



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH

IN RURAL AMERICA



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Packing Political Punch in Rural America

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Digging into the Demographics:

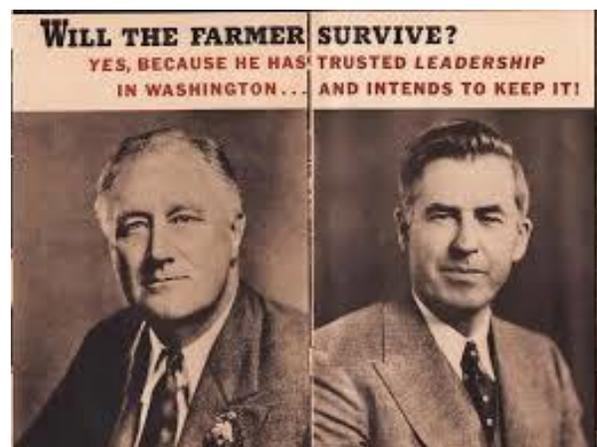
Will fewer farmers still be able to deliver political punch?

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 7, 2014 - If farmers' political influence was measured strictly by the number of farm operators, 1935 would have been a very good year. Peaking at 6.8 million out of a total U.S. population of 127 million, farmers represented slightly more than 5 percent of U.S. citizens.

Certainly, it was a period of time – coming on the heels of the Great Depression – when both the Congress and the White House were focused on addressing the economic plight of farmers suffering from shrinking international markets and dramatic overproduction. Just two years earlier, cotton was trading at 6 cents a pound, wheat at 35 cents a bushel, corn at 15 cents and some farmers were selling hogs at 3 cents a pound.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a New York Democrat, appointed Henry A. Wallace, then a registered Iowa Republican, as his Secretary of Agriculture. Wallace believed that, to have a strong national economy, you had to have a strong agricultural economy and he went to work on crafting New Deal agricultural legislation to tackle problems down on the farm. The result, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, laid the groundwork for many policies that are still foundationally in place today.



In a speech delivered to farmers in 1935, Roosevelt boasted about the important relationship that farmers enjoyed with their city “cousins.”

“If the farm population of the United States suffers and loses its purchasing power, the people in the cities in every part of the country suffer of necessity with it. One of the greatest lessons that the city dwellers have come to understand in these past two years is this: Empty pocketbooks on the farm do not turn factory wheels in the city.”

Both Roosevelt and Wallace talked passionately about the economic interdependence between farmers and consumers, but it also served them well politically. They put together the “New Deal

Coalition,” an alliance of voters representing urban Jews, Catholics and blacks, along with farmers and labor unions, in a fashion that powered the Democratic party for decades later.

Fast forward to 2014

The economic, demographic, and political landscapes are all dramatically different in 2014, **making it more challenging than ever before for farmers to connect with the consumers who live in cities and the politicians who represent them.**

Over time, modern farming practices like hybridization and mechanization made it possible for farmers to escape some of the back-breaking tasks that characterized on-farm production in the 1930s and later years, enabling them to produce more food with less labor. But this trend also accelerated a “disconnect” between those who make a living from the land and those who benefit from their hard work – a gap that appears to have widened in recent years.

“In the old days – if you remember the movie *Field of Dreams*, it was –‘If we build it they will come’ – and that was true in agriculture..... ‘If we grow it they will buy it.’ But those days are not around anymore,” Dan Glickman, a former secretary of agriculture, told *Agri-Pulse*.

“Now the line is more complex: If you grow it and they want it and they want to know what’s in it, they will buy it. That means you have a consumer that’s more investigative. They want to know what’s in their food,” adds Glickman, who also serves as one of four co-chairs of AGree, a group focused on the transformation of food and agricultural policy systems.

“That means production agriculture has to be more consumer focused. But that’s OK,” Glickman says. “Because the demand is there, too. The innovative producer will meet that demand.”

So what does that mean in terms of political power?

Some argue that the growing demand for food on a globe where the population is expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050 (it’s presently at 7.2 billion), puts agriculture in the driver’s seat, regardless of the on-farm numbers.

“When you’re keeping people fed, I’d say you are pretty darn relevant,” emphasized American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman in a convention speech to his delegates last year.

“While there may be fewer of us in rural America than in other places, we will work harder. We will work longer. We will always stand up for the values that are the bedrock of our nation.”

Yet, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack was one of the first to suggest that the declining number of farmers could translate into declining political clout. Two years ago, while Congress was wrangling over farm legislation, he publicly challenged farmers and ranchers to rethink their rural strategies and try to rebuild the population base in rural America.

“It’s time for us to have an adult conversation with folks in rural America. ...Why is it that we don’t have a farm bill? It isn’t just the differences of policy. It’s the fact that rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country, and we had better recognize that and we better begin to reverse it,” Vilsack said during a presentation at the Farm Journal Forum in December 2012.

At the time, Vilsack seemed to be underscoring the political polarization that had become painfully obvious within GOP circles.

The GOP majority in the House of Representatives repeatedly struggled to find a path forward on a new farm bill. Their caucus – including a group of about 60 fiscally conservative Tea Party-aligned members who were focused on reducing federal spending above other priorities – seemed unable to reach agreement on how much deficit reduction they could accept in the legislation. On June 20, 2013, the House defeated a comprehensive farm bill in a 234-195 vote, sending shock waves through the traditionally supportive farm community.

Just five years earlier, Democrats who were guided by former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and former House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson of Minnesota had skillfully managed to craft together a new farm bill and also override President George W. Bush's veto.

But by 2014, some Democrats were still dealing with painful changes in their own party. After Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, Republicans picked up a net total of 63 seats in the 2010 midterm elections and regained control of a chamber they had lost in 2006. Although the sitting U.S. president's party usually loses seats in a midterm election, the 2010 balloting resulted in the worst losses for such a party in a House midterm election since 1938.

Most noticeably missing after 2010 – at least for many in the agricultural community – were the so-called Blue Dog Democrats. These members represented many agricultural and rural districts and served as swing votes on fiscally conservative issues – often siding with their GOP counterparts and against the more liberal members of their own party. During President Bill Clinton's two terms in office, many of the Blue Dogs supported the Republicans' Contract with America, complained that the Clinton White House was too liberal and called for a balanced federal budget.

But as a result of redistricting, which placed several conservative Democrats like Charlie Stenholm of Texas and Dennis Cardoza of California in hard-to-win, largely GOP districts, the number of Blue Dogs shrunk from 54 members in the 100th Congress to only 19 in the 113th Congress.

Ultimately, the House managed to pass both parts of a “split” farm bill by dividing the nutrition title from the remaining 11 titles and then merging the two versions back together in a conference committee with the Senate.

Rather than the traditional White House bill event, President Barack Obama signed the “Agriculture Act of 2014” on Feb. 7 at Michigan State University, the alma mater of Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich. It was a monumental occasion designed to showcase not only the comprehensive nature of the farm bill but celebrate Michigan State's history as one of the nation's premier land grant universities.

However, even the signing ceremony was not without controversy. Stabenow invited her other three principal negotiators: the Senate Agriculture Committee's ranking member Thad Cochran, R-Miss., as well as House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., and Ranking Member Collin Peterson, D-Minn., but none of them showed.

Clearly, some of the controversy over the farm bill still lingered, as did the questions about future political effectiveness.

“When you have three-quarters of 1 percent of the population involved in food production – if you just look at it from that perspective – the influence of agriculture has really waned,” says former Congressman Cardoza, who now serves as co-chair of the public affairs practice of Foley

& Lardner LLP in Washington, D.C. “But it’s also a problem of the industry not advocating forcefully enough and not making their presence known.”

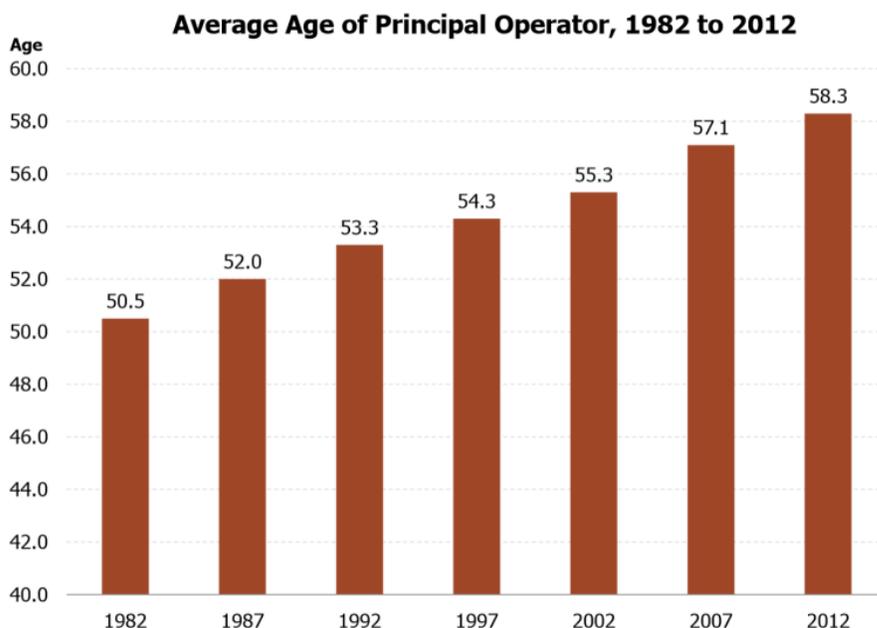
Numbers tell part of the story

The U.S. population has more than doubled since 1935 when Roosevelt was building his “New Deal” coalition, topping over 318 million on July 1. Meanwhile, the U.S. farm population continues to be a shrinking slice of that larger national pie.

The number of principal farm operators dropped about 4 percent from the last U.S. Ag Census in 2007, from 2.2 million to 2.1 million. Farmers now represent less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, based on USDA’s fairly generous definition of a “farmer.” According to USDA, the official definition of a farm for census purposes is “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold or normally would have been sold” during the census year.

The American farm population is also growing older, with the average farmer’s age increasing from 57.1 in 2007 to 58.3 in the 2012 Ag Census. **That trend is not surprising, but the number of new farmers – a talent pool which could eventually replace those nearing retirement age – does not appear to be keeping pace.**

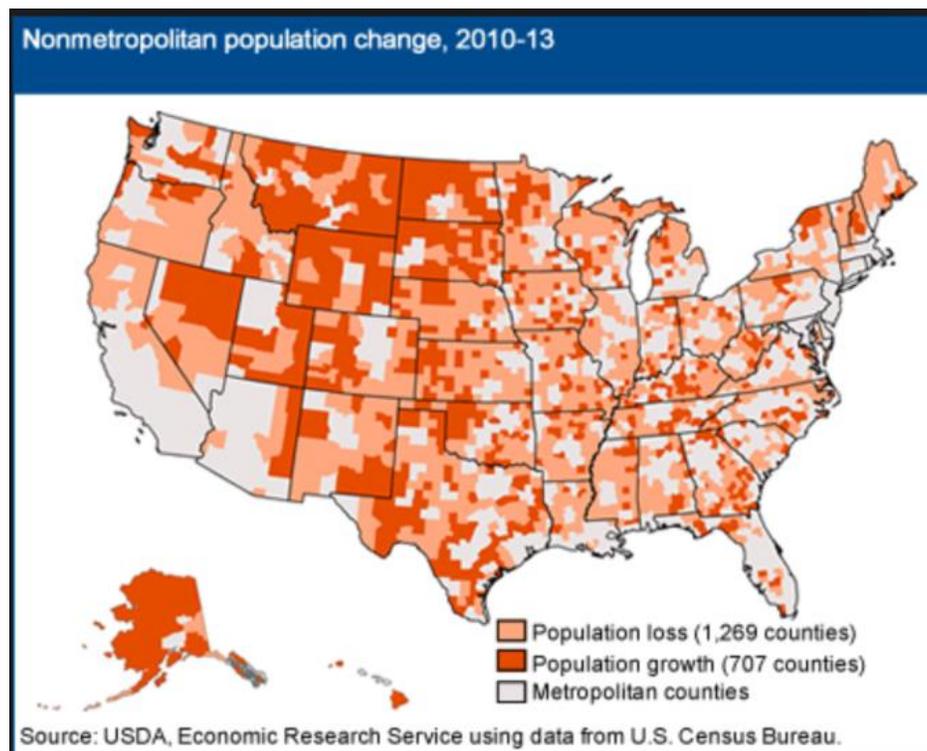
The number of new, beginning farmers shrunk by 23.3 percent since the last Census was released in 2007, however, those farmers who started farming 10 years ago (between 2003 and 2007) fared slightly better – their numbers only decreased by 19.6 percent.



Rural counties are also on the decline

In addition to the declining number of farmers, many rural counties are also losing residents. Non-farmer rural residents may not understand agriculture, but they often feel the pain whenever economic problems surface in the agricultural economy. Conversely, rural businesses may also benefit when farmers and ranchers are making money and buying more goods and services locally.

The number of people living in non-metropolitan (non-metro) counties stood at 46.2 million in 2013 — that represented nearly 15 percent of U.S. residents spread across 72 percent of the nation's land area. That's not an insignificant share. Those non-metro counties are also showing some disturbing trends.



Population growth rates in non-metro areas have been lower than those in metro areas since the mid-1990s, and the gap widened considerably in recent years, notes John Cromartie, a geographer with USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). However, while non-metro areas in some parts of the country have experienced population loss for decades, non-metro counties as a whole gained population every year – until the 2010-2012 time.

Although the non-metro population loss during that period is quite small – an estimated 44,000 – it was the first time there was an estimated population loss for non-metro America as a whole.

Even if this trend is only temporary, Cromartie writes in the ERS magazine *Amber Waves*, it **“highlights a growing demographic challenge facing many regions across rural and small-town America, as population growth from natural change is no longer large enough to counter cyclical net migration losses.”**

Population change within counties comes from three sources: natural change (defined as total births minus total deaths), domestic migration (people moving from one county to another), and international migration (people moving to and from other countries), explains Kenneth Johnson, a University of New Hampshire sociologist and senior demographer for the Carsey Institute. He told *Agri-Pulse* that, in many counties, the amount of “natural change” is at a historic low.

Deaths exceeded births in 1,135 out of 3,007 U.S. counties in 2012, the most number of counties in U.S. history. As recently as 2009, that same natural decrease occurred in just 880 counties, Johnson wrote in a [special report](#) for the Carsey Institute.

Last year, 46 percent of all non-metro counties experienced this natural decrease compared to only 17 percent of urban counties. For the first time in U.S. history, deaths exceeded births in two entire states: Maine and West Virginia.

One factor that has helped reverse this trend and increase population numbers in some parts of rural America? The growth of minority populations, especially Hispanics.

“The Census Bureau recently released new data which showed, for the second year in a row, that in the white, non-Hispanic population as a whole, more people are dying than being born. **Since rural America is much more non-Hispanic white, that would impact rural America quite dramatically,**” Johnson explains. **“Hispanics are one of the few groups that are causing population increases in some parts of rural America.**”

“It’s not uncommon in some rural high schools to lose half of the graduating class (to domestic migration) within a year after graduation,” Johnson explains. “Then another generation comes along and instead of 100 kids graduating from high school there are only 50 and then if half of them leave, there’s not going to be many young people left to produce the next generation of children.

“In the meantime, that older population that never left has aged in place and now within two generations it is getting up to the age where they are starting to experience significant mortality. So with few young people left to produce the next generation, and a larger older generation that’s going to begin to die off, that’s when natural decrease begins to happen.”

Reversing that trend has been difficult in many parts of the country. As one economic development expert who asked not to be identified told *Agri-Pulse*: **“Some of these older farmers want their small town to last only one day longer than they do.”**

Johnson says that “not all natural-decrease areas face a bleak future. Economic development, an influx of minorities, high levels of civic engagement, and community cohesion have broken the downward spiral of natural decrease in some areas, but many remain at risk.”

“Demography is not destiny, but one ignores it at their peril,” he adds.

How does this translate politically?

Regardless of the population, each state gets two votes in the U.S. Senate, which often provides farm and rural interests substantially more political punch per voter than those in urban areas. When you compare a state like Wyoming, with a population of only 582,565 in 2013, to a more populous state like Florida, with a population of about 19.5 million, it’s easy to see how farmers and ranchers can still carry considerable Senate clout in less densely populated states.

But in the U.S. House, where the number of voting representatives is currently set at 435, these population trends can make a huge difference. Each state is guaranteed at least one congressional seat, but the total number of seats corresponds to the share of the aggregate U.S. population that resides in each state.

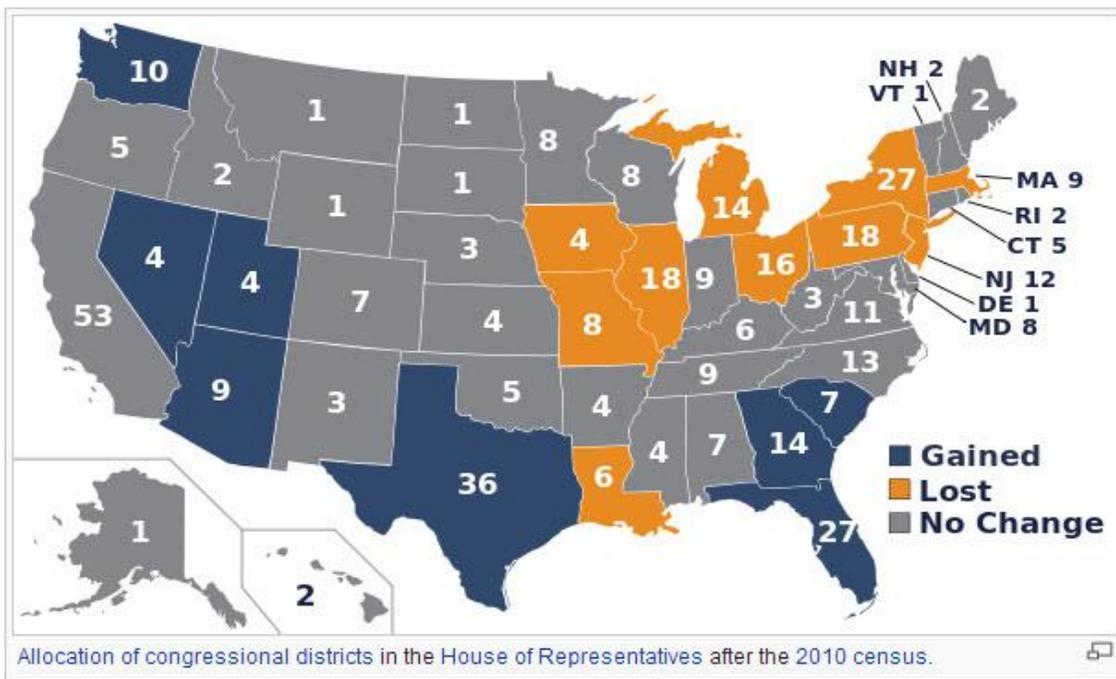
In a state where the population has been growing, like Texas, the number of representatives increased from 21 in 1930 to 36 today. The state of Florida, which had five representatives in 1930, now has 27.

In a state like Nebraska, which is still largely rural, the number of representatives has declined from five to three during that same time frame. In Iowa, the number of federal representatives

was set at nine in 1930. As a result of the most recent reapportionment, there are now only four congressional districts in the state.

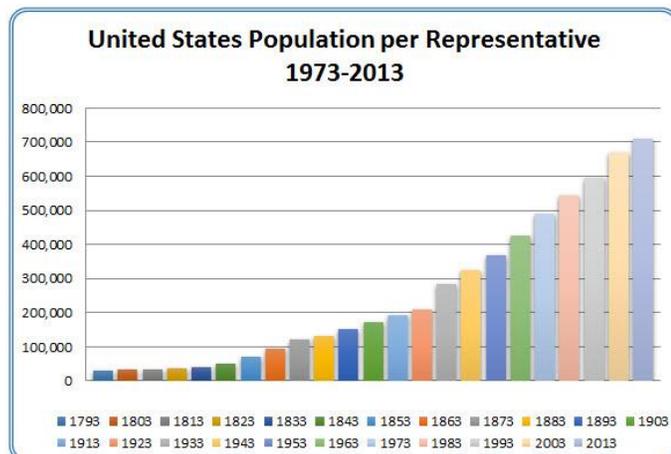
Congressional seats are redistributed following the release of the U.S. Census every 10 years, and in 34 states, it's up to the state legislature to decide – subject to the governor's approval – where those congressional district lines are drawn. Other states use independent bodies, sometimes subject to approval of their state legislatures, to redistribute seats. In seven states where the population is low – Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming – there is only a single representative for the entire state.

The map below indicates how the number of congressional seats in each state changed as a result of the most recent reapportionment in 2012, based on the 2010 Census. Several states in the Upper Plains only have one representative and many others like Iowa, Illinois and Missouri continue to lose representatives. **The biggest “gainers” in the pack?** Texas, which gained four seats and Florida, which gained two.

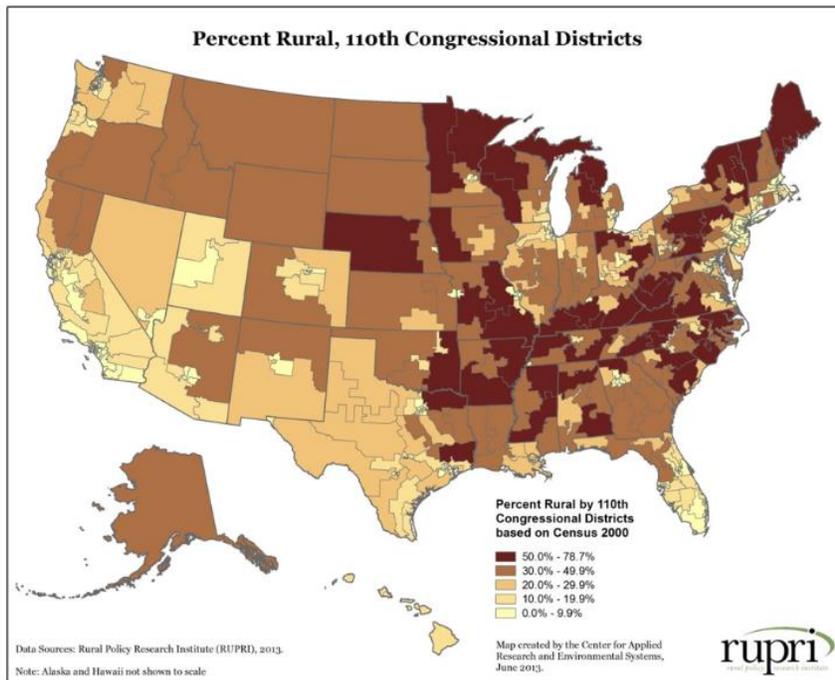


Source: Wikipedia

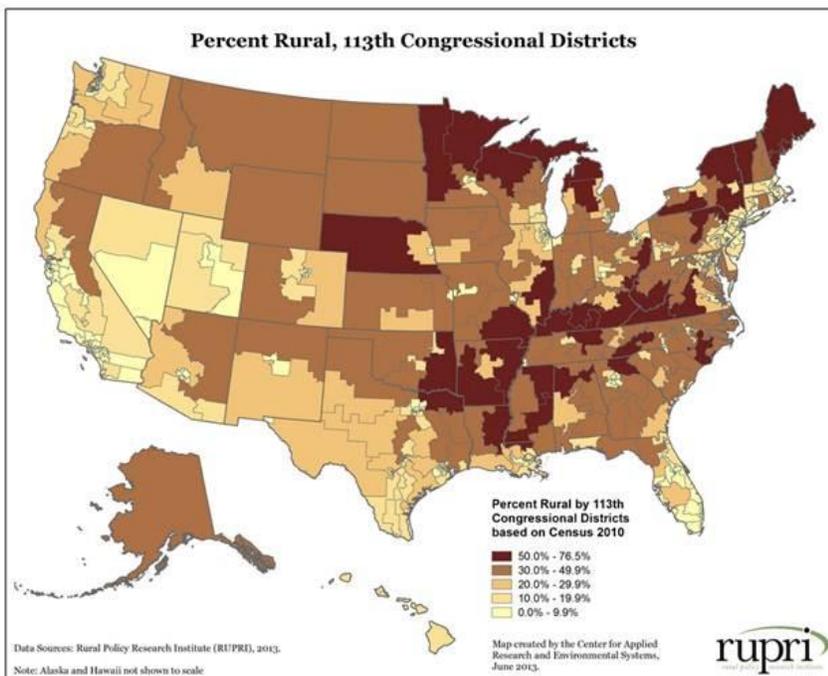
As the U.S. population has grown, so has the average number of constituents represented by each member. For example, in the 1930s, each House member represented an average of just under 300,000 constituents. Now that number has grown to over 700,000.



The maps below, developed by the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), also show how the congressional boundaries changed in each state as a result of redistricting. The first map shows the percentage of rural population in each district, based on the 110th Congress, which served from Jan. 3, 2007, to Jan. 3, 2009. These districts were established after the 2000 Census numbers were released.



The lower map show congressional maps based on the 2010 Census, where there are only about 34 primarily rural districts left remaining in the 113th Congress, which started on Jan. 3, 2013.



Over time, there's no doubt that demographic changes can have an impact on redistricting and, depending on how the new congressional districts are drawn, influence the politics within a district. But it is often difficult to make simple predictions based on the demographics of rural versus urban.

Take the case of former Congressman Charlie Stenholm, a cotton farmer and conservative Texas Democrat who was first elected to the House in 1978 from a largely rural district. A member of the Blue Dog Coalition, he was the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee for six years and worked closely with Republican Larry Combest to win approval of the 2002 farm bill.

From 1980 to 1990, Stenholm was reelected without major-party opposition, even running unopposed in 1980 and from 1984 to 1990. But a decade later, he became a target of a fellow Texan -- then GOP Majority Leader Tom Delay, and his effort to redraw congressional districts in favor of Republicans.

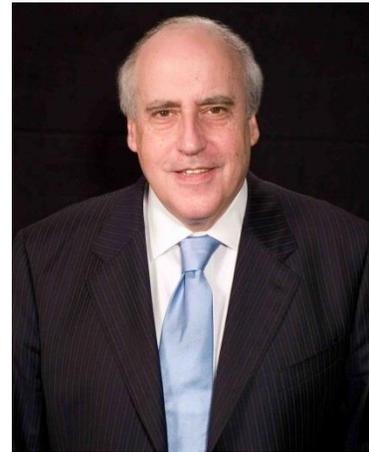
Stenholm's district was split into four other districts, with most of his former territory thrown into the heavily Republican 19th District, represented by Rep. Randy Neugebauer. Facing an uphill battle, Stenholm lost by 18 percentage points in the November 2004 election.

In general, "the redistricting process has not helped agriculture," says Glickman, a Democrat who represented the Fourth Congressional District in Kansas for 18 years before being named Secretary of Agriculture in President Bill Clinton's administration.

"Where there are pure agricultural districts, they tend to not be bipartisan at all....They tend to be very heavily Republican," Glickman explains. "Whereas, I represented a district that was mixed and blended, which means I had to build bridges that crossed party lines....Now that more districts are homogenous, you either have all urban districts or all rural districts and there are just not enough rural districts to have a majority."

In the case of House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, redistricting after the 2010 Census left his heavily Republican district in Oklahoma largely intact.

When the Oklahoma Republican first ran for the Sixth Congressional District seat in 1994, it was one of the largest congressional districts in the state and one of the largest – in terms of land mass – in the entire nation.



Dan Glickman, former Congressman & Secretary of Agriculture

For Lucas, political challenges surfaced – not as a result of any rural/urban split – but within his own party as a result of conservative opposition to farm bill spending. Last year, Tea Party aligned groups like Heritage Action started running radio ads in Oklahoma, “to help educate everyone on the reality behind the ‘trillion dollar farm bill.’”

“The farm bill is no such thing. Eighty percent of the money goes to food stamps, and spending a trillion dollars isn’t fiscally responsible, by any reasonable definition,” the ad claimed, with pigs squealing in the background.

Still, Lucas had no problem defeating his Tea Party challengers in the June primary, winning over 80 percent of the vote.

That’s why some political insiders suggest that demographics may be part of the future political puzzle for agriculture, but certainly can’t entirely be used to frame the discussion.

“I think a bigger problem was the Tea Party Republicans who were elected in what were traditionally farm districts,” Ranking Member Collin Peterson told *Agri-Pulse*. “You could always count on the southerners coming up here...they were for cotton, rice and peanuts and they were solid. But when these people were elected in 2010 and 2012, a lot of them had no ties to agriculture. Some of them came around and some didn’t. So you didn’t have the support for traditional commodity agriculture coming out of the South that you used to have.”



Ranking Member Collin Peterson

For his part, Chairman Lucas says such a wide variety of factors were in play as the 2014 farm bill was being developed that it is difficult to pinpoint any single one.



House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas

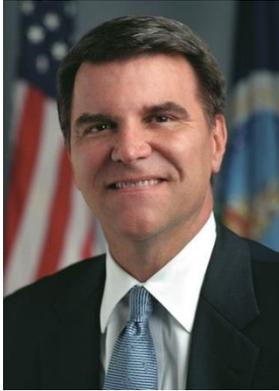
As he looked at the whip count for the first farm bill vote in 2013, Lucas said almost half the House had not been here for the previous farm bill of 2008.

“They had not been there for the debate, the discussion on the amendments, and the challenging process of implementing any farm bill. They just simply were babes in the woods. They were naïve. So the re-education or education process was incredible there, too,” Lucas said in an interview.

“I just simply say this. The declining population – yes, it hurts. The fact that it causes members of both stripes - Rs and Ds alike - perhaps not to be as sensitive to rural America as they should be is a huge problem. But with this particular two sessions of Congress with divided control, dramatic differences in philosophical perspective, huge deficit, huge turnover in membershipthere’s dramatically less institutional memory in the body....all those things together made it (farm bill passage) really hard.”

Tactics, not demographics?

“Some would probably suggest that agriculture needs to change the way we handle politics, given the change in demographics and that sort of thing, and I don’t necessarily buy into that,” says Chuck Conner, president and CEO of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives.



Chuck Conner, CEO
National Council of
Farmer Coops

“I generally think that food production in this country, and those that are engaged directly in that, carry as much political clout and as much support out there at the grassroots, even among the non-farming interests, as we probably ever have. I don’t think that’s necessarily waned dramatically.

“But where the change has to happen, though, is that, among those of us involved in the food production system, we’ve got to make our views known and get active,” adds Conner, who previously served as deputy secretary of agriculture under President George W. Bush.

“What has changed is that there has always been some of that indifference out there among farmers who say, ‘I’m busy. I’m growing crops. I’m raising livestock. Somebody else has got to handle the political advocacy.’”

But Conner says that won’t work in today’s world, where technology can provide “micro-groups” with “really big voices.”

“You can’t just have a system where someone else is sort of doing your advocacy. They’ve got to get engaged, every one of them, at the grassroots level and participate in order to counter that sort of micro-advocacy that’s going on out there.”

Conner argues that there is no need for farmers and ranchers to change the message or create new organizations.

“Generally speaking, if you went down some of the streets of New York City and started surveying people, I think there’s generally pretty high regard for farmers for food production. It’s a strong message, and farmers are viewed very, very highly in that process -- but they’ve still got to make their views known.”

Another problem that surfaced during the farm bill debate was the divisiveness within the agricultural community “with corn arguing one way, beans another, rice a completely opposite third,” Conner adds.

“That’s where our smallness really shows, when we’re speaking with different voices.”

On the other hand, Conner says agriculture can continue to deliver powerful political punches if diverse interests can unite.

“If we’ve got a common goal in mind and people really believe -- not only at the grassroots level but at the political level -- that this is what farmers really need. . . . I think we can battle with the best of them.”

Farm leaders crave comfort and clout in new coalitions

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 14, 2014 – When David Graves was hand-picked from Sen. Thad Cochran’s staff to lead the Rice Millers Association in 1989, the U.S. congressional map was not his “friend.”

The U.S. rice crop is primarily grown in just six states: Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and a few counties in California. In 2013, rice was grown on only about 2.5 million acres, a relatively small crop compared to corn, for example, which was harvested from about 98 million acres.

At best, Graves could count on a dozen senators and even fewer representatives to fight for rice industry causes. That is, unless he could broaden the political base to include more people and more states.

The most likely solution: Connect those who sell the rice with those who grow the rice.

It’s a time-honored tradition to look for partners who can be aligned politically. In southern agricultural circles, the cotton industry had already figured out how to bring together all parts of their industry.

The National Cotton Council, established in 1938, serves as a forum for consensus-building among all parts of the supply chain: producers, ginners, warehousemen, merchants, cottonseed processors/dealers, cooperatives and textile manufacturers, both here and abroad. Although there are only about 8,900 cotton farms in the U.S., according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the Council has grown into one of the farm sector’s most powerful lobbying organizations.

But trying to make rice growers comfortable with other members of their supply chain in the late 1980s was like mixing oil and water, recalls Graves, now a lobbyist at McLeod, Watkinson & Miller in Washington, D.C.

The growers didn’t trust the millers and manufacturers. They complained about how little they got paid for the rice that would often sell – after it was processed and packaged – for dollars more when it was boxed, branded and stocked on grocery store shelves. Likewise, the millers



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didn't trust the growers to understand their cost structure and how much they invested in marketing.

Graves said it took plenty of hard-fought discussions and about two years to get everyone to agree that they needed each other to build stronger congressional support for their industry. Ultimately, all sides came together to create what is now the USA Rice Federation, an umbrella organization for producers, millers, the Rice Council and rice merchants. Graves served as the organization's first president and chief executive officer, from 1994-1997.

Like Graves, many agricultural and rural leaders are taking a hard look at the demographics in America and seeing fewer farms, fewer farmers and fewer rural congressional districts. Still, they remain convinced that this does not mean that farmers and ranchers will lose their political punch – if they can think differently about coalition building, political action committee (PAC) strategies, and communication efforts.

“There is absolutely no need for agriculture to lose one ounce of influence when it comes to producing food, feed, fuel and fiber,” says Graves. “As an industry, we are more valuable to the U.S. than 50 years ago and we can be even more valuable in the future.”

“But if your institution is so rigid that you fail to look at what’s happening around you, then you’ll lose. You can’t just continue doing what you are most comfortable with,” he adds.

“It’s all about comfort,” emphasizes Graves. “If people in agriculture can stay focused on their priorities and work with others, you can really expand your opportunities.”

Time to move out of the bunker?

Montana native Jon Doggett is now in his 27th year of advocating on behalf of agriculture in Washington, D.C., and currently serves as vice president of public policy for the National Corn Growers Association. Doggett is also concerned that many people in agricultural organizations are afraid to move out of their comfort zone and are “succumbing to a bunker mentality.”

When he talks to growers, he often hears defiant complaints about how urban and suburban folks “don’t understand agriculture” and “don’t know where their food comes from.”

“This mentality does the opposite of what we need to do,” explains Doggett. “We need to reach out to others and help understand their concerns. If we have our arms crossed against our chest, it won’t work.”

Doggett has been having discussions with his members about changes in U.S. demographics and how his organization needs to think differently about working with members of Congress.

“In 1960, there were eight members of the House of Representatives from Iowa and there were eight members from Florida. Now there are four from Iowa and 27 from Florida,” he adds.



Jon Doggett, VP of Public Policy
NCGA

Who is responsible? “Everyone in this room, plus Walt Disney and Fidel Castro,” he pointedly tells corn growers about Florida’s booming population, which increased from about 4.95 million in 1960 to almost 20 million in 2013.

Sometime in 2014, Florida will surpass New York in population, becoming the nation's third-most populous state, behind only California and Texas. And it is not only sun-seeking seniors driving the growth.

Florida is a haven for Latin American migrants and Northerners seeking work in the “Sunshine State.” Iowa may host the first-in-the-nation primary – giving voters there unparalleled influence on the primary process, but Florida’s 29 electoral votes are some of the nation’s most coveted during presidential elections.

Doggett says his grower members have been taking a hard look at demographic changes and are starting to understand that **“it’s not all about us. It’s about making sure that we are advocating for something that members want to deliver for their constituents.”**

“Our growers are all farming more land than they did in the 1960s. In agriculture, we’ve all been a victim of our own success,” he notes. **“But just as we’ve been innovative in moving from a 4020 John Deere tractor in the 1960s to modern day farm equipment, we have to be as innovative and adaptive in the political world.”**

Traditional partnerships splintered

Historically, farm groups have partnered with nutrition groups to advance both the “farm” and the “food and nutrition” portions of the farm bill – building on a partnership launched in the early 1970s when Senators Bob Dole, R-Kansas, and George McGovern, D-South Dakota., formed a coalition that was mutually beneficial to both urban and rural constituencies.

But that coalition has frayed in recent years – in part because so many lawmakers are focused like a laser beam on reducing the massive federal debt. And for conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation, Taxpayers for Common Sense and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), the farm bill became a “poster child” for what they viewed as wasteful federal spending. Even though the agricultural committees were the first to advance legislation which would help reduce the federal deficit, the farm bill was still projected to cost almost \$1 trillion dollars over 10 years.

As the farm bill debate brewed, so did enthusiasm for driving a wedge between farmers and the nutrition community.

Farm leaders may not look much differentbut Congress does

Many farm organizations are trying to recruit more diverse leaders, but few have been very successful. Since the 1980s, only a handful of women have served at the top of national farm and commodity organizations. For example, JoAnn Smith and Jan Lyons served as presidents of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Pam Johnson recently led the National Corn Growers Association and Vanessa Kummer served as chairwoman of the United Soybean Board.

At the same time, more and more females and other diverse candidates are running for office and winning. A record 102 women serve in the 113th Congress: 82 in the House (including three Delegates) and 20 in the Senate, according to the Congressional Research Service.

There are 42 African American Members of the House and two in the Senate. There are also a record 37 Hispanic or Latino Members serving: 33 in the House, including one Delegate and the Resident Commissioner, and four in the Senate. Thirteen Members (10 Representatives, two Delegates, and one Senator) are Asian American or Pacific Islanders. Two Native Americans serve in the House.

The dominant professions are public service, business and law, including 10 former governors, 33 former mayors and 100 former congressional staffers.

Only twenty-nine are farmers, ranchers or cattle farm owners.

Several of the most far-right legislators gathered each month on Capitol Hill for a Chick-fil-A lunch and “Conversations with Conservatives,” a Heritage Foundation event designed to highlight conservative causes. The farm bill was often a target of their wrath, with lawmakers like Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kansas, reserving some of his most critical comments for the largest portion of the farm bill in terms of spending – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Commonly known as food stamps, this portion of the new farm bill was expected to cost over \$760 billion.

As Heritage Action’s Dan Holler explained: “Senator Thad Cochran, R-Mississippi, the top Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, has called the Senate (farm) bill a ‘job creator.’”

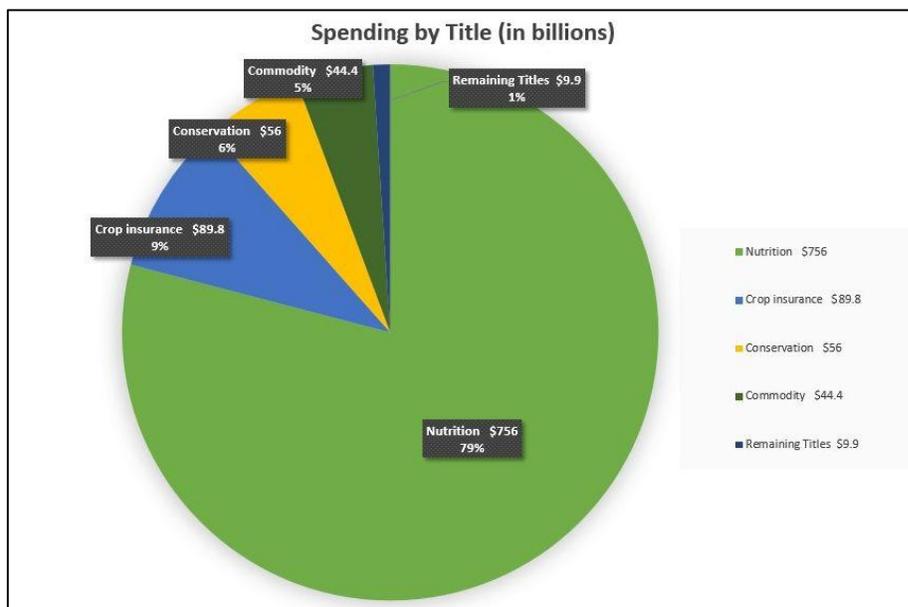
“Why are self-styled conservatives doing this?” asks Holler. “The answer is as simple as it is cynical. Cochran recently explained that ‘purely from a political perspective’ the inclusion of food stamps ‘helps get the farm bill passed.’”

“Cochran’s logic is not unique, but it is time to put this type of thinking out to pasture,” emphasizes Holler. “The inclusion of massive food stamp spending is one reason a five-year ‘farm bill’ was derailed last year, which therefore begs the question: Could \$80 billion in food stamp spending be reauthorized if farm subsidies weren’t?”

With backing from Heritage Action, lawmakers like Huelskamp wanted nothing short of \$40 billion in SNAP cuts over 10 years – even though the Senate was willing to cut only \$8 billion. Controversy over the proposed cuts and an amendment by Rep. Steve Southerland, R-Florida, that would have required able-bodied SNAP recipients to work or volunteer, helped bring the farm bill to its knees last year.

On June 20, 2013, farm leaders were stunned as the five-year measure failed on the House floor by 195-234, with 62 Republicans joining 172 Democrats to oppose the bill, and just 24 Democrats voting with 171 Republicans to approve it.

Later that evening, the farm bill defeat generated cheers and high-fives for the 1,000 or so business leaders and lawmakers attending the annual CEI fundraising dinner in Washington,



where they had just raised \$1 million to continue their pork-fighting efforts.

Eventually, Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Ind., and others moved to break the long-held farm and nutrition alliance with a split-bill strategy. On July 12, 2013, Republicans managed to pass a slimmed down “agriculture only” bill through the

House with a 216-208 vote – the first time food stamps were left out of a farm bill since 1973. On Sept. 20, 2013, the House voted 217-210 to pass the nutrition title of the farm bill as a stand-alone measure, while slashing billions of dollars from the food stamp program.

It's not easy, but effective

The farm and nutrition alliance may not be dead, but the only way Congress is ever going to pass another farm bill is to figure out how to reach out to new people and bring new coalitions together, says former Rep. Dennis Cardoza, who now serves as co-chair of the public affairs practice of Foley & Lardner LLP in Washington. But he admits it's not easy to encourage farmers to move outside their comfort zone.

When he served on the House Agriculture Committee and helped craft the 2008 Farm Bill,



Former Rep. Dennis Cardoza - CA

Cardoza said he would frequently chastise some of the farmer leaders who traveled from his California district to lobby on the legislation.

“They would always come and talk to the same 30 members they always talked to. And I’d say, ‘Well, you know, we always vote with you. Don’t come talk to us. Go talk to the other folks who don’t know who a farmer is.’”

But the unspoken truth in many agricultural leadership circles is that working with people outside of so-called traditional agriculture – especially those who are younger or who come from more urban and ethnic backgrounds – does not always come easy for your “average” farmer who is a white, 58.3 year-old male.

“Some people in traditional agricultural organizations worry about these newbies,” admits former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, who now serves as co-chair of AGrEE. **“The truth is, they can be very helpful.....serving as allies in a changing world.”** AGrEE works to engage conventional organic and local farming interests – bringing together more new faces than have been brought together in the past, Glickman says.

“Organizations aren’t going to survive very long or be very successful if all they are doing is talking to the 35 members of Congress that are primarily representing rural districts,” says lobbyist Randy Russell, principal at the Russell Group.

He points to groups like the National Pork Producers Council – where leaders have been meeting with members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus – as examples of organizations trying to reach out to other interest groups in an attempt to find common ground.

“It’s those kinds of new outreach efforts that have been very successful and will help the industry over the longer term. We’ve got to stop talking to ourselves,” Russell says.

“The rules of the game have changed,” adds Mike Torrey, principal and founder of Michael Torrey Associates. “Today, effective lobbying takes building alliances across industries and party affiliations. **A single voice is not often heard, but a diverse coalition can elevate an issue and deliver real results. It’s not easy, but it is effective.”**

Both Cardoza and Glickman see opportunities for agricultural interests to partner with the academic community as well as conservation and environmental groups.

“The universities have been very concerned because they receive a lot of funding from the farm bill. Yet, as far as I know, they weren’t really brought in as part of any farm bill coalition. That’s a missed opportunity,” Cardoza added.

When it comes to developing relationships between traditional agricultural groups and environmental and conservation groups, Glickman said it’s still “a work in progress.”

“Farmers are a particularly important part of preserving the land base. This is a partnership that’s got great potential,” he says.

Ducks and rifles to the rescue

The 2008 farm bill significantly expanded funding for the conservation title, bringing in much needed support from conservation organizations. For the most recent farm bill, farm groups found that they needed to expand the relationship even further to combat attacks on what they viewed as the most important part of the farm safety net: crop insurance.

The battle had been brewing for years. Organizations like the Environmental Working Group (EWG) – which became infamous in farm country for unveiling a database listing every farm program payment that any U.S. farmer had ever received – effectively built on what might seem like an unlikely set of allies – conservative critics of farm bill spending.

As members of Congress started shaping a new farm bill almost three years ago, it became clear that direct payments to farmers – which were paid regardless of whether or not a crop was planted – were no longer politically sustainable.

With direct payments out of the picture, EWG’s next line of attack was crop insurance. The group tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to obtain information on every growers’ crop insurance subsidy so they could publish the information. One of the group’s goals was to limit premium subsidies and trim participation in crop insurance by capping the adjusted gross income (AGI) level for the nation’s largest growers.

“Taxpayers currently subsidize an average of 62 percent of crop insurance premiums,” noted EWG’s Craig Cox. **“Shaving a few percentage points off these generous premium subsidies would save billions of dollars while retaining an ample safety net for farmers,”** he says.

In the Senate, there was already strong support for “means testing” on crop insurance subsidies. Senators Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, and Tom Coburn, R-Oklahoma, partnered on an AGI amendment that would reduce premium support on crop insurance by 15 percent for farmers with an AGI over \$750,000. It passed as an amendment during the first Senate farm bill vote in June 2012 by a large margin: 66-33.

If this amendment was included in the final farm bill, farm organizations feared that many of their members would be forced out of the program, making the rates much costlier for the remaining farmers and ultimately, making the program unsustainable.

It didn’t take long for American Farm Bureau Federation’s Senior Director of Congressional Relations Mary Kay Thatcher and former Natural Resources Conservation chief Bruce Knight – now a principal at Strategic Conservation Solutions – to launch a series of conversations with Dan Wrinn, the director of public policy for Ducks Unlimited (DU).

They had a mutual goal: maximizing the amount of conservation taking place on U.S. farmland. To address that goal, DU wanted farm organizations to support re-linking conservation compliance requirements to crop insurance. But that made some farmer leaders extremely nervous.

Between 1985 and 1996, the federal crop insurance program required farmers to meet conservation compliance standards before they qualified for subsidized premiums. However, the requirement was dropped in the 1996 farm bill in order to attract more participants. Conservation compliance was then tied to the direct payment subsidies to farmers that were initiated in the 1996 farm bill.

“We agreed to fight AGI if others would support conservation compliance with crop insurance,” noted Wrinn, who said that this was a change in perspective for his organization compared to 2002, when “we really angered a lot of our friends in agriculture.”

After realizing that direct payments and ties to conservation compliance would likely be gone in a new farm bill, **DU recognized that helping both large and small farmers would be key to their own mission of filling the skies with ducks and geese for future generations.** Crop insurance became the next logical connection to keeping conservation on the land.

But it wasn't an easy coalition to form and keep together.

“It wasn't really until Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Michigan, asked the groups to get moving that it all came together,” recalls Knight.

But as the coalition gained traction, it also attracted criticism. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Oklahoma, is no stranger to coalition building. But he opposed linking conservation compliance with crop insurance and his staff made it very clear that he did not approve of farm organizations lending their names to this effort. That push provided extra incentives for some farm organization leaders – who weren't sure they wanted to partner with the so-called “hook and bullet” groups to begin with – to stay away entirely. Over time, even the American Farm Bureau Federation pulled their support – citing the need to strictly follow its own policy book.

For his part, Wrinn had to deliver the bad news to a long-time ally – Durbin – explaining that his organization would be working against the senator's AGI amendment.

“Never would I have thought that I would be setting up Capitol Hill visits for corn and soybean farmers,” Wrinn told participants attending a crop insurance industry convention this spring.

“But DU wants to be that conservation group that has a relationship with ranchers, farmers and now with the crop insurance industry. This isn't a date, this is a marriage. We are in this for the long haul.”

Other farm and conservation organizations joined the coalition in support of linking conservation compliance to crop insurance and opposing the AGI amendment, including the National Corn Growers Association, the American Soybean Association, the National Cotton Council and the National Association of Conservation Districts. Even the National Wildlife Federation signed on.

Almost one year later, the Senate once again approved Durbin and Coburn's AGI amendment to the farm bill, but with slightly fewer votes. It passed by 59-33.

The coalition celebrated a much bigger victory during the House farm bill debate, when Wisconsin Rep. Ron Kind's amendment to means test crop insurance was narrowly defeated, 208-217.

“The success of the conservation compliance coalition was just one tiny example of what’s possible when you move out of your comfort zone,” noted David Graves, who lobbies on behalf of the crop insurance industry and convinced his members to stay engaged in the coalition. “We just need to keep learning and building coalitions.”

That was exactly the “take home” message delivered by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow when she addressed farm and crop insurance industry leaders earlier this year.

After the farm bill conference committee had completed its work and the House was poised to consider a final farm bill vote, Stabenow walked over to the lower chamber to watch members vote.

“In the end, we had over 350 conservation organizations that supported the farm bill, including the National Rifle Association (NRA) which endorsed the effort because of habitat for hunting,” Stabenow told *Agri-Pulse*. “I know that there were some Republican House members who changed their vote because of the NRA.”

Unlike last year's effort, the House approved the new farm bill, officially known as “The Agricultural Act of 2014” by a margin of 251-166 on Jan. 29, 2014.



Sen. Debbie Stabenow,
Chairwoman Senate Ag
Committee

Stabenow says she knows that there was a lot of concern at the beginning of this coalition, but “this is very, very important for the future.

“We ended direct payments, we put more money into crop insurance and we have critics out there now, just gunning for crop insurance.

“Because of this agreement, we were able to push back on some very damaging proposals for crop insurance,” she explained. **“But we wouldn’t have been able to do it without the broad coalition and understanding that we need to care about large farmers and large pieces of land as well as small farmers and small pieces of land.**

“Adding fruit and vegetable growers builds your coalition....expanding to organic farmers builds your coalitionstrengthening whole farm policies for small farmers builds your coalition....connecting with conservation groups builds your coalition....all of which will be absolutely critical going forward,” Stabenow adds.

Strategic Conservation Solutions founder Bruce Knight says, in many ways, this far-reaching coalition represents just the start of how those in agriculture and rural America can grow their influence.

“One of the real keys to watch is whether or not this coalition continues as one of convenience that is focused on just one issue or whether or not it will be a coalition about collaboration that can enable cooperation on several other issues,” says Knight.

For example, he says the American Petroleum Institute (API) desperately wants to bring conservation and wildlife groups into a coalition opposing the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS).

Knight says that, thus far, many have not jumped on that bandwagon.

“That itself, is very significant and underscores the fact that there are tremendous gains to be made on other issues.”

PACs pave the way for greater political influence in Rural America

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 21, 2014 – Shortly after the U.S. House of Representatives defeated the farm bill on June 20, 2013, Rep. Justin Amash, along with hundreds of business leaders, government officials and staff, attended a \$250-a-plate dinner hosted by the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI). The libertarian group, which espouses “free market” principles, made a James Bond spoof video called “Capitalism Never Dies,” and the group’s president, Lawson Bader, sported a kilt in tribute to actor Sean Connery.

But before the elaborate Bond-themed dinner began, the emcee announced two other reasons to celebrate: CEI had just raised [\\$1 million](#) from sources like Google, Facebook, Koch, Altria and the Association of American Railroads. Plus, there was the political victory: the organization had helped defeat the farm bill - thanks in part to Amash and dozens of other House conservatives.

CEI aligned with conservative groups, such as Heritage Action, Taxpayers for Common Sense and the National Taxpayers Union, along with an eclectic mix of other organizations, including the National Black Farmers Association, U.S. PIRG, and Defenders of Wildlife and the Environmental Working Group, in order to bring down the farm bill. Several of them expressed concerns about the largess of the bill, which was expected to cost about \$956 million over the next 10 years, at a time when farmers were enjoying record farm incomes. The largest portion – almost 80 percent – would be spent on food stamps, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).



Rep. Justin Amash

It was widely known that Rep. Amash had concerns about SNAP and supported splitting the “nutrition” portion of the bill away from the “farm” portion, while adding more work requirements for SNAP recipients. But he also opposed price supports and other farm programs “because they damage the economy, harm consumers, and hurt the environment by encouraging more agricultural production than may be necessary,” he explained on his Facebook page.



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH IN RURAL AMERICA



Asked after the CEI dinner what it would take to win his support for the farm bill, the Michigan Republican told *Agri-Pulse* that he wasn't sure, but the bill would have to be significantly rewritten before he could support it because of concerns over both crop insurance and SNAP.

That type of response didn't sit well with the Michigan Farm Bureau, which had endorsed Amash in his most recent bid to represent the state's 3rd Congressional District, a seat once held by President Gerald Ford. Amash, the son of a wealthy Palestinian immigrant, was part of the tea party wave of conservative House lawmakers first elected in 2010 with a focus on downsizing government. Since then, he's become known as a member of the "No" caucus because of his resistance to compromise.

This year, members of "Michigan's Voice of Agriculture" decided they had enough. The grassroots-driven Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB) Agri-Pac recently announced its endorsement of challenger Brian Ellis over incumbent Amash in the Aug. 5th Republican primary. The group's political action committee (PAC) had over \$300,000 on hand in March of this year, according to Federal Election Commission (FEC) documents.

"We are widely viewed as an organization that connects with 500,000 voters in our state," says Michigan Farm Bureau President Wayne Woods, who says he frequently gets called by both state and federal candidates, seeking his organization's endorsement - as much and sometimes more - than its campaign contributions.

After MFB evaluated the candidates' records on the issues, "our members sent a message that they didn't appreciate Amash's unwillingness to work on the farm bill," explained Wood. "Plus, he didn't want to work with us on immigration – a crucial issue for our members."

While Amash is still heavily favored in the polls, the MFB's endorsement of his long-shot GOP challenger underscores the fact that **farmers – who may support Republicans on a wide variety of social and business issues – are taking a harder look at whether or not candidates support them on their key legislative issues. And if not, they are giving them the boot.**

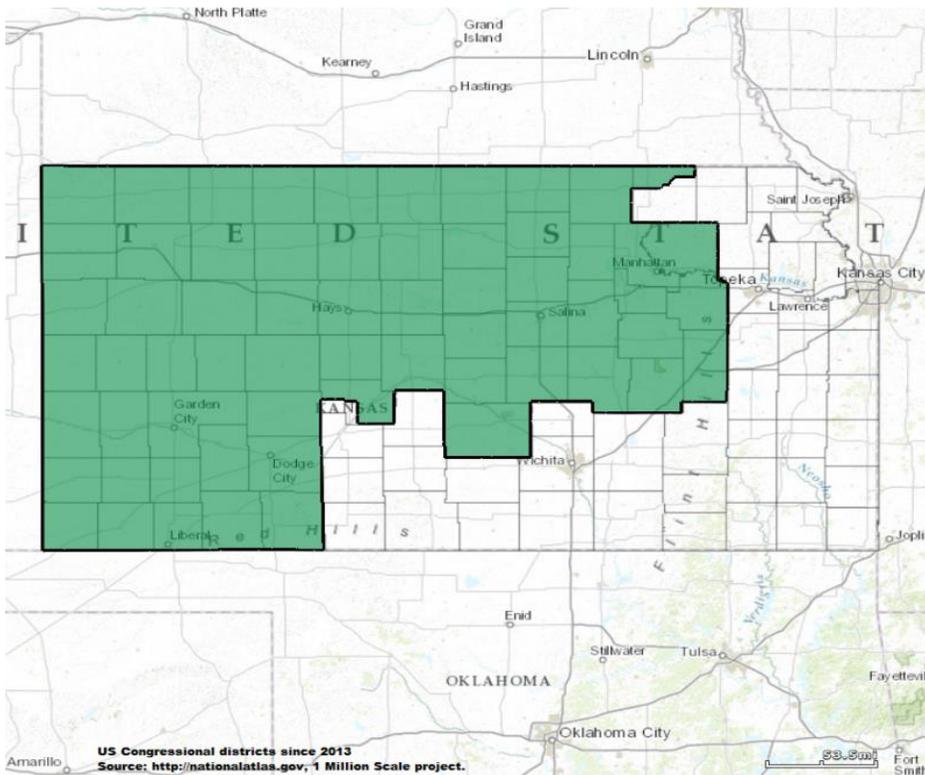
The conundrum in Kansas

Take the case of Rep. Tim Huelskamp, who represents the sprawling "Big First" congressional district in Kansas. His mostly rural district encompasses 63 counties in western and northern Kansas, making it the 11th largest congressional district in the nation. Voters there helped launch the political careers of some of the most notable advocates for American agriculture, including Senators Bob Dole, Pat Roberts and, most recently, Jerry Moran. For nearly 100 years, a representative of the district has served on the House Agriculture Committee.

But not so with this Kansas Republican. A tea party favorite and farmer by trade, Huelskamp frequently rails against any type of new government spending – voting repeatedly against the farm bill and the Water Resources Development Act. He got crossways with his own GOP leadership so often that, at the end of 2012, House Speaker John Boehner stripped Huelskamp of his seat on the Agriculture Committee.



Rep. Tim Huelskamp



The Big First in Kansas

Huelskamp won the endorsement of the Kansas Farm Bureau when he was first elected in 2010 and again in 2012, but this year, the grassroots membership organization said “no more.” That’s despite the fact that almost all other members of the Kansas delegation also opposed the farm bill.

Kansas Farm Bureau (KFB) President Steve Baccus said members in each county have a chance to vote and the group did not surpass the 50 percent margin needed to get an endorsement for either Huelskamp or his challenger, Alan LaPolice.

Baccus said his members are simply “fed up” with the failure to get things done in Washington.

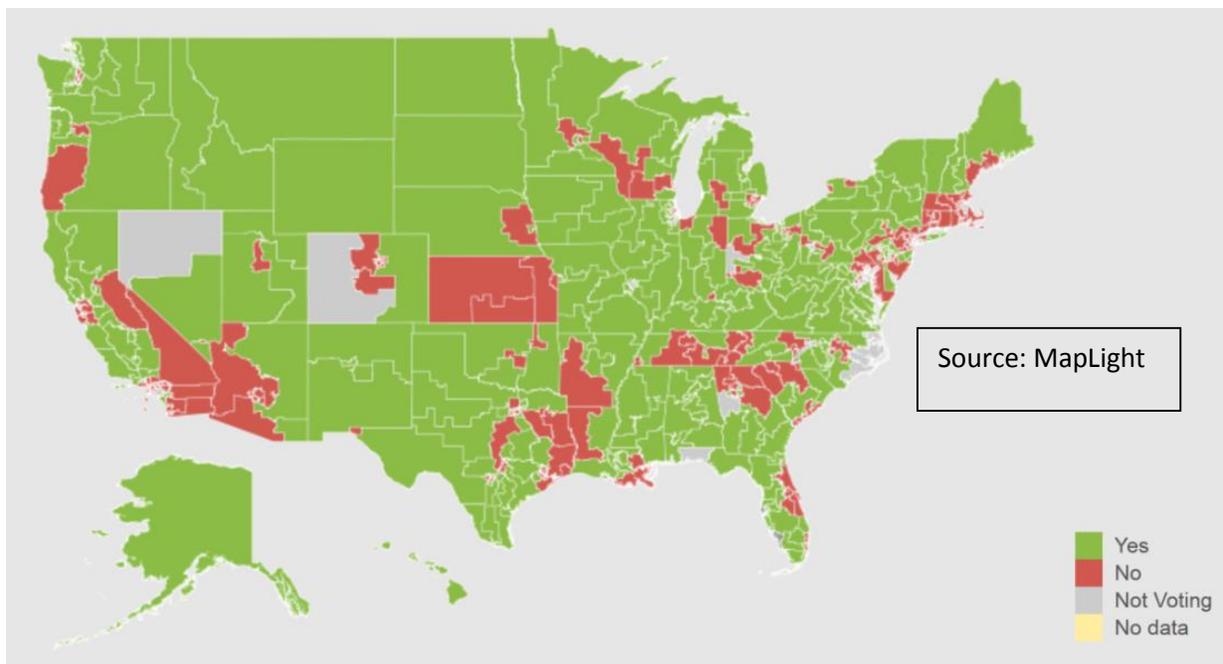
“For Huelskamp, it’s always ‘my way or the highway’ and that simply doesn’t work.” Baccus said Huelskamp had a zero percent voting record with KFB. Even Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi scored better, at 50 percent.

Still, most polls show Huelskamp taking a commanding lead over challenger LaPolice ahead of the state’s August primary. Touting endorsements from groups like the National Rifle Association, the Huelskamp campaign recently released a poll showing he held a 62 percent to 12 percent lead over his opponent.

Some Kansas farmers believe that, while LaPolice may not have the name recognition to win in this cycle, their support may pave the way for victory in the next one. They hope to have a representative on the House Agriculture Committee prior to the next farm bill.

Despite criticism from members like Huelskamp and Amash and attacks from hundreds of different interest groups, a comprehensive farm bill eventually sailed through the House by 251-166 on Jan. 29 and the Senate by 68-32 on Feb. 4. The almost one trillion dollar package was signed into law by President Barack Obama on Feb. 7.

The House 2014 Farm Bill vote by congressional district



“Part of why the farm organizations were successful was because of their PACs,” says Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minnesota, who serves as the House Agriculture Committee’s ranking member and represents parts of the Red River Valley. He noted that many farm groups “had fairly significant PAC money, especially sugar.”

However, he questions whether those PAC dollars will be as important in the future, especially given the impact of the so-called “super PACs,” which Peterson believes could make “some PACs irrelevant.”

The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United ruling struck down spending restrictions by corporations, associations and unions, enabling super-PACs - which typically are supported by multiple donors - to create an outsized influence on political expenditures. As a result, Peterson says it may be more difficult for some traditional PACs to deliver political punch.

Based on reports filed with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) in 2013 and 2014, there are 7,025 federal PACs trying to influence candidates and their campaigns. Those PACs reported total receipts of \$1.1 billion during this election cycle, with disbursements of \$951.5 million, debts of \$20.9 million, and combined cash-on-hand of \$594.1 million as of the end of March.

Sugar’s sweet influence

But for now, the American Crystal Sugar Co. PAC, headquartered in Moorhead, Minnesota, is one of the largest and most powerful in agriculture – delivering far more political punch than many of their relatively small number of growers and contributors had ever anticipated.

As of June 30, American Crystal Sugar had collected a whopping \$2.45 million in receipts, with the majority of the funds coming from growers. In terms of contributions to candidates and other committees, American Crystal Sugar doled out over \$2 million during this election cycle.

“Between 80 to 90 percent of what we take in as a PAC comes from growers’ own pockets,” explains American Crystal Sugar’s Vice President of Government Affairs Kevin Price. “So

they invest not only in their crops and in their machinery, but they invest their money wisely in a Political Action Committee. And we work hard to make sure those dollars are used wisely.”

American Crystal’s PAC receipts may pale in comparison to a PAC like Emily’s List, which had raked in \$24.5 million as of March 31 for this election cycle, or the National Rifle Association’s America Political Victory Fund, which collected \$14.9 million, according to the FEC reports.

However, when the FEC ranked all PACs in terms of contributions to candidates and other committees on March 31 of the current election cycle, American Crystal ranked No. 15.

That put the company below PACs like the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO Committee (\$2.7 million) and the National Beer Wholesalers Association (\$2.16 million), but ahead of the American Bankers Association (\$1.9 million) and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (\$1.54 million).

Throughout the farm bill debate, there was perhaps no segment of agriculture that was attacked and tested as frequently as the sugar industry, as reformers tried to modify or simply dismantle a program that combines price supports, domestic marketing allotments and tariff-rate quotas to support prices and influence the amount of sugar available to the U.S. market.



Kevin Price, VP of Government Affairs – American Crystal Sugar

Yet, a small army of sugar beet growers who represent only about 1.2 million acres in 10 states, along with their “brethren” who raise sugar cane on about 900,000 acres in four states, seemed to exert outsized political influence when fending off attackers. They fought off three different attempts to reform the sugar program in committee and five attempts on both the House and Senate floor.

“It’s always a challenge to face votes either in the committees or on the House and Senate floors, but our growers were up to the task and our industry was up to the task of conveying to Congress why we think sugar policy is important and ought to be continued,” noted Price. “Ultimately, Congress agreed with that.”

Price says his industry thinks “the policy stands on its own, but we certainly want to be active in supporting those folks who are supportive of us. That is certainly no secret in agriculture and nothing unique to sugar. Yet, we don’t take anything for granted.

“We don’t assume anything in exchange for any campaign contributions. We just want to be constructive players in a political process and constructive players in the policy-making process.”

Price says regular communication is key to the industry’s PAC and its lobbying strategy.

“Within Crystal Sugar, we work very hard to communicate to the shareholders and the growers that being politically active is important. It’s a part of our monthly company board meetings where I discuss what’s going on in Washington. It is also part of almost every meeting in our districts - around our factories with the shareholders and employees.

“We’ve just been fortunate to have good leaders in the (Red River) Valley, from the CEO on down to the board members of American Crystal to the Red River Valley Sugar Beet Growers

Association. They take it upon themselves to talk to their neighbors about contributing to the PAC and travel to D.C. to lobby Congress. They believe in it, they show their peers the importance of it. That peer-to-peer communication, along with our CEO and board communication, provides just a roundhouse of exhibits of why being involved is important. The results have proven themselves.”

Of course, American Crystal is not the only sugar industry PAC making an impact on Capitol Hill. In an analysis of the top cooperative PACs, in terms of contributions to candidates and other committees from Jan. 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014, several sugar cooperatives made the list, including the Michigan Sugar Company Growers PAC (\$397,750) and the MINN-DAK Farmers Cooperative Sugar PAC (\$255,000). See our snapshot of the top 30 cooperatives, below.

**Top 30 Cooperative PACs Contributions to Candidates and Other Committees
Jan. 1, 2013 - March 31, 2014**

Rank	Committee	Amount
1	AMERICAN CRYSTAL SUGAR COMPANY PAC	\$2,019,000
2	MICHIGAN SUGAR COMPANY GROWERS PAC	\$397,750
3	CALIFORNIA DAIRIES FEDERAL PAC	\$387,000
4	SOUTHERN MINNESOTA BEET SUGAR COOPERATIVE PAC	\$298,500
5	MINN-DAK FARMERS COOPERATIVE SUGAR PAC	\$255,000
6	LAND O'LAKES, INC., PAC	\$248,100
7	DAIRY FARMERS OF AMERICA, INC. - DEPAC	\$159,500
8	SNAKE RIVER SUGAR COMPANY PAC	\$111,570
9	BLUE DIAMOND GROWERS PAC	\$76,000
10	ORRICK HERRINGTON & SUTCLIFFE, LLP FEDERAL PAC	\$74,000
11	FARMERS' RICE COOPERATIVE FUND	\$64,250
12	AG PROCESSING INC PAC	\$37,625
13	ASSOCIATED MILK PRODUCERS INC. PAC	\$36,500
14	RICELAND FOODS, INC. PAC	\$35,100
15	RIO GRANDE VALLEY SUGAR GROWERS INC PAC	\$33,500
16	SUGAR CANE GROWERS COOPERATIVE OF FLORIDA (PAC)	\$30,500
17	AGRI-MARK INC PAC	\$25,550
18	SECURITY SERVICE FEDERAL CREDIT UNION PAC	\$21,950
19	ARIZONA DAIRYMEN PAC	\$17,500
20	INDIANA ACRE/INDIANA STATEWIDE ASSN OF RECS INC	\$17,300
21	MICHIGAN MILK PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION PAC	\$11,500
22	DARIGOLD PAC	\$11,500
23	DAIRYLEA COOPERATIVE PAC	\$9,750
24	BASIN ELECTRIC POWER COOPERATIVE PAC	\$8,800
25	MARYLAND & VIRGINIA MILK PRODUCERS COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION INC PAC	\$7,000
26	WEST CENTRAL COOPERATIVE PAC	\$5,100
27	OKLAHOMA ASSOCIATION OF ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES	\$5,000
28	SIUXLAND ENERGY & LIVESTOCK COOPERATIVE PAC	\$5,000
29	INDIANA FARM BUREAU INC ELECT PAC INC	\$4,500
30	JEWISH COMMUNITY PAC OF PITTSBURGH	\$4,500

Model for success

As total farm numbers continue to decline, the sugar industry's political success has many other farm organization leaders, such as those representing the nation's most widely planted crops of corn (on 91.6 million acres this year) and soybeans (planted on 84.8 million acres), thinking they could also pack more political punch into their legislative strategies with PACs.

But for some farmers, writing a check is still a hard sell. Many of these groups are far behind American Crystal Sugar when it comes to fundraising.

Former National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) President Ken McCauley recalls that even he was not really supportive of establishing a PAC 10 years ago, but his members saw that politics were changing and it was necessary to "pay to play."

Showing up at a fundraising event with a check won't "buy" a vote, but the donation may buy access and potentially build relationships with key allies, says McCauley, who now serves as President of NCGA's PAC.

"If you do it right, you might get the ear of a member of Congress for 1-2 hours. That's a big deal for us."

McCauley, a farmer from White Cloud, Kansas, has worked tirelessly to attract products and events – like John Deere Gators, duck hunts and NASCAR races - that his members will bid for at his organization's annual PAC auction, held during the Commodity Classic each year. And it's paid off; the event generated over \$160,000 in March, bringing NCGA's cash on hand to \$293,000. As the following chart shows, annual contributions doubled within the last five years.

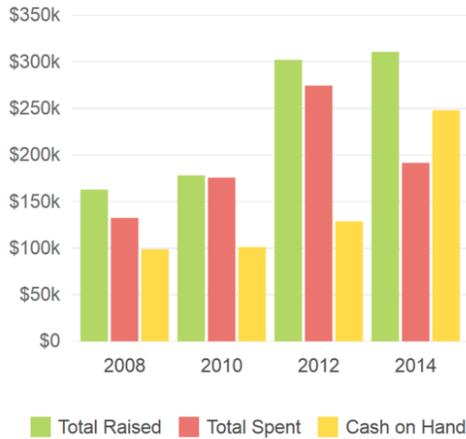
The American Soybean Association had even greater success at fundraising, holding their event at a different night during the Classic. They gathered over \$200,000 in new contributions in March.

However, with more funds to spend comes even greater responsibility.

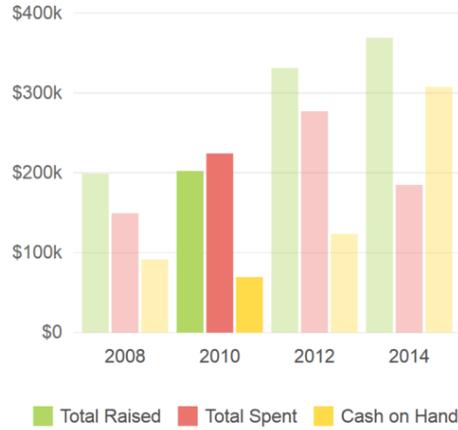
NCGA's Vice President for Public Policy Jon Doggett says that his organization's PAC and overall legislative strategy requires growers to be better educated about what is happening in Washington, and better prepared to ask tougher questions that hold their elected officials accountable.

In the past, many agricultural organizations contributed their PAC funds to congressmen who they liked and who supported their issues "most" of the time. But the stunning defeat of a new five-year farm bill in June 2013 caused many to rethink their priorities and pay even closer attention to key votes on their legislative scorecards.

NATIONAL CORN GROWERS ASSOCIATION (NCGA) IN OTHER YEARS



AMERICAN SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION PAC (SOYPAC) IN OTHER YEARS



Source: U.S. Campaign Committees

Bring back the balance?

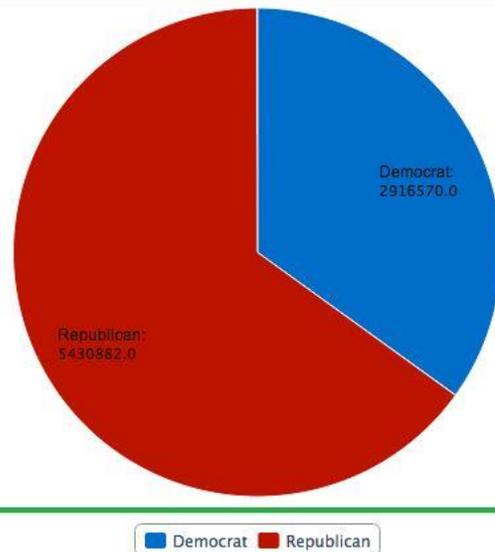
In recent campaign cycles, the majority of farm organizations and agribusinesses have supported more Republicans than Democrats, as *Agri-Pulse* reported in our PAC analysis in March. But several of those GOP candidates also opposed the farm bill.

So that led many to wonder: **If farmers traditionally vote for GOP candidates, is the GOP taking them for granted? And perhaps, should they give more money to Democrats so there is more balance in their giving?**

Senate Agriculture Committee Leader Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat, has been quietly meeting with farm leaders to elevate questions about political balance. Some farm leaders tell *Agri-Pulse* it's an argument they are taking to heart.

“Our leader (Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid D-Nev.), who has almost no agriculture in his state, stood with American agriculture, stood with me, which I am very grateful for, and gave us every bit of time we needed on the floor, not once, but twice to pass it all and then go to conference,” she told *Agri-Pulse*. “So, if we’re going to pass future farm bills, the agriculture community needs to support the people that support them.”

Ag PAC Contributions
Source: Center for Responsive Politics



Ag PAC Contributions 2013 – March 2014

“This is not about politics, it is about being smart; about supporting people that will support agriculture. It’s pretty foolish not to support the people that support agriculture.”

In the long run, that’s certainly not going to make it very easy to pass another farm bill. It ought to be Basic Politics 101,” she added.

Stabenow said her message to farm groups has not been as political as it has been practical.

“I don’t know how many times we had folks who didn’t support anything about this bill. If they get supported by agricultural groups, then the next time, they get what they get. So that was my message.

“You can support Democrats and Republicans, but support the people who supported agriculture and understand that our majority went way beyond what was necessary here to get this thing done,” she added.

Yet, for House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas of Oklahoma, all of the talk about GOP opposition to the farm bill and the need for farmers and ranchers to support more Democrats with their political contributions may be a bit overblown.

“I’m an old Baptist. There are sinners in every congregation that sit on both the left and right side of the room,” he told *Agri-Pulse*.

“Yes, I was frustrated with some of my conservative friends when they voted for all of the food stamp reforms that are in the final bill. But by the same token, I watched some of my friends on the left try to take profit-sharing apart at every opportunity.... to try to torture the process at every opportunity. I would tell you that there’s just a good set of very challenging people with slightly confused attitudes – on both left and right together – they helped to make this (farm bill) a two-and-a-half year process.

Michigan farmers increase Stabenow’s margin of victory

For Stabenow, serving as Chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee and her overall support for agriculture and rural issues appears to be paying off at the ballot box. When she first ran statewide for the U.S. Senate seat, the Michigan Democrat received slightly more than two million votes.

But in 2012, she won the endorsement of the Michigan Farm Bureau. Her unwavering support for farmers, especially after the devastating freeze that year, convinced many of them to vote for the Democrat, even though most of their other endorsements were for GOP candidates. An Agri-Pulse analysis of some of the most heavily farming-dependent counties in the state showed that she increased her margin of victory in those counties, attracting over 2.7 million votes in her 2012 election.

“With time, will they all grow up and come to their senses?” he asked. **“A bunch of ‘em are adults already.”**

Farmers can still flex muscles in mid-term elections

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 28, 2014 – If a recent poll is any indication, Sen. Kay Hagan appears to be holding onto a small lead in a hotly-contested race that could determine whether Democrats retain their control of the U.S. Senate next year.

There are 36 Senate seats in play this year and 21 are held by Democrats like Hagan with 15 in the hands of the GOP. If Republicans hold all of their own and pick up six additional seats, they can gain control of the Senate, setting the stage for Republican control of both chambers during the last two years of Barack Obama’s presidency.

In North Carolina, Hagan leads her Republican challenger, state House Speaker Thom Tillis, by 7 percentage points, according to a July 17-20 survey by Public Policy Polling, with a margin of error of plus or minus three points.

However, polls offer just a snapshot of public sentiment at any given time. **In political terms, it’s still a long way until the November elections, and pundits and political operatives are watching and videotaping almost every move** – waiting for something akin to “a Todd Akin moment,” where members of the Missouri Senate hopeful’s own party faced the troubling reality of disavowing their own candidate because of some of his comments.

At the same time, Democrats and Republicans are ramping up their investments in this heated political battle. Since Jan. 1, 2013, Hagan’s campaign has taken in more than \$14 million, leaving her with over \$8.7 million in cash as of June 30. During the same time period, the Tillis campaign collected over \$4.7 million and, after a contested primary, he has about \$1.5 million in the bank.

But those numbers pale compared to some of the spending by outside groups to influence the race -- money that often doesn’t have to be reported to the Federal Election Commission. Republicans say such groups have spent \$11.1 million so far against Tillis, while Democrats estimate outside groups have spent \$18 million against Hagan, according to a [McClatchy](#) analysis.



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH IN RURAL AMERICA



With donation numbers like that, it seems an unsurmountable task for the state's approximately 50,000 farmers to influence this Senate race. Even if all of them donated dollars and turned out to vote, could farmers possibly make a difference in a state with over 9.7 million residents?

“Not really, when you consider that there are fewer and fewer farmers in our state,” says Ferrel Guillory, the director of the Program on Public Life and journalism professor at the University of North Carolina. “But that’s not the end of the story. Two other important changes have happened.”

Senators up for reelection 2014		
State	Democrat	Status
AK	Mark Begich	Running for 2 nd term, R primary 8/19/14
AR	Mark Pryor	Running for 3 rd term, faces Tom Cotton (R) in general
DE	Chris Coons	Won 2010 special election, no D opposition, R primary 9/9/14
IA	Tom Harkin — <i>Retiring</i>	Bruce Braley is D nominee, will face Joni Ernst (R) in general
IL	Dick Durbin	Will face Jim Oberweis (R) in general
LA	Mary Landrieu	Running for 4 th term, no Dem opposition, R primary is 11/4/2014
MA	Ed Markey	Won special election 2013, no D opposition, R primary is 9/16/14
MI	Carl Levin — <i>Retiring</i>	Gary Peters (D) faces Terri Lynn Land (R)
MN	Al Franken	First time defending, no D opposition, R primary 8/12/14
MT	Max Baucus — <i>Retiring</i>	John Walsh appointed 2/14, will face Rep. Steve Daines (R)
NC	Kay Hagan	Running against Thom Tillis (R) and Sean Haugh (L) in general
NH	Jeanne Shaheen	Running for 2 nd term, R primary w/fmr. Sen. Scott Brown 9/9/14
NM	Tom Udall	Running for 2 nd term, faces Allen Weh (R) in general
OR	Jeff Merkley	Running for 2 nd term, faces Monica Wehby (R) in general
RI	Jack Reed	Running for 4 th term, R primary 9/9/14
SD	Tim Johnson — <i>Retiring</i>	Rick Weiland (D) faces Mike Rounds (R) and Larry Pressler (I)
VA	Mark Warner	Running for 2 nd term, faces Ed Gillespie (R) and Robert Sarvis (L)
WV	Jay Rockefeller — <i>Retiring</i>	Natalie Tennant (D) will face Shelley Moore Capito (R)
CO	Mark Udall	Faces Rep. Cory Gardner (R) in general
NJ	Cory Booker	Won special election 2013, faces Jeff Bell (R) in general
HI	Brian Schatz — <i>Special Election</i>	Appointed to fill Inouye's term, faces Colleen Hanabusa (D) in primary 8/9/14
State	Republican	Note
AL	Jeff Sessions	Running for 4 th term, no D opponent
GA	Saxby Chamblis — <i>Retiring</i>	David Perdue (R) faces Michelle Nunn (D) in general
ID	Jim Risch	Running for 2 nd term, faces Nels Mitchell (D) in general
KS	Pat Roberts	Running for 4 th term, faces Milton Wolf in primary 8/5/2014
KY	Mitch McConnell	Five-term incumbent faces Allison Lundergan Grimes (D)
ME	Susan Collins	Running for 4 th term, faces Shenna Bellows (D) in general
MS	Thad Cochran	Won run-off in June, faces Travis Childers (D) in general
NE	Mike Johanns — <i>Retiring</i>	Ben Sasse won primary, faces David Domina (D) in general
OK	Jim Inhofe	Running for 4 th term, faces Matt Silverstein (D) in general
SC	Lindsey Graham	Running for 3 rd term, faces Brad Hutto (D); Thomas Ravenal (I)
TN	Lamar Alexander	Running for 3 rd term, faces Joe Carr in R primary 8/7/14
TX	John Cornyn	Running for 3 rd term, faces David Alameel (D) in general
WY	Mike Enzi	Running for 4 th term, primary is 8/19/14
SC	Tim Scott	* Special election - Tim Scott was appointed in 2013 to fill Jim DeMint's term, faces Joyce Dickerson (D) in the general
OK	Tom Coburn — <i>Retiring</i>	* Special election for remaining 2 years of Tom Coburn's seat will be held in Nov. – James Langford running as R, Constance Johnson running as D

Guillory says the old southern democratic political construct, where the “elite courthouse crowd who once fought to keep segregation but later gathered support for Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and New Deal programs, is all gone. They’ve been replaced by Republicans.”

While some primarily black southern counties will go to Democrats, rural white voters in the South are overwhelmingly Republican, Guillory said.

“As a result, they can form coalitions with business and professional people and control much of the South.



Ferril Guillory, University of North Carolina

“That’s the big historical change. The center of gravity for Democrats has moved to the cities.”

Secondly, Guillory says that, within the American psyche, there is a feeling that “many of us have roots in farming or small towns.” It is not an experience shared by his children, but he says that many Baby Boomers still have that type of connection.

“So there is a psychological clout that exists, even as the economic and political clout has waned.”

The Senate sway

Kyle Kondik, managing editor for Sabato’s Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, says that while there may be fewer rural districts in the U.S. House of Representatives, one thing that has not changed is that every state gets two senators.

“So states that are rural have more power than they would if Senate seats were handed out proportionally by population. That inherently gives agriculture and farmers a bigger say in policy than they otherwise would have.”

But Kondik also agrees that many voters have a “cultural identity” with farmers, providing them with influence that belies their actual numbers.

“The idea of being a farmer is kind of a cultural identity issue in the same way that, in a place like West Virginia, coal mining and coal is just part of the cultural identity of being a West Virginian. So someone in West Virginia may not actually work in a coal mine, but a lot of people there identify culturally with coal in a way that’s bigger than the actual industry.

“By the same token I would say there are a lot of people who aren’t farmers in say, Iowa or Nebraska or Kansas, but I think people who live there may kind of generically identify with agriculture as being perhaps a bigger employer than it actually is.”

For an example, Kondik points to the Iowa Senate race where Republican Joni Ernst is battling Democrat Rep. Bruce Braley for the seat held for the past 30 years by retiring Democrat Tom Harkin.

Even though farmers make up less than 5 percent of the Hawkeye state’s 3 million residents, agriculture is playing an incredibly important role in the campaign, albeit for reasons one would not normally expect.

In January, Braley spoke to a group of trial lawyers in Texas who were possible donors to his campaign. In a [video posted online by America Rising](#), a GOP-aligned organization, the former trial lawyer tried to persuade his audience about how important it was for him to win the race and more generally, for Democrats to retain their majority in the U.S. Senate.

During the pitch, he told fellow trial lawyers that a GOP takeover of the Senate in November could turn the Judiciary Committee chair over to the Iowa’s popular senior statesmen, Senator Chuck Grassley. In a rather stunning political gaffe that seemed to paint all farmers as underachievers, he referred to Grassley as a “farmer from Iowa who never went to law school.”

Braley apologized, but the GOP is hitting him hard for delivering the Iowa equivalent to Mitt Romney’s infamous “47 percent” comment that was captured on tape during the 2012 presidential campaign and used by Democrats to make Romney appear to be critical of poor folks.

A GOP super PAC, Priorities for Iowa, has already inserted the comments into a \$250,000 advertisement buy against Braley. The tagline of the spot: **“Tell Bruce Braley, ‘We’d rather bet the farm on Grassley than a bunch of trial lawyers from Texas.’”**

‘Squeal’

As Republicans ramped up their criticism of Braley, Ernst, a relatively unknown state senator, was trying to break out of the crowded GOP primary pack and win the chance to challenge the relatively well-known congressman.

Drawing on her farm upbringing, Ernst supporters developed an advertisement that is officially known as “Squeal,” or more commonly as “that castration ad.”

“I grew up castrating hogs on an Iowa farm, so when I get to Washington I’ll know how to cut pork,” she says in the video taken in what appears to be an older hog barn. **“Washington’s full of big spenders -- let’s make ‘em squeal.”**

Farmers finding more friends

Even though the number of U.S. farmers may be declining, they may be attracting more friends – especially when it comes to influencing lawmakers and regulators.

For example, the National Farmers Union and the North Dakota Corn Growers Association (NDCGA), along with 23 other farm organizations, recently filed comments with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) on rate case complaint procedures. It was the largest combined filing by farm organizations in years, according to Chandler Goule, NFU’s Sr. Vice President of programs.

But the outreach didn’t stop with the farm community.

“In the formation of the rail coalition, NFU reached out to companies like Diageo, National Propane Gas Association, Amtrak and other non-agriculture based organizations to discuss the impacts the captive railway system is having on farmers, energy, companies and commuters,” Goule explains. “Although these groups don’t often talk to one another, we all have common interests and need to act in unison in order to be heard.”

Goule says the changing political landscape has necessitated the ability to build new coalitions and bring together groups who might have never worked together.

“A group consisting of commodity organizations, conservation/environmental and crop insurance interests all banded together to get the recent farm bill passed. This was a historic alliance and this new form of coalition expansion is the wave of the future.”

The [advertisement](#), which generated national media buzz and almost 600,000 YouTube views, “transformed her candidacy,” according to the [Washington Post](#). Ernst won the primary and has now done what many thought was unthinkable a few months ago: She’s pulled even or ahead of Braley in several polls.

In conversations with political analysts, they noted that, while farmers and ranchers are much smaller in numbers, it’s hard to count them out, especially if they can align with other like-minded groups. In close political Senate matchups, any interest group – be it farmers, ranchers, foodworkers or teachers – could help push a candidate over the top. But efforts have to be coordinated and well-organized.

“If the final outcome is 51 versus 49 percent, a lot of people are going to be able to claim political clout,” adds Guillory.



Al Cross, University of Kentucky

Kentucky and coal

In Kentucky, Democratic Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes is trying to unseat Mitch McConnell, the U.S. Senate’s ranking minority member. For her, the rural vote in eastern Kentucky may be key, says Jennifer Duffy, senior editor for the Cook Political Report.



Jennifer Duffy,
Cook Political
Report

However, Duffy says “you have to subdivide your rural voters. Eastern Kentucky is very rural but not very agricultural. It’s coal.” The region is struggling after losing 7,000 jobs directly related to coal mining since 2012.

“And that’s where this race may well be fought. Democrats have always done fairly well in eastern Kentucky. But McConnell has made inroads.”

The importance of Eastern Kentucky voters likely explains why Grimes recently released an advertisement called “[Question from David](#),” which takes a stab at a statement McConnell reportedly made, suggesting that economic development in coal country was not his job. In the ad, Grimes appears with an out-of-work coal miner named David.

For his part, McConnell has criticized Grimes for accepting political donations from anti-coal groups and for not mentioning coal when she appeared at a fundraiser with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

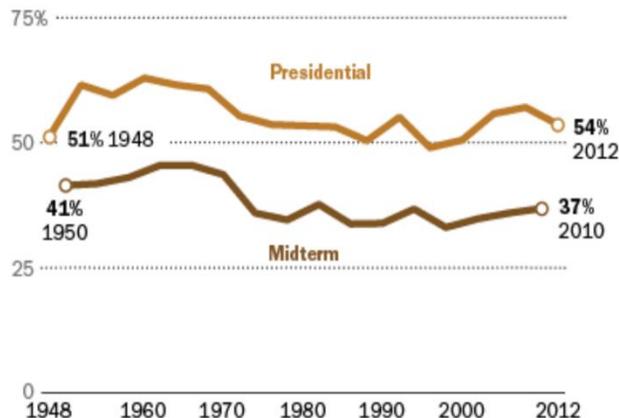
In Kentucky, most of the rural vote has turned Republican, but there are still pockets where Democrats are very strong, says Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues and associate professor in the University of Kentucky School of Journalism and Telecommunications.

Cross says this U.S. Senate race may be more about voter motivation and turnout than the issues themselves, especially in a mid-term election when the number of voters traditionally drops.

“In this case, the Democrats are more united behind their Democratic candidate than at any time since her father chaired the state’s Democratic Party and served as a state representative in the late 1980s,” adds Cross.

When the Presidency's Not at Stake, Fewer Voters Turn Out

Turnout rate during ... election years



Note: Turnout rates calculated as total votes cast for president (in presidential election years) or House of Representatives (in midterm election years) divided by voting-age population.

Source: Census Bureau (voting-age population), Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives (vote totals)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Yet, farmers are usually one of the most dependable voting groups, willing to turn out in mid-term elections when many others won't, says Cross. And farmers are "pretty well lined up behind McConnell."

Voter turnout regularly drops in midterm elections, according to the Pew Research Center. In 2008, 57.1 percent of the voting-age population cast ballots, lifting up Barack Obama to become the first African American president. In 2010, only 36.9 percent of the eligible voters turned out for the midterm election that put the House back in Republican hands. By 2012, Pew reported that turnout rebounded to 53.7 percent for Obama's re-election.

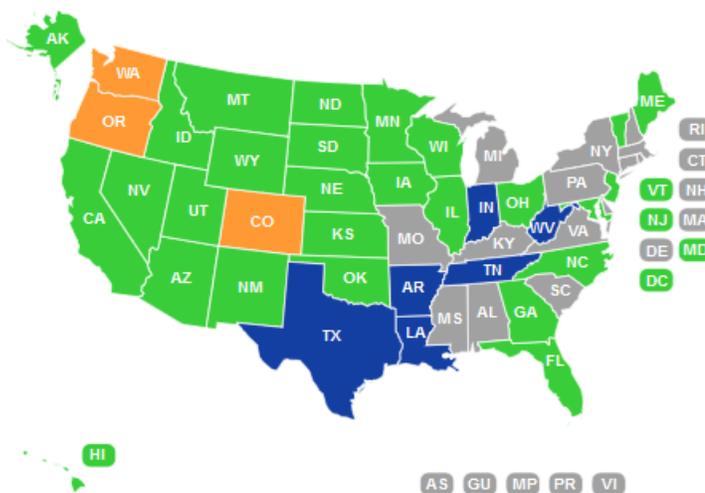
In general, the voters who are more reliable in a mid-term electorate are ones that are more Republican, a little bit whiter, and a little bit older than those who turn out for your average presidential election, explains University of Virginia's Kondik.

"It wasn't always like that: The 'Greatest Generation' came of age during the FDR years and was more Democratic than those who came after them," adds Kondik. That was about the same time that U.S. [farm numbers also peaked](#).

"But at this particular point in time, the over-65 demographics are generally more Republican and the 18-29 demographic is more Democratic and the older voters come out more regularly in non-presidential elections."

That's why some Democrats are so focused on get-out-the-vote efforts with younger voters and looking for ways to extend the voting period for more absentee and early voters. According to the [National Council of State Legislatures](#), any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day in 33 states and the District of Columbia. No excuse or justification is required.

No-excuse absentee voting	Early voting	Early voting AND no-excuse absentee voting	All-mail voting	No early voting: excuse required for absentee
AK, HI, WA, OR, CA, NV, UT, AZ, NM, CO, TX, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, NC, VA, WV, OH, IN, IL, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, TN, KY, WV, VA, PA, NY, ME, VT, NH, MA, RI, CT, DE, MD, DC	TX, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, NC, VA, WV, OH, IN, IL, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, TN, KY, WV, VA, PA, NY, ME, VT, NH, MA, RI, CT, DE, MD, DC	AK, HI, WA, OR, CA, NV, UT, AZ, NM, CO, TX, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, NC, VA, WV, OH, IN, IL, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, TN, KY, WV, VA, PA, NY, ME, VT, NH, MA, RI, CT, DE, MD, DC	AK, HI, WA, OR, CA, NV, UT, AZ, NM, CO, TX, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, NC, VA, WV, OH, IN, IL, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, TN, KY, WV, VA, PA, NY, ME, VT, NH, MA, RI, CT, DE, MD, DC	AK, HI, WA, OR, CA, NV, UT, AZ, NM, CO, TX, LA, MS, AL, GA, FL, NC, VA, WV, OH, IN, IL, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE, KS, MO, TN, KY, WV, VA, PA, NY, ME, VT, NH, MA, RI, CT, DE, MD, DC



Whether or not Grimes will be able to make inroads with farm and rural voters remains to be seen. She's been invited by the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation to participate in a candidate's forum on Aug. 20, where board members can ask questions and media can observe the discussion. McConnell has already accepted an invitation and Grimes is expected to attend. If so, it will be the first time both candidates will face off and respond to the same questions in the same room.

Tribes still matter

The Cook Political Report's Duffy says the rural vote will continue to matter in places like Kentucky, North Carolina, Iowa, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina and Alaska, where one of Democratic Sen. Mark Begich's top challengers, former Attorney General Dan Sullivan, is married to a native Alaskan – a member of the *Athabascan* cultural group.

“The battle is on now for who has the support of the Alaskan tribes. They are not necessarily a monolithic vote, although they can behave that way,” Duffy adds.

Begich already won the support of Sealaska, a regional native institution representing more than 21,600 member-shareholders of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian tribes. The group endorsed Republican Lisa Murkowski in 2010.

Another prominent native corporation, Artic Slope Regional Corp., endorsed Sullivan, even before he faces off against Joe Miller, who won the last Republican primary for a U.S. Senate seat in Alaska, and Lt. Gov. Mead Treadwell in the Aug. 19 primary.

Face-off over the farm bill

In Arkansas, Sen. Mark Pryor hopes to parlay his support for the new farm bill into a win for his third term. He's facing GOP Rep. Tom Cotton, the only member of the state's congressional delegation to vote against the legislation.

“With his vote against the farm bill, Congressman Tom Cotton today cemented his status as an opponent to Arkansas' top industry, which contributes \$17 billion to our state's economy and provides one in six jobs here in Arkansas,” noted Pryor on his Facebook page. “The rest of Arkansas' House delegation voted for the bill, which was drafted with the help of Cotton's fellow Arkansas Republicans, Sen. (John) Boozman and Rep. (Rick) Crawford, and provides disaster aid to our cattle ranchers, makes responsible cuts to spending and gives farmers the certainty they need to succeed.”

Cotton said he primarily voted against the bill because it didn't do enough to cut and reform the Food Stamp program, but also cited a few other reasons.

“This bill spends too much and leaves Arkansas farmers with too little. Arkansas farmers will receive barely 0.5 percent of its bloated \$956 billion price tag — half of what they received in the 2008 bill. Also, it imposes unfair regulations on livestock producers, opening all Arkansas farmers to retaliatory tariffs,” Cotton said in a statement regarding the farm bill conference report.

“This bill can only be called a Food-Stamp bill when nearly 80 percent of its funding doesn't support farmers. Food-Stamp spending has grown by 86 percent under President Obama and enrollment is at a record high, while 70 percent of adults who receive Food Stamps have been on

the program for more than five years,” Cotton continued. “Yet this bill fails to make real reforms — lacking even common-sense work requirements that would provide job training to able-bodied adults receiving Food Stamps.”

But thus far, Cotton’s lack of support for the farm bill doesn’t appear to be hurting him in the polls, given that more of the state has turned Republican red since Pryor was first elected. According to Real Clear Politics, Cotton is leading by almost 3 percentage points in an average of most recent polls. However, the [site](#) notes that Pryor’s campaign “is showing some signs of life that weren’t really there a month ago.”

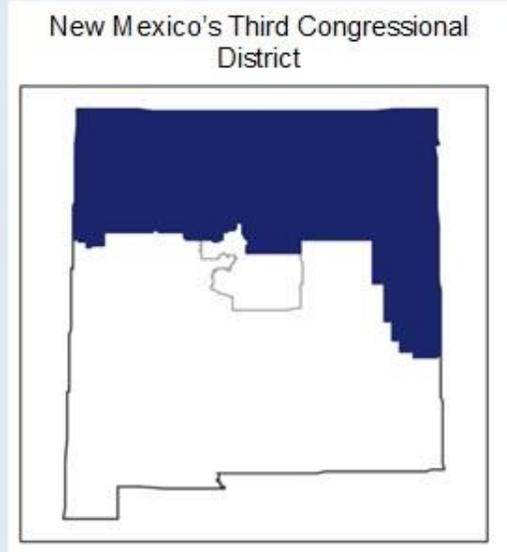
New Census data shows farm impact in each congressional district

While the number of farms may be declining in several parts of the country, New Mexico’s Third Congressional district, represented by Democrat Congressman Ben Ray Luján, is one of the exceptions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) released the 2012 Census of Agriculture Congressional District Profiles for the 113th Congress today, indicating that there are now 19,356 farmers in the third district, up from 18,075 in 2007 and 10,469 in 2002. The region includes the State’s Capital, Sante Fe and covers most of the northern half of the state.

A variety of data points are published in the congressional district profiles including:

- Number of farms, land in farms, average size of farm
- Market value of products sold, average per farm
- Crop sales, livestock sales
- Government payments, average per farm receiving payments
- Value of sales by commodity group
- Top crop and livestock items
- Economic characteristics
- Operator characteristics



In August, NASS plans to publish the 2012 American Indian Reservations report and the 2012 Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Profiles, which the agency notes “will provide even more information for policymakers and advocates.”

To access the data for every district [click here](#).

Farmers for Thad

Duffy said that, in general, when farmers are contacted and told the consequences of an election, they vote, but she also noted how the American Soybean Association (ASA) recently used social media to help improve voter turnout in farm country.

She says the Mississippi primary runoff was a good example of farmers reaching out to fellow farmers to help generate more votes for Sen. Thad Cochran in a tough battle against tea-party favorite and state Sen. Chris McDaniel.



Danny Murphy,
Chairman American
Soybean Association

McDaniel attracted slightly more votes than Cochran during the initial GOP primary, but not enough to win the race. Three weeks later in the runoff, Cochran beat McDaniel 50.9 percent to 49.1 percent. They were separated by 6,693 votes out of more than 375,000 cast.

“When we started ‘Farmers for Thad’ on Facebook and asked farmers to reach out to their friends and neighbors, we had no idea of how effective it might be,” says Danny Murphy, ASA’s chairman who farms in Mississippi.

The outreach campaign started after Murphy was contacted by the Cochran campaign about the need to boost farmer engagement. Although the Cochran campaign generated a lot of headlines for efforts to turn out black Democrats in the runoff, they also relied heavily on boosting voter turnout among mainstream Republicans.

City	Reach
Jackson, MS	792
Gulfport, MS	530
Brookhaven, MS	487
Oxford, MS	467
Madison, MS	422
Starkville, MS	390
Brandon, MS	329
Clarksdale, MS	306
Memphis, TN	284
Cleveland, MS	270
Tupelo, MS	262
Hernando, MS	258
Hattiesburg, MS	246
Greenwood, MS	200
Greenville, MS	191
Tunica, MS	189
Ripley, MS	172
Vicksburg, MS	171
Biloxi, MS	142
Yazoo City, MS	135
Southaven, MS	131
Canton, MS	131
Olive Branch, MS	124
Columbus, MS	123
Senatobia, MS	115
Belzoni, MS	113
Meridian, MS	107
Fulton, MS	106
Laurel, MS	104
Rolling Fork, MS	99
Ridgeland, MS	99
Natchez, MS	98
Ocean Springs, MS	94
Indianola, MS	87
Clinton, MS	82
New Albany, MS	81
McComb, MS	80
Meadville, MS	78
Pontotoc, MS	74
Philadelphia, MS	73

Murphy turned to Patrick Delaney, ASA’s Washington-based communications director, for help in figuring out how to use social media tools like Facebook to get the word out. He also worked with Elizabeth Jack, wife of Mississippi Soybean Association President Jeremy Jack, to post items on Facebook, but the campaign was not limited to soybean growers. In fact, the site reached farmers of all types and even a few suburbanites.

Delaney says the group posted to the site a whopping 269 times in 14 days. The top post, which reached 15,500 people, was The Clarion-Ledger article in Jackson, which depicted McDaniel’s non-commitment to federal farm subsidies during his stop in the Delta.

The “Farmers for Thad” Facebook page had 570 likes, Delaney says, and more than 200 of them came in the final days of the campaign, “which mean our farmers that liked us really stepped their games up and recruited their contacts as well.”

“Amazingly, we had fewer than 10 negative comments -- from only a small handful of people --throughout the two-week run of the page,” Delaney added.

It was not possible to identify all of the people who may have been contacted through this Facebook campaign, but for those who identified themselves as being in or near a city, Delaney shared a snapshot (left) of the campaign’s social media reach. Cities within the Delta are bolded, he noted, but it’s also worth pointing out several other parts of the state that were involved.

“These are areas in which McDaniel held large leads during the primary, and we were able to cut into that somewhat in the runoff,” explained Delaney.

As a result of this campaign, Murphy said it made him realize how much farmers need to do a better job of reaching out to others.

“I want to continue to remind farmers that they can’t take anything for granted. Each election is very important.

“A lot of farmers just want to do their jobs,” he added. “But we really need to be out there telling our stories and sharing our messages with others.”

50 under 50: Farm, rural advocates plant seeds of passion and commitment

By Ann Tracy Mueller

WASHINGTON, Aug. 4, 2014 – From the grass fields of the Pacific Northwest across the nation’s wheat-, corn- and soybean-covered prairies to the cotton fields and citrus orchards of its southernmost states, America is growing one much-needed crop: its future voice.

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture released its 2012 Census of Agriculture on June 27, the report included a troubling statistic. The average age of the American farmer is 58.3. To those in farm country, this wasn’t much of a surprise. Visit any farm organization board meeting these days and you’ll find more of today’s leaders than not sporting white or thinning hair.

Through the years, farming, like other industries and cultures, has looked to its elders for leadership and guidance. But, today’s farm and rural leaders – many Baby Boomers and older – will eventually climb down from those leadership tractor steps. Who will ascend them? Is rural America ready for this exodus?

Agri-Pulse asked its readers and contacts in Washington, D.C., and nationwide to tell us about bright young people they’ve seen at work in recent years – men and women under 50 from across the nation, involved in all types of crop and livestock operations – who are stepping into leadership roles, spreading the word about what matters to rural America and promoting causes important to today’s agricultural and rural communities.

High priorities: Family, feeding the world and protecting a legacy

As we spoke with these young leaders, certain things became more and more obvious. These farmers have a passion for what they do. They love where they live; it’s where they want to “grow” their children. Some have tiny babies, toddlers or grade school children, while others have kids busy with high school activities or off at college.



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH IN RURAL AMERICA



For some of these leaders, farming wasn't always in the plans. Nicole Van Vleck, a California rice farmer, set out to be an attorney, then found herself drawn back to her farm roots.

Kate Danner of Illinois, a fifth-generation farmer, wasn't involved in ag activities in high school. But while at a nearby community college on a volleyball scholarship, she became curious about the passion other rural kids had for farming. She took a year off from school to work with her dad and was hooked, returning to the family's century-old farm full-time after finishing her degree.

Providing a safe and stable food source for the world is top on these young leaders' minds. It's important to them – whether they're first-generation farmers or eighth – to protect the legacy and the industry, so their children and grandchildren can follow in the footsteps of previous generations if they choose.

Spreading the word has never been more important

Yet, to these young leaders there is another top priority: it's spreading the word about agriculture and rural America – to our nation's leaders and to consumers.

Again and again, these young people echoed the same messages:

“There are fewer and fewer of us [farmers].” (Only about 2 percent of the nation farms today.)

“We want the same things for our children as others do for theirs: a safe food supply.”

“Farmers are under attack more than ever before.”

“We have to tell our story.”

“If we don't stand up for ourselves, who will?”

Whether it's selling crops at a local farmers' market where they can talk with their customers about how food is grown, offering farm or vineyard tours, talking with legislators and their aides, hosting political fundraisers, or using social media to showcase farm practices, all have the same goal in mind – letting the rest of America know what's important to farmers and why it matters to them.

That's why these young farmers are stepping into leadership roles – on commodity boards, in farmer organizations, in politics.

Professional speaker and registered Holstein breeder Michele Payn-Knoper of Indiana, who often speaks to farm groups about improving conversations about food and agriculture, stresses the importance of finding time to be the voice of agriculture. “You may think you don't have time today, but you'll have time when you're regulated out of business,” she says.

Protecting priorities requires scheduling, sacrifice, support

None of this is easy. Farming certainly isn't a 9-to-5 job, and serving on a board isn't as simple as blocking out a few hours on a calendar one evening a month. The farm and rural advocates under 50 with whom we spoke often serve on multiple boards.

One, Boe Lopez, is the mayor pro-tem of his small town, while others serve on church councils or school boards, or coach their children's sports teams. Some also pursue interests off the farm,

such as Tim Nilsen, a California turkey farmer who has won national wakeboarding championships, or John Lee of Arkansas, who enjoys hunting and fishing.

They are busy people. How do they juggle it all?

“That’s tough. That’s the hardest part,” says Geoff Ruth, a Nebraska soybean farmer. Yet, “thanks to technology today, you can always be somewhere where you are physically not,” he adds, using Skype as an example.

One after another, they said, “It’s not easy,” or “It’s a balancing act.”

Though this listing features individual farmer leaders, many emphasized the importance of the contributions of their spouses, families and employees to their leadership and success.

They often said, “I couldn’t do it without my husband’s (or wife’s or family’s) support.”

Fourth-generation California farmer Josh Pitigliano says when the opportunity to lead presented itself, his dad and brothers said, “Do it now. We’ll make it work.”

Some farmers said, “We’re a team,” or “We (including neighbors) help each other out.”

Many said, “You’ve got to be organized.” Some also spoke of the value of technology – smartphones and iPads – in helping them stay on top of their schedules.

“You’ve got to do a lot of mapping out of your schedule to try to stay ahead of the game,” says Wyoming cattle rancher and auctioneer Adam Redland.

Often, they spoke of choosing what was most important – and of sometimes having to make sacrifices. Many try hard not to make those sacrifices at the cost of time with family, though.

“There will always be things pulling us,” says Illinois farmer Grant Noland. He tries to focus on the “high-value things” and says his wife is flexible and understanding, recognizing the end goal – they want their youngsters to be the ninth generation on the family farm. Noland echoes the comments of other busy people when he says, “Balance isn’t easy.”

Some leaders grew up traveling to commodity events or Washington, D.C. with their parents. Now they take their own children with them to board meetings or the nation’s capital.

“First of all, stay on top of the farm stuff,” says Nebraska farmer Zach Hunnicutt, echoing a sentiment expressed by others. “See the value in everything you do.”

Another priority for Quint Pottinger, whose family has farmed in Kentucky since a Revolutionary War veteran ancestor settled there in the 1780s, is lifelong learning. He schedules time to begin his day reading *The Wall Street Journal* and articles on ag policy and checking Twitter. He reads up on investments in the evenings.

How we grow our leaders

What plants the seed of leadership in a young person in agriculture? How is it nurtured?

Among the leaders with whom we spoke were young people who got their start as FFA officers, student council members or class presidents, captains of sports teams – or in leadership roles in college organizations or fraternities.

Josh Moore of Arizona, a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribe, says his grandfather told him when he was small, “If you look at a ram, the ram’s defending and leading. You have to be the ram.”

Moore remembered that advice and volunteered for his first leadership role when he was only nine years old, serving as secretary of his 4-H club.

Redland, whose mother was a 4-H leader, said, the tradition of leadership in his family “started in the crib.” Others have parents, grandparents or great-grandparents who served on commodity or farm organization boards or served in politics. South Dakota State Senator Jason Frerichs is the fourth generation of his farming family to serve in political office.

In many areas, programs are in place to identify future leaders and offer them opportunities to learn and grow. A number of states have agricultural leadership programs, as do some commodity groups, ag-related corporations and Farm Bureaus. Through such groups, many of these young people have had the opportunity to develop their leadership potential, learn about struggles in agriculture, visit Washington, and travel overseas to learn about global agriculture or trade.

50 farm advocates under 50



Gary Baldosser, 47, Republic, Ohio, raises corn, soybeans and wheat and has a cow/calf operation. Currently he serves on the board of directors of Ag Credit, a farm credit organization, is assistant chief of his local volunteer fire department, and is on his church’s board.

In the past, Baldosser served in a number of Farm Bureau roles, including chairmanship of the American Farm Bureau Federation Young Farmers & Ranchers.

Baldosser and his wife have two sons – one a recent college graduate and the other a college sophomore. He says there came a time as his boys were growing up that he stepped back from a busy leadership travel schedule to spend more time with his family. The more local positions require less travel.

To young farmers, such as his sons, coming back to family farms and looking to step into leadership roles, Baldosser says, “Start out small. Find something you’re passionate about. Make that your issue.”



Josh Beckley, 33, Atwood, Kansas, is a third-generation custom harvester, who admits that an agricultural lifestyle that may seem strange to some is his “normal.” He was born in South Dakota while his parents were on the road during harvest season and began working full-time during harvest when he was still young. Beckley and his wife have three sons (one born during harvest season in North Dakota).

With a brother and family, the Beckleys spend three or four months a year living in campers while harvesting canola, corn, field peas, milo, soybeans and wheat far from their Kansas homes.

Beckley is the state chairman of the U.S. Custom Harvesters and says it's important to be involved in leadership roles so that those passing laws impacting agriculture understand the work harvesters do.



Ryan Bivens, 35, Hodgenville, Kentucky, is a first-generation farmer, growing soybeans, corn and wheat in Kentucky.

Bivens is president of the Kentucky Soybean Association Board, serves on his county Farm Bureau's board of directors and, with his wife, earned the Kentucky Farm Bureau's Outstanding Young Farm Family Award and the American Farm Bureau Federation's Young Farmers & Ranchers Achievement Award in 2012. He's served the Farm Bureau at county, district and state levels. He and his wife have two young sons.

Bivens didn't get his start in farming as many do, by moving back to the family farm. He grew up hearing farmers couldn't make it unless they were in a farm family or married into it, but got his start growing corn and soybeans as an FFA project.

When Bivens finished college, got married and was ready to farm full-time, he ran an ad in the paper advertising that a young, energetic farmer was looking for land to rent. The ad was answered, and he was soon farming 500 acres. Next, Bivens used an innovative manner to market himself and get more land to rent. He made sure land he farmed looked sharp and put roadside signs in his fields touting "another quality crop" from Bivens Farms.

Besides his leadership roles, Bivens also spreads the word about agriculture and issues important to farmers through a [Facebook](#) page and events on the farm, such as the Kentucky Joint Interim Ag Committee meeting he recently hosted.

"If we're not involved, plenty of others will do it for us," Bivens says.



Ben Boyd, 37, Sylvania, Georgia, whose family has farmed in Georgia for five generations on one side and six on the other, has a farming operation diversified beyond his main crop, cotton. He also raises cattle, corn, hay, oats, peanuts, rye, soybeans and wheat. Boyd says he, his wife and one-year-old son live "13 miles from a Coke or a gallon of gas."

An alternate member of The Cotton Board, Boyd also serves as district director on the Georgia Farm Bureau board and learned the importance of being involved on his first trip to Washington, D.C. as a young farmer, when a legislator told him, "If you work on your planters once a year, come and talk to me once a year."



Dow Brantley, 38, England, Arkansas, took over as chairman of USA Rice Federation on Aug. 1. He got involved in leadership roles shortly after he began farming with his father because he realized it was important to be outside the farm to listen to what was going on in each commodity group. Brantley also serves the Farm Bureau on both the county and state levels and has previously served as a delegate to the National Cotton Council and in leadership roles in other organizations.

Brantley raises rice, cotton, soybeans and corn and worries that the average person doesn't understand agriculture. He and his wife have four young daughters.

Brantley's advice to young people who want to get involved in agriculture: "First, get an education."

"That," Brantley says, "is where they're going to learn how to learn."



Anne Burkholder, 39, Cozad, Nebraska, grew up in an urban area, far from the Plains cattle ranch she now calls home. The Dartmouth College graduate from West Palm Beach, Florida, says she was "an athlete fueled by beef for a long time before she knew where it came from." When she married and joined her husband's family cattle operation, she quickly learned.

Burkholder, who says she's been involved in outreach since the "get-go," has held a number of ag leadership roles. She is currently on the National Cattlemen's Beef Association board, Nebraska Beef Council, National Beef Quality Assurance Advisory Committee and on the Tyson Fresh Meat's Animal Wellbeing Advisory Committee.

Transparency is important to her – closing the gap between the farm and consumers wondering where their food comes from. She's on a mission, saying, "If I don't have somebody that wants to buy my beef, there's no reason to be a farmer."

Burkholder gets numerous requests to speak about animal health issues, but she often turns them down these days. She and her husband have three daughters. Time with them is important. Burkholder [blogs](#) to spread important messages about farming.



Chris Chinn, 39, of Clarence, Missouri, serves on the state board of the Missouri Farm Bureau, is secretary of her county Farm Bureau, is on the National Pork Board, and on the Missouri Pork Producers membership committee.

A hog farmer who has a feed mill, a small cow-calf operation and raises hay, Chinn says a previous role as chair of an American Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers Committee "lit the fire," opened her eyes to

the struggles American farmers face, and showed her she “needed to pay attention.”

This wife and mother of two teens admits that balancing involvement on the farm and in other organizations is a challenge some days. With more than 5,200 [Twitter](#) followers and a [blog](#), Chinn carves out 20-30 minutes each day for social media. When she’s on the road, as many as four or five days a week during the busy months from August through October, she takes work with her so she’ll have more time with her family when she is at home.



Jacob Chisholm, 21, Gary, Minnesota, raises sugar beets, wheat, corn, soybeans and dry beans, attends college at North Dakota State University, and interned this summer for the American Sugarbeet Growers Association in Washington, D.C.

Chisholm has had his own farm operation since high school. A winning essay on its diversification landed him one of 10 spots in the 2011 National FFA Risk Management Essay contest and a trip to the nation’s capital. It’s that trip, he says, that sparked his interest in ag leadership.

Chisholm’s family looks after his crops while he’s off at school or away in D.C., but he plans to return to the farm when he’s completed his education.

“There’s something special there that the past generation worked hard for,” he says.

This young farmer leader sees the leadership opportunities in agriculture, too, though. Chisholm says, “There are lots of shoes to be filled.”

His sugar internship has given him a sweet tooth for the industry. Among Chisholm’s goals are a seat someday on the American Crystal Sugar Company board.



Tamara Choat, 36, Terry, Montana, and her husband raise cattle and horses and own a butcher shop and meat processing plant. Her involvement runs the gamut from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association and Montana Stockgrowers Association to membership in the Farm Bureau at county, state and national levels, to membership in chambers of commerce, alumni organizations and more.

Choat, an alumni of the Indiana Ag Leadership Program, has also served as a keynote speaker at annual meetings in the cattle industry.

She and her husband left corporate jobs in Indianapolis three years ago to move to Montana to raise cattle. They’re now raising young children as well – and running their meat processing business.

As for leadership and growing her businesses going forward, Choat says she has lots of ideas. She knows this much – she wants to continue to be a leader in the business world in her community and state, and to continue to tell agriculture’s story. As a product of youth agriculture activities, including 4-H and FFA, Choate also wants to create more activities for young people.



Justin Dammann, 34, Essex, Iowa, is a fourth-generation farmer who raises food grade yellow and white non-GMO corn, soybeans, hay and rye, as well as managing a cow-calf operation along the rolling hills of southwestern Iowa. He started farming 14 years ago, aided by a Farm Service Agency beginning farmer loan.

Active in his local Page County Farm Bureau, he and his wife Jennifer were given the Young Farmer Achievement Award from the Iowa Farm Bureau in 2012. He also serves as a Farm and Food Ambassador for the Iowa Soybean Association and welcomes the chance to talk about farming to non-farmers and members of the media.

“Anytime we can provide a positive experience to someone who has never been on a farm, that’s what we need to be doing,” says Dammann. “We are not perfect, but we don’t have anything to hide.” He’s concerned that, for far too long, agricultural groups have been playing defense, rather than having “a good offense” to share their story to non-farmers.

While volunteering in organizations takes time away from the farm and his family, which includes a young daughter and son, Dammann emphasizes the importance of getting involved in both community and state groups. In addition to the education gained, he says the people he’s met have become “almost like a second family” who can “help you understand that you are not the only one facing the same kinds of challenges and opportunities.”



Kate Danner, 25, Roseville, Illinois, raises corn and soybeans with her father. She currently serves as an Illinois Soybean Association Soy Ambassador, a role that has helped to give her a view of what it would be like to serve on a commodity board. Earlier this year, Danner spoke in Washington, D.C., at the USDA Ag Outlook Forum about her path to a full-time career as vice-president of the farm operation her great-grandfather founded in 1901.

In July, Danner was recognized by the White House as a Champion of Change in Agriculture.

Danner believes it’s important to be involved in leadership roles, because there are fewer and fewer farmers every day, with people becoming disconnected. She says, “Food is so secure that [people] don’t have to think about where it’s coming from.”



Miguel Diaz, 27, Alamosa, Colorado, raises potatoes and barley and serves on the National Potato Council board of directors.

Diaz admits that as a student he didn't pay much attention in government class in high school, but he understands today the importance of getting his industry's grassroots messages to lawmakers and their staffs throughout the year.

He credits some of this understanding to his industry's program to help develop young leaders, the Potato Industry Leadership Institute. Diaz says, "Leadership programs are amazing!"



Zach Ducheneaux, 45, Eagle Butte, South Dakota, is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. He is the program director for the Intertribal Agriculture Council Technical Assistance Program and his tribe's delegate to the council. Ducheneaux was appointed by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to the USDA Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics. He also serves on the board of the Eagle Butte Cooperative Society.

With his family, which includes a son and daughter, Ducheneaux raises cattle and quarter horses, and is starting a horsemanship intern program.

Involvement in leadership is important to Ducheneaux, not only as a farmer, but in his culture. As a Native American, it's important to him to improve the lot for the entire people, not just himself.

Ducheneaux says one of his goals is to train the next generation of leaders. One way he did so recently was by speaking at the Native Youth in Agriculture Summit held at the University of Arkansas.

Ducheneaux has some advice for young people looking toward a future in farming or ranching: "Careers in agriculture are more than just the guy out on the farm or ranch. Make connections. Don't take 'no' for an answer. Don't let someone else define your happiness."



Stacie Euken, 33, Wiota, Iowa, raises cattle, hogs, corn and soybeans. She is president of her county Farm Bureau and pork producers group and is on the board of the Agricultural Development Division of the Iowa Finance Authority. She also was a member of a Farm Bureau Ag Leaders Institute.

Euken and her husband are now parents to a baby boy, but that hasn't weakened her passion for being a voice in agriculture. She knows farmers will continue to have to respond to consumers' needs – and the ag community will need to keep educating the public.

“We all have the same goals,” she says. “We want what’s best for our families.”



Kole Fitzpatrick, 31, Browning, Montana, is a member of the Blackfeet Tribe and a third-generation cattle rancher. He also has a trucking business, hauling cattle and hay. He works for the Intertribal Agriculture Council’s Technical Assistance Network and was appointed in 2013 to Secretary Vilsack’s Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers.

In addition to the roles Fitzpatrick has within Indian country and at the national level, he’s making a commitment to the agricultural future of his community, working with volunteers to start a 4-H fair and build a fairgrounds. It’s an effort that’s reaping dividends. “More kids in the community are getting into ranching,” Fitzpatrick says.

Fitzpatrick and his wife have a son and daughter. He says his goals are to keep on doing what he’s doing, without getting away from the production end of it. He explains how he balances it all: “It’s easy when you want to do things and love what you’re doing.”



Stacey Forshee, 42, Delphos, Kansas, raises cattle, alfalfa, corn, milo, soybeans and wheat.

Forshee sits on the board of the Kansas Farm Bureau, and got her start in leadership at the county level. She says she’s always felt the political part of ag leadership was important, but on a trip to Topeka, the state capital, saw that the “legislators really valued [farm leaders’] thoughts.” Later, on a county Farm Bureau presidents’ trip to Washington, D.C., she says she “fell in love with that kind of connection with national leaders.”

These days, Forshee often speaks on issues related to ag advocacy, and has joined Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-Kansas) in press conferences related to GMO labeling.

One of the reasons Forshee feels it’s important for farmers to be involved as leaders is that “there just aren’t that many of us [farmers] anymore.” She recognizes the disconnect between the farm and non-farmers, even in the rural communities.

That’s why she says to young people aspiring to leadership in agriculture, “You have a voice. Be sure you’re not afraid to speak up and say what you feel.”

Forshee and her husband have two daughters – one in college and one who recently earned her degree.



Jeff Fowle, 44, Etna, California, raises cattle, horses, hay and grain. Active on social media, he has more than 51,000 [Twitter](#) followers.

Fowle has served on the board of his county Farm Bureau since 1996. He serves on the California Farm Bureau Beef Commodity Advisory Committee, the state's Animal Health and Welfare Advisory Committee, the county planning commission, and more.

Fowle says he got his start in leadership in the 1990s when the Coho Salmon was listed as an endangered species. His local area is a habitat. Fowle says he got involved early to do what he could to ensure the financial sustainability of farms and ranches in the future.

For time management, Fowle follows the mantra, "Plan your work and work your plan." He agrees, it's probably not that simple, but says he does budget his time – and lives within the budget.

In 2013, Fowle averaged one-and-a-half trips a month for speaking engagements. He's not taking to the road for speaking engagements now, but instead focusing time on family. Fowle and his wife have a young son.



Jason Frerichs, 29, of Wilmot, South Dakota, a fourth-generation farmer and politician, got his start as an elected official in 2008 in the South Dakota House. Two years later he was elected to the state Senate, where he's now serving his second term.

Frerichs explains that, aside from the tradition of politics in his family, he got his start watching a South Dakota ballot initiative when he was in fifth grade – Amendment E, which concerned ownership and interest in farming in the state. The amendment, aimed at saving the family farm, passed.

Frerichs is still active on the farm, raising cattle and helping his brother, who focuses more on the crop side. To balance involvement on the farm and in politics, he tries not to be gone during the planting, harvest or calving seasons. He relies on help from family, neighbors and friends when he does have to be off the farm and is thankful for his generation's willingness to work together.



Patrick Frischhertz, 31, Plaquemine, Louisiana, was a "city kid" when he grew up in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. At college, he majored in history and education, then went on to law school. Today Frischhertz is directly involved in the day-to-day operations of a sugar cane plantation with his father-in-law, a seventh-generation farmer. He's also facing another new role, that of "dad." Frischhertz and his wife just welcomed their first son.

As a member of the American Sugar Cane League, Frischhertz has visited Washington, D.C., on matters important to the industry. He is in Louisiana State University Ag Center's Agricultural Leadership Development Program, which exposes him to ag issues. He says, as one with fewer years in farming, what he learns in the program is "all new and exciting" to him.

It's helpful for Frischhertz when he needs to leave work to travel on behalf of the sugar interests that his staff keeps things running smoothly. "Everyone is like a Swiss Army knife and can step in and fill a void," he says.



Brenda Frketich, 30, St. Paul, Oregon, raises grass seed and hazelnuts. In addition, she grows crimson clover, green beans, straw and wheat.

Frketich didn't plan to make a career of farming. After high school, she went to Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles to major in business. While there, "I realized how special this place [the family farm] was," she says. "I missed harvest. It broke my heart."

When Frketich talked to her father about moving back to the farm, he offered her a two-year internship. She says she's in her eighth year farming now, and her father has retired.

Frketich says in her family, living in a community of about 300 people, there was "never a question that you would be involved." She's also a firefighter and emergency medical technician, and is involved with her county Farm Bureau and Oregon Young Farmers & Ranchers.

Frketich believes there's a need for transparency in agriculture today, as consumers have a thirst for understanding how food is grown. She uses a [blog](#) and [Twitter](#) to talk about "hot" topics and heartwarming ones, such as the Frketich's first son, who may someday be the fourth generation on the Oregon farm.



Colleen Gerke, 36, Platte City, Missouri, owns Jowler Creek Vineyard and Winery with her husband, a fifth-generation farmer. Vineyards are nothing new to Gerke, who was raised in California wine country, and neither is livestock. Living in a rural area, where her parents were teachers, Gerke was involved in 4-H and FFA and used the proceeds from her hogs to help pay for college.

Turning a cow pasture into habitat for wine grapes was something new for the California girl. Yet, just as the couple built the state's first vineyard and winery using "green technologies," Gerke is building a legacy as an advocate for agriculture and her industry.

She's the first female president of the Platte County Farm Bureau and serves on an agri-tourism committee. Agri-tourism is something Gerke knows. Her family hosts farm tours two weekends each month, drawing as many as 150 guests each tour from nearby Kansas City and the surrounding area.

Gerke also has been involved in ag leadership and advocacy through grape and wine organizations, and wants to stay involved in the organizations she's served.

Now with two young children, she also wants to make an impact where they are, so this ag communications major is calling upon her communication skills to promote her business and agriculture through websites and social media – in the Kansas City area and beyond, through a [website](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [Pinterest](#).



Will Gilmer, 35, Sulligent, Alabama, is often called the “singing dairyman.” He has a strong social media presence, with almost 7,500 followers on [Twitter](#), nearly 3,500 likes on [Facebook](#), and more than 100 videos on [YouTube](#). Gilmer also uses [Instagram](#) and has a [website](#) for his dairy.

Gilmer says his family's tradition in farm organizations goes back a long ways. Not only his father and grandfather, but also his great-grandfather, were active in their Alabama Farmers Federation programs.

Gilmer serves on the board of the county Farmers Federation and on the American Dairy Association of Alabama board. He's been involved with the American Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers program on county and state levels. He was also a member of the inaugural class of his dairy cooperative's leadership program.

Gilmer and his wife have two young sons, He's involved in church and youth sports activities, as well, which he says gives him an opportunity to interact with a lot of people.

Whether through social media or in his community, Gilmer stresses the importance of relationship building to help consumers understand farming and issues important to it.



Zach Hunnicutt, 32, Giltner, Nebraska, is a fifth-generation farmer, raising corn, seed corn, popcorn and soybeans with his dad and brother. He's the president of his county Farm Bureau, served as chair last year of the American Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers Committee and is a member of Nebraska Corn Growers. He and his wife have two sons and a daughter.

Hunnicutt says his family has always been active in organizations, including the Farm Bureau and church leadership. Though his high school didn't have an FFA chapter, he was involved in class government and an ambassador for the College of Agriculture when he attended the University of Nebraska.

He first joined the Farm Bureau a couple years after college when a friend invited him to a meeting. Hunnicutt has seen first-hand the power of a farm spokesperson's influence on trips to Capitol Hill.

Hunnicutt also serves on the AgChat Foundation board and is active in social media, presenting in 2013 at the South by Southwest Interactive (SXSW) mega-festival. He has more than 3,200 followers on [Twitter](#).

In talking about farming today, Hunnicutt says, "A key component now is to talk to non-traditional audiences. My dad and grandpa didn't have to do this."

One thing he and other farmer leaders today show those who don't understand farming is that the 21st century farmer is often someone with "an Android and an iPad," not an "old man in bib overalls."



Whitney Klasna, 27, Lambert, Montana, raises cows, wheat, feed barley and hay along with her husband, Dylan, and his parents in the resource-rich northeastern area of the state.

Her political involvement spans a wide range of organizations, including Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), where she has helped with social media, chairs the beef committee and also serves as vice president of the Montana chapter. She is involved with the U.S. Cattlemen's Association and serves as a member of Montana's Livestock Loss Board where she helps oversee a fund to compensate producers who lost livestock due to wolves or grizzly bears and to create incentives for producers to take preventative steps to decrease losses.

In 2013, she was selected to take part in the two-year Resource Education and Agriculture Leadership (REAL) Montana program, offering education and training in the agriculture and natural resource industries and taking her to places like Washington, D.C. and international destinations next year.

Being involved in state and national organizations "is a vital part of our success of our family farm," Klasna says. "Policies developed in Congress and at the state level have an incredible impact on us on the ground – especially with so many overbearing and overreaching regulations."



Jesse LaFlamme, 36, Monroe, New Hampshire, is CEO and co-owner of Pete and Gerry's Organics, which offers eggs from small family farms, like its own, to consumers.

LaFlamme serves on the American Egg Board, has served on the producers' advisory board for Humane Farm Animal Care, has served his county Farm Bureau and has worked with the Organic Standards Board and others on topics related to agriculture.

As an organic producer, this fourth-generation farmer believes it's important to serve in leadership roles to lend perspective where he can. Today, the egg farm, which has been in his family for four generations, offers organic eggs from about 30 family farms in the eastern United States, but it wasn't always like that. When LaFlamme was growing up, the family business used traditional egg production practices, but changed to cage-free, organic eggs produced without antibiotics, hormones, pesticides, GMOs or animal byproducts. Later, they became the first Certified Humane egg farm in the country.

Another reason LaFlamme is involved in leadership in the industry is his concern about the definition of "organic" in the United States. It's important, he believes, to be a voice for organic farmers by working with the USDA and Organic Trades Association to make sure what organic standards are and what they stand for. LaFlamme says he doesn't want to see the meaning of organic be diluted.

LaFlamme and his wife have two youngsters – a daughter and a son.



Kendra Lamb, 31, Oakfield, New York, is a social media advocate for agriculture. While the farm on which Lamb, a stay-at-home mom, and her husband are raising their two daughters is part of her husband's family dairy operation, Lamb has roots in the industry herself. She once served as a spokesperson as the New York State Dairy Princess.

Recently, as a voice of rural America, Lamb was asked by Rep. Chris Collins, R – New York, to testify about the need for more rural broadband.

Speaking for others in rural America is something Lamb takes seriously. As coordinator of a mom's group, she saw the hunger in other moms of young children to learn more about the food they feed their youngsters.

"We have a good story to tell," Lamb says, and she set out to tell it. "We believe in a product enough to feed it to our own kids."

One of the ways Lamb tells the story of the dairy farm and its 6,000 cows is through a [Facebook](#) page. Another is the tours she hosts for

preschoolers, scouts, church youth groups, leadership programs, and tour groups. The farm was even the stop once on a senior citizens' "mystery tour."

Balancing the social media isn't as much of a challenge as it may seem, though. Lamb often takes photos as she and her young daughters walk through the barn. "It demonstrates we're a family farm," she says. With cell phones today, it's easy to snap photos, and Lamb says others on the farm sometimes send pictures to her to post as well.



John Lee, 43, Little Rock, Arkansas, who grew up on a farm, purchased his first one six years ago. He grows corn, milo, peas, soybeans and wheat. Lee is a member of the Farm Bureau, and while he doesn't sit on the board or belong to any grower groups, he says his leadership lies in a much-needed but informal effort with his peers.

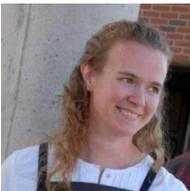
Lee has joined with a group of other college-educated black farmers helping older farmers with some of the complexities of today's farm environment.

He explains, "This is the older generation we grew up with," and says many of these older farmers taught younger ones valuable lessons about the land and the profession. Now it's time to give back.

From the previous generations, Lee and his fellow farmers learned what they didn't learn in college – things like how to deal with the "what ifs" – farming's uncertainties.

Yet, because some of the older farmers struggle with literacy problems, Lee and others of his generation help the older generation understand the complexities of crop insurance, farm management techniques and more.

Among the advice Lee offers to future generations of farmer leaders is this: "Agriculture offers lots of opportunities that pay above other [fields]. It's not just about playing in the dirt."



Joanna Lidback, 34, Westmore, Vermont, has a small dairy, grows hay and grass silage for her cattle, raises Jersey bull calves to sell for beef, and sells cow manure for compost. She's on the board of her county Farm Bureau, active in her local dairy coop and recently testified in front of a subcommittee for the U.S. House of Representatives.

In addition to working a full-time job for a farm credit association, tending to her farm, serving farm organizations and caring for her family, Lidback uses social media on behalf of agriculture. Her [blog](#), farm [Facebook](#) page, [Twitter](#) and Instagram help Lidback show a people farther and farther removed from the farm what happens there.

In February, Lidback partnered with other dairy farmers on a social media strategy using the hashtag [#farmlove](#). She and the others planned to use videos and photos to show the things they loved about farming. The campaign grew even larger than the group dreamed, gathering posts and views from all over the world.

Last time Lidback checked, #farmlove had more than 4 million impressions.



Boe Lopez, 32, Springer, New Mexico, is a fourth-generation cattle rancher, serving on the boards of the U.S. Cattlemen’s Association and New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau. He is chair of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Young Cattlemen’s Leadership Subcommittee. Lopez also serves his county Farm Bureau, county fair board and other organizations.

Though Lopez admits his free time is limited, he feels fortunate that his parents are supportive. He’s got another person in his corner, a grandmother he calls his biggest supporter. Among the words of wisdom she’s offered are to “get involved now; listen and learn.”

Lopez says his grandmother also said, “You’ll have ideas,” but reminded him, “you don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”



Eric McClam, 28, and his father, both trained as architects, are building a new legacy as farmers raising 100 crops on 3.5 acres in the midst of a large metropolitan area – Columbia, South Carolina’s state capitol – and from another 25 acres. McClam’s sustainable urban farm, City Roots, provides produce to on-farm customers, farmer’s markets, 100 restaurants, grocery stores and more.

McClam is on the board of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and served as a U.S. delegate to an international Slow Food conference in Turin, Italy.

Before he was on these boards, advocating for agriculture on a state, national or international level, McClam and his father took on another challenge – convincing the city of Columbia of the value of rewriting zoning regulations to allow agriculture as an accepted land use for vacant lots in underdeveloped areas.

They were successful and their urban farm is now a tool through which they can reach out to discuss and educate on methods of farming.

McClam plans to stay involved at the local level and to continue to promote the profession through agri-tourism. In July, City Roots hosted a festival that drew 3,500. It also hosts farm tours for as many as 5,000 youngsters each year.

This young farmer leader gives youth this advice: “Farming is a viable career path due to the mounting desire for uniqueness,” he says. “There’s a need for more farmers; we’re not replacing them as fast as they’re dying off.”



Andrew Moore, 32, Resaca, Georgia, raises canola, sunflowers, barley, grain sorghum, winter oats and winter peas while producing vegetable oils and running a feed mill.

He serves on the U.S. Canola Association board and is a member of other farming, soybean and cattle organizations.

By serving in a leadership role, Moore is carrying on a family tradition just as he is by farming. He says both his grandfather and father have been involved in ag policy “for a long time.”

Moore’s advice to others considering leadership in farm organizations is, “You don’t always see the results of it. The benefit is somebody has to be the voice of agriculture.”



Josh Moore, 23, Parker, Arizona, is a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribe. The tradition of leadership runs deep in Moore’s family, so from the time he volunteered to serve as secretary of his 4-H club as a nine-year-old, he’s been committed to serving.

Moore says the 200,000-acre reservation where he was raised is a great agricultural hub, and he’s now starting to invest in farming there.

Moore, who is going to school for his masters in ag education, is also committed to making an investment in young people. From judging livestock to serving on the state board for the Arizona Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers to being involved with the Farm Bureau on a local level, it’s important for him as a Native American to try to make himself as visible as possible so children on the reservation have a connection to agriculture.

As someone who says he has a “passion for youth,” he believes children on the reservation interested in agriculture “need someone to push them along.” He’s done workshops, serves as a 4-H leader, and founded an organization for young farmers and ranchers at the University of Arizona, where he is a student.

Moore says he tells his 4-H kids, “Watch and learn as much as you can before you jump in. Keep learning and act like a pro; eventually you’re going to be a pro.”



Tim Nilsen, 39, Wilton, California, is a third-generation farmer who raises turkeys and serves on the board of the California Poultry Federation. He's also been on the board of his county Farm Bureau and traveled to Washington, D.C. on policy issues.

Nilsen says it's important for farmers to be involved in industry leadership roles, not only to help shape rules and regulations but to gain rapport with consumers. He wants customers to feel good about the turkeys from his operation.

He'd like to see it easier for people like him to get into farming – and tells those who aspire for leadership to “go into it with eyes wide open, really stay involved, get to know your local legislators.”



Grant Noland, 30, Decatur, Illinois, is an eight-generation farmer, serving as a district director on the board of the Illinois Corn Growers Association. He's also on U.S. Representative Rodney Davis' Ag Advisory Board and was recently selected to the 2016 Illinois Agricultural Leadership Class.

Noland's family began farming in Macon County, Illinois in 1833, just three years after 21-year-old Abraham Lincoln moved with his family to a farmstead about eight miles away. Noland says his own involvement in farm organizations had roots in a service-minded household. His father, like Lincoln, spent time in the Illinois Legislature, while Grant has been more involved behind the scenes.

Noland raises corn and soybeans. He and his wife have a young son and daughter.



Odessa Oldham, 22, Lander, Wyoming, a member of the Navajo tribe, started raising her own sheep herd when she was three years old. These days she has 200 head of cattle, attends the University of Wyoming and works to encourage and inspire the next generation of Native American farmers.

While in high school, Oldham was the first Native American to run for the National FFA board.

One reason she thinks it's important to be a leader in agriculture is this: “A lot of individuals don't realize how important agriculture is or have any idea where food comes from,” Oldham says. “We need to close that gap.”

Another is that she wants to be a role model, especially to other young Native Americans, to get an education.

Oldham saw the seeds of one of her dreams reach maturity in July at the University of Arkansas when a gathering she'd long envisioned came to

be. She watched as 50 youth came together for the inaugural Native Youth in Agriculture Summit for training in the legal and business complexities unique to Indian lands and agriculture.



Michele Payn-Knoper, 44, Lebanon, Indiana, is a professional speaker, registered Holstein breeder, author of the book, “No More Food Fights,” and founder of the public Twitter conversations, #AgChat and #FoodChat. Payn-Knoper says that when she founded the chats in 2009, they were the second and third weekly chats on Twitter.

Through her business, Cause Matters, Inc., which Payn-Knoper started in 2001, she works to help agriculture have a better conversation around agriculture and food. Payn-Knoper presents for grower groups, farm organizations and conferences around the country. She says she got her start in ag advocacy through 4-H and FFA, as she saw the growing need for leadership in agriculture.

Besides her [Cause Matters website](#) and [Gate to Plate blog](#), Payn-Knoper has a strong presence on social media. She has more than 20,000 [Twitter](#) followers, 6,000 [Facebook](#) likes, a [YouTube](#) channel and a [Pinterest](#) page. She serves on the board of directors of the Ag Chat Foundation.

Payn-Knoper, who has one daughter, says she’d give this leadership and political advocacy advice to young people looking toward careers in agriculture: “Find your passion and try to build your life around your passion.”



Josh Pitigliano, 36, Tipton, California, is a fourth-generation farmer, raising almonds, pistachios and wine grapes with his wife, brothers and parents on the farm where his great-grandfather once planted potatoes.

Pitigliano serves on the executive committee of the Tulare County Farm Bureau. Tulare County is one of the three largest agricultural producing counties in the nation and number one in dairy production.

One of Pitigliano’s goals going forward is to get word of what farmers do out to the masses – to urban people. “Growing food in America is a national security issue,” he says. “Farmers need to be here in America. If the masses don’t help, don’t embrace that, we’ve got a problem.”



Quint Pottinger, 25, New Haven, Kentucky, serves on the board of the Kentucky Soybean Association. He raises corn, soybeans, jalapeno peppers, snap beans, squash, sweet corn and tomatoes.

Pottinger is on the board of the Kentucky Soybean Association and participated in an American Soybean Association DuPont Young Leaders program.

Pottinger thanks a persistent ag teacher for encouraging him to get involved in leadership roles, saying that's what he needed to do if he really wanted to make a difference.

Looking to the future, this soybean farmer would like to take his leadership skills beyond his native Kentucky. Pottinger says he'd like to be involved in the United Soybean Board and the U.S. Soybean Export Council.



Seth Pratt, 23, Blackfoot, Idaho, is a Noble Agricultural Scholar at the Noble Foundation and a fifth-generation livestock and cattle rancher. Pratt served as National FFA western region vice president in 2011-2012 and is now finishing his education at the University of Idaho.

While many of the young leaders are balancing home and leadership responsibilities, Pratt is also juggling school, internships and opportunities such as his work with the Noble Foundation. Yet, there are times when he makes it a point to be home on the ranch, such as when it's time to move cattle.

His number one piece of leadership advice to young in agriculture is, "First and foremost, make sure things are in order back home."



Adam Redland, 25, Ten Sleep, Wyoming, a cattle rancher and auctioneer, is a member of the U.S. Cattlemen's Association.

With a family tradition of leadership and a personal path that includes serving as a captain in sports and president of his class in high school, Redland got his start in the cattlemen's group when he was at an auctioneering competition four years ago.

Redland says he's always been interested in politics. Now, when the opportunity to be the voice of agriculture presents itself, he sees it as "talking for everyone that pulls a plow or herds a cow."



Vena A-dae Romero, 33, Lanai, Hawaii, is a member of the Cochiti Pueblo and Kiowa tribes. She farms with her family in New Mexico, raising blue corn and varieties of Pueblo corn, and with her husband's family in Hawaii, growing taro.

Romero is also a Princeton University graduate, an attorney, and the recipient of a Fulbright scholarship to study the Maori people of New Zealand. She is a member of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance and Native American Farmers Advisory Board for New Mexico.

Romero's grandfather was a leader among his people. When construction of the Cochiti Dam flooded agricultural land used by their tribe, Romero was just a child. Yet she remembers playing nearby as her grandfather

and other leaders discussed the loss of the land for farming, which was vital to the tribe's livelihood.

Romero says it was a "very intimate and powerful time" in her life, as this community dependent on agriculture struggled with the question, "Who would we be without farming?" As she began to develop an interest in a profession that could help her to be a voice of her culture, she found a mentor who encouraged her to pursue her dreams of law school.

Romero and her husband have a young daughter, who is often with her as she travels in efforts related to agriculture and Native Americans.

Romero worries today about people – on and off the reservation – so removed from agriculture that they don't really understand where their food comes from. She's working to sow seeds of interest in agriculture in today's young people.

"After all," Romero says, "farming is about getting our hands dirty, and there is a simple kind of happiness in that."



Geoff Ruth, 30, Rising City, Nebraska, is the chair of the Nebraska Soybean Association. He raises corn and soybeans.

Ruth says he had some experience with ag leadership even before he was old enough to lead himself. In 2001-2002, his father was the president of the American Soybean Association. "Tagging along" to meetings in St. Louis and to the Commodity Classic gave the younger Ruth a taste of some of what he does today.

Ruth knows what leadership entails, both at the local and national level. He and his wife have three young children – two girls and a boy. Right now, he says, with little ones at home, he's focusing his ag leadership efforts on the state level and serving on his local school board.



David Schemm, 43, Sharon Springs, Kansas, raises wheat, grain sorghum and corn in a farming operation started when his grandparents came to the U.S. from Germany in 1928.

Schemm is the secretary/treasurer of the National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG) and past-president of the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers. He's also served on his local school board for 12 years.

Schemm says when he moved back from college, he saw a need in his small rural community for people to step up into roles and serve. He illustrates his philosophy on leadership by using circles. Schemm believes it's good to stretch beyond our own circle and that of our family. A leader, he says, expands his circle into the community, knows what's

good for it and helps with it. A great leader expands beyond the circle into the industry.

Involvement beyond the family and community and into the industry at the national level has had Schemm on the road to the nation's capital in the past. As he moves into other positions of increasing responsibility with NAWG, he'll be away from home even more.

But service and leadership is something he and his wife, who have two sons, have discussed. They decided early on that, as parents, they wanted to lead by example.



Justin Sobie, 30, Hollywood, Florida, raises sugar cane, sod, citrus and vegetables and is involved in a number of groups and boards. Sobie has worked closely with his 87-year-old grandfather for the past 15 years, learning the business and making decisions in a large, diverse agricultural operation.

Sobie is directly involved with many groups and boards on which his grandfather serves – from a water control district board to the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida.

Sobie's path to leadership has roots spanning generations, continents and countries. Because of Hitler's influence in Europe, Sobie's grandfather, like many, fled his native Poland in 1936, following relatives to Cuba. While there, he started a business and created a family, but in 1960 under Castro's regime, it was time to move again – this time to America, "with a suitcase, a couple of dollars and a family of five," Sobie says. Today, the family's business spans nearly 25,000 acres.

"We have to have the younger generation know what happened in the past," Sobie says. "We have to know where our roots come from."



Alex Tiedtke, 31, Orlando, Florida, raises sugar cane, sweet corn and silage corn in the Florida Everglades and has participated in the American Farm Bureau Federations Young Farmers & Ranchers program.

Tiedtke is involved in a sugar growers coop and says trips to Capitol Hill a couple times each year since high school have helped him build relationships important to his industry and his operation.

He says to other young people pursuing careers in agriculture, "It is paramount that you cooperate with other farmers/ranchers in your region and nationally. Because of the existing laws and competitive nature of the American agricultural markets, the only farmers who are successful are those who are able to produce foodstuffs affordably and safely."

Tiedke's concern, he says, is that "without a group effort among farmers, our story will not be heard."



Jeff VanderWerff, 34, Sparta, Michigan, grows apples, corn, peaches, soybeans and wheat.

As president of Ag Chat Foundation, VanderWerff has an active presence on social media. He has 2,500 [Twitter](#) followers, uses a [Facebook](#) page to raise awareness about agriculture, and posts videos about his farm operation on [YouTube](#).

VanderWerff got his start in ag leadership serving the Farm Bureau at the county level. He's also served on state level committees and on the Michigan Farm Bureau State Young Farmer Committee.

VanderWerff says he liked politics before he began serving as a leader. Once he realized farm organization involvement could help create policy, he says he was hooked. VanderWerff has traveled to both his state's and the nation's capital as a voice of agriculture, as well as internationally.

As he's seen the value of being involved and growing connections when he represents agriculture to lawmakers and consumers, VanderWerff says to those aspiring to leadership in agriculture, "Building relationships will benefit you more than you ever know."



Nicole Van Vleck, 46, Sacramento, California, manages her family's rice operation in Sutter County. This former political science and history major didn't plan to come back to the farm when she went to the University of California at Los Angeles, but intended to go to law school. Ironically, her husband, who planned to farm after college, became an attorney instead.

Before the farm pulled her back, Van Vleck did legislative work on land use, the environment and agriculture at a law firm. Her interest in politics and experience in the legal workplace are both tools upon which she can call in leadership roles, while ag leadership classes provided ideas on how she could serve the industry. Van Vleck is a graduate of both the California Agricultural Leadership Program and the USA Rice Leadership Program.

Van Vleck is on the board of the California Rice Commission and co-chairs the USA Rice Federation's Rice Quality Task Force. She also serves in other roles in her community, in the rice industry, and related to water issues. Van Vleck, who now travels to the nation's capital several times a year, says she began to transition to national work a few years ago, as her son and daughter, now teenagers, got older.

This leader encourages her children and other young people in agriculture to take advantage of internships at the state and federal level, participate in leadership groups and “go to D.C.”



Keith Wedgworth, 38, Belle Glade, Florida, raises sugar cane, green beans, sweet corn and rice.

Leadership is a family tradition for Wedgworth. His grandfather served as president of a sugar cooperative for 50 years. “Big shoes to fill,” Wedgworth says.

When the younger Wedgworth returned to the farm after college, he says he started from the ground up. The fourth-generation farmer is now vice-president of his county Farm Bureau and serves on the soil and water advisory boards at the state level. He participated in and serves on the board of the University of Florida Wedgworth Agricultural Leadership Program. He’s also active in his community at the local level through Rotary and area leadership programs.

Wedgworth and his wife have a two-year-old son. “Agriculture is the best industry out there,” he says. “It’s one of the last family-oriented.”



Antron Williams, 31, Rowesville, South Carolina, is a sixth-generation farmer and a full-time soil conservationist. He raises corn, cotton, grain sorghum, oats, peanuts, soybeans and wheat.

Williams served the National Peanut Board on its Diversity Advisory Council, following in the footsteps of a late uncle, who served the organization. He is involved in party politics at the local level, in Farm Bureau and is County Young Farmers chapter president.

Williams stresses the importance of one-on-one contact with elected officials to help influence policy in the face of changing rural demographics. He says farmers are the best ones to tell agriculture’s story. If not, he says, “Others will tell it for you – not as it is.”



Stuart Ziehm, 34, Buskirk, New York, is a dairy farmer, who serves on his county Farm Bureau board and town planning commission. He’s also served his local land trust and been involved with Farm Bureau young farmer committees.

Ziehm and his wife have served as delegates from their local dairy cooperative to the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) meeting. The couple, who have two small children, chair the NMPF Young Cooperative Program.

Ziehm explains that his parents taught responsibility “at a very young age,” doing chores first – even on special days, such as Christmas. In the dairy business, “no matter what, you have to care for the animals,” he

says. Ziehm believes that sense of responsibility carried over, setting the stage for leadership today.

The New York dairyman urges young people interested in ag leadership to build personal relationships with legislators, so lawmakers will remember them.

Serving with pride

As Agri-Pulse spoke with these farmers across the country, over-arching themes were the love of their work and the land on which they practice it and the commitment they have to spreading the word about this profession essential to Americans and the world.

All that and one more thing: Ben Boyd put into words what many expressed in other ways. As he spoke of his father, Boyd said, “He’s really proud to be a farmer, and so am I.”

50 young ag leaders share their vision for the future

By Ann Tracy Mueller

WASHINGTON, Aug. 11, 2014 – If farmers’ political power could be measured by passion, the 50 young farm leaders we featured in our “Packing Political Punch in Rural America” series are already off the charts in terms of influence.

They are bright, eager and willing to share their knowledge in so many different ways and from so many different places across the country.

They farm near the streets of a state capitol, grow sugar cane in the Sunshine State and move cattle across the mountains of Montana. They have farms as small as 3.5 acres and as large as almost 25,000.

They serve as board members of commodity organizations and farm groups, or use social media to connect with consumers. One serves in his state’s senate, while others reach people through visits to Capitol Hill. Some serve on single boards important to their operations, while others are involved in leadership roles too numerous to list.

They’re descendants of generations who’ve worked the soil, or first-generation farmers hoping to leave a legacy for their own offspring. Nearly all are college-educated, with degrees in fields ranging from agricultural economics to business to food sciences. Many are also graduates of community, commodity or agricultural leadership programs.

They have one thing in common – they’re speaking up today and destined to be the voice of agriculture in the future.

Reversing trend lines

As the sixth and final piece of our six-part series, *Agri-Pulse* asked 50 young leaders in agriculture under the age of 50 to talk about issues they’d like to see addressed, to share their visions for the future in the face of changing rural demographics. Last, but not least, we asked them to provide some words of wisdom for other young people looking to lead agriculture in the future.



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH IN RURAL AMERICA



These young leaders understand that the American farm population is also growing older, with the average farmer's age increasing from 57.1 in 2007 to 58.3 in the 2012 Ag Census. That trend is not surprising, but the number of new farmers – a talent pool which could eventually replace those nearing retirement age--does not appear to be keeping pace.

The number of new, beginning farmers shrunk by 23.3 percent since the last Census was released in 2007; however, those farmers who started farming 10 years ago (between 2003 and 2007) fared slightly better – their numbers only decreased by 19.6 percent.

This group is determined to do what they can, through local initiatives and state and federal programs, to try and reverse that trend in declining farm numbers.

A farm bill, at last

Among these young leaders, many made visits to Capitol Hill – some once, some numerous times over the past few years – to talk one-on-one with legislators, testify before committees, lobby on behalf of their commodity groups or farmer organizations as Congress worked on the Agricultural Act of 2014.

Even those who didn't have a direct role in forming policy usually followed the farm bill's progress, some more closely than others.

When asked to rate the farm bill on a scale from one to 10, with one being the best outcome, some chose not to answer, but of those who did, nearly half gave it three or four. Overall, these farmers said, they were pretty pleased with it.

Kentucky farmer Quint Pottinger says, "I was just happy we got one." It was a long time coming.

On the topic of beginning farmers, those just starting out and the more seasoned among our farmer-leaders were usually on the same page. All agree we need younger producers to



Kentucky farmer Quint Pottinger tweeted a "selfie" after he was honored by the White House as a "Champion of Change" earlier this year.

replace those aging out of agriculture, and they recognize how hard it is to get into farming today, with the high costs of land, livestock and equipment. Many expressed thanks at seeing programs in the farm bill to help those just getting started.

As can be expected, some farmers had opposing opinions regarding their likes and dislikes of the bill. This seemed to be most evident in light of the changes in direct payments. In the Midwest, farmers often said "it was time for direct payments to go," while in southern states, where climate can be more fickle and ground less fertile, producers lamented the loss of this safety net.

Facets of the bill which pleased nearly everyone, though, were crop insurance and disaster programs. Yet, even these aspects of the bill have left some apprehension. Farmers worry about the difficulty for beginning farmers to get the crop protection they need when they don't have yield histories.

As far as the nutrition portion of the bill goes, farmers who addressed it were divided. Some think it belongs in the overall comprehensive bill, while others would like to see it separated from the agriculture section – as House GOP lawmakers tried to do in 2013.

Several of the farmer-leaders are taking a wait-and-see attitude in one regard – they feel there are still unknowns about the bill’s implementation and want to see how it plays out.

Worries linger

To be sure, plenty of agricultural issues are still unresolved, creating concern for America’s farmers. *Agri-Pulse* asked the farmers interviewed to share a few topics they’d like to see addressed in pending or future legislation.

The top topic mentioned by almost half of the young leaders was water. For many, the proposed EPA action concerning the Clean Water Act and definition of the “Waters of the United States” (WOTUS) is creating big worries, while in some western states, water use, water rights and lingering drought conditions leave some producers wondering how they’ll be able to continue.

With California in the fourth year of drought, Josh Pitigliano, who farms there, says water is his “number one priority.”

Not surprisingly, risk management is also high on the lists of worries. Nearly a third of the farmers interviewed are concerned about safety nets for agriculture – whether through crop insurance programs and choices, livestock risk protection, commodity payments, or the dairy margin protection program.

Federal government oversight – on a variety of issues, from the “right to farm” to the ability to use modern technologies to privacy – worries more than a fifth of the farmers interviewed.

And, nearly the same share of young farmer-leaders say it’s time to act on immigration reform. Immigration is a concern for growers in areas where manual labor is crucial to production – for crops such as fruits and vegetables and in the dairy industry – even among farmers who don’t use migrant workers themselves. They see the impact on nearby growers and the local economy.

Brenda Frketich, who farms in Oregon, says, “I know farmers who lost their crops because they couldn’t find enough labor [to harvest them].”

Josh Moore, a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribe farming in Arizona, is no stranger to the immigration issue. He says he attended school with a diverse group of students, some of whom weren’t legal citizens. “We need a working immigration system,” Moore says. “Literally, we can’t find people to work for us.”



Josh Moore
Colorado River Indian Tribe

Trade is a big concern for about a fifth of the young leaders.

Commodity farmers know the important role American products play in the world market, especially looking to a world population of nearly 9.5 billion to be fed by 2050 – up from about 7.2 billion now – and with competition from some of our neighbors to the south. A particular facet of trade, Mexican sugar dumping, is of special concern among the beet and cane farmers in the group.

Rural development, the graying of America’s farmers, and transportation were hot topics, too.

Several farmers expressed concern about the revitalization of rural America and the need for reliable Internet connectivity.

Having Internet you can count on in a rural community, Nebraskan Zach Hunnicutt says, “is key to whether we can keep up.”

The farmers interviewed are concerned about the aging of the farm population, with the 2012 Census of Agriculture showing the average age of the American farmer at 58.3. The young farmers want to see more encouragement and support for beginning farmers, for careers in agriculture, and for availability of credit, including on America’s Indian reservations.

Transportation issues worry several – from maintenance of locks and dams to trucking and emission regulations. Growers with commodities to move are concerned about being able to move them and are worried about America’s ability to remain competitive without an adequate infrastructure.

Still other farmers expressed concern about topics including conservation, USDA programs and funding for farm programs, as well as renewable fuels, the nutrition program, GMO labeling, organic standards and the Food Safety Modernization Act. Some are worried, too, about the business climate (unemployment, taxes and estate planning) and issues related to animals (including antibiotics, manure management, horse slaughter and animal welfare standards.)

Changes on the horizon

So what lies ahead for farming?

If these farmer-leaders are good at forecasting the future, it’s change – especially in size of farms and the use of technology.

Jacob Chisholm, a young Minnesota farmer, believes the profession “will change a lot faster, more often.”

“There’s a great deal of opportunity, and a great deal of vulnerability,” Chisholm says.

Along the same lines, state Senator Jason Frerichs of South Dakota says he sees farmers “becoming more adaptable and welcoming to all aspects of production agriculture.”

“We would be shortsighted,” Frerichs says, “to say there’s a perfect way.”

Nearly a third of the farmers interviewed addressed the issues of farm size, declining rural population, and urbanization. Many see more consolidation, larger farms and fewer family farms.

Leaders like Vena A-dae Romero, an attorney who farms with her family in New Mexico and Hawaii, would like to see more family-based farms, and Florida sugar grower Keith Wedgworth hopes young people stay in farming. Wedgworth recognizes it’s harder to get into the profession and says he hopes America can keep its farms viable for future generations. “Once they’re gone, they’re gone,” Wedgworth says.

Zach Ducheneaux, a South Dakotan who raises cattle and horses, hopes American agriculture can find a happy medium between so-called “factory” farms and family farming.



Jacob Chisholm
Minnesota

And, perhaps it can. As large farms get larger and some small farms go away, Louisiana sugar farmer Patrick Frischhertz sees other small farms starting up in response to the growing desire for organic and locally grown foods, which helps to build that connection with where food comes from.

Quint Pottinger, a Kentucky farmer who grows not only traditional row crops but also some vegetables, says, “We’ve got new young producers coming in because of local food markets.”

Several farmer-leaders addressed the desire for consumers to have choices in the food they eat and the way it’s produced – and many spoke of the increasingly important need for producers to have conversations with consumers.

“Choices look different to different people,” says professional speaker and dairy farmer Michele Payn-Knoper.

With those choices come opportunities for more crop diversity, including some age-old, but new-to-the-U.S. crops. Nebraska farmer Zach Hunnicutt says some farmers are growing an ancient Ethiopian grain, teff, in response to consumers requesting gluten-free diets.

Most agree the need for conversations with consumers is crucial, with less than 2 percent of Americans farming today.

“The further people are removed, the less they understand,” says Colleen Gerke, who owns a vineyard and winery in western Missouri.

Many of the farmer-leaders talked about the increasing role technology plays in farming – how it is increasing efficiency and production, reducing labor costs, and doing things that would have seemed a few years ago to be even too futuristic for the Jetsons.

Jeff VanderWerff, a Michigan farmer and president of Ag Chat Foundation, believes agriculture is going to speed up. He spoke of watching John Deere’s 2012 “[Farm Forward](#)” video again recently. The technology seemed futuristic when the video was released. “[Today,] I’m doing everything in that video,” he says.

The farmers interviewed see ever-evolving technology – not only in the use of new electronics for communication, in production and in the use of data, but in the development of new ways to feed the growing world population.

California farmer Jeff Fowle says it’s likely that “to have a future, we must find a way to shift from maximum production to optimum production.”

Fowle says farmers have to find more ways to be more efficient. This increased efficiency also needs to be applied to labor, he says, because, in California, for instance, shortage of labor is among the greatest challenges to agriculture.

Several of the farmers also spoke of the growing need for farmers to “get educated” – at colleges or universities and through continuing education.



Jeff Fowle, California

Antron Williams, a sixth-generation farmer from South Carolina, talked about the importance of education for farmers “to be able to manage all of it, to stay on top of the technology.”

“Farmers are going to be more like CEOs,” says Alabama dairy farmer Will Gilmer. He sees management of the farm becoming more of a full-time job, putting farmers behind a desk even more as risks and responsibilities increase.

Yet New Mexico cattle rancher Boe Lopez believes the basic traits of farmers in America will stay the same – respect, hard work and determination.

Among other ways farmers see agriculture changing are more rules and regulations, the loss of agricultural land, and increased input cost. Grant Noland, an Illinois farmer, worries that we’re moving out of a period of tremendous profitability and into a lean time.

Kate Danner, whose family has farmed the same west central Illinois land for more than a century, worries that agriculture is not changing in a farmer-friendly way. She says, “That’s why I need to be at the table.”

Tools of the trade

The 50 young advocates for agriculture and rural America spoke of yet one more thing they see changing – the way the agricultural community works with legislators.

New terms of engagement

For decades, anyone who wanted to be involved as an advocate for farm and rural issues had to make big sacrifices, including: traveling to distant locations, spending countless hours in meetings and finding someone to keep an eye on the farm and family while you were gone.

Not any longer. The Internet, cell phone technology and new software programs have revolutionized the way advocates work.

But even though technological changes have made important differences in the way individuals and organizations can advocate, it also requires some creative, more “entrepreneurial” thinking at the top.

Julie Anna Potts, executive vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), said her board decided about seven years ago that they had to do more to reach out to younger members in non-traditional ways or they were going to fall behind.

“We were challenged to get more members engaged to be advocates for our industry,” she told *Agri-Pulse*. “It’s been a very deliberate effort that requires a different manner of thinking.”

Potts says AFBF has made several internal changes, including coordinating issues management across several departments and ramping up their communications efforts. But they’ve also focused on other new opportunities.



Julie Anna Potts,
AFBF Executive Vice
President

For example, they discussed “micro-volunteering,” where an individual perhaps can’t commit to the time demands required by becoming an elected officer but can get involved for an hour or two at a time by writing letters or participating in a virtual meeting.

One of the outcomes of AFBF’s effort to grow engagement was the creation of the “Grassroots Outreach” or “GO Team” earlier this year.

Currently there are 118 GO Team members in 42 states, explains Cody Lyon, AFBF director for Grassroots and Political Advocacy. He describes them as a “tip of the spear” elite advocacy group.

“We ask the GO Team to do more than basic advocacy and be more involved in social media,” Lyon says. “This includes building relationships with lawmakers, publishing op-eds and blogs, interacting with media and other high-level advocacy tactics to advance Farm Bureau policy. We’ve asked them to provide personal, real-world examples on the most pertinent issues facing agriculture and connect to lawmakers and their staffs.”

One of the most recent examples is the [“Ditch the Rule”](#) campaign, where AFBF members have been using social media, national media appearances and even produced a popular video in an effort to persuade the Environmental Protection Agency to repeal its proposed rule defining waters of the United States.

Potts says the GO Team provides an opportunity for their members to demonstrate their commitment to the industry and talk about what they do. “It’s that authentic voice that works in Congress and with the public,” she emphasizes.

Agri-Pulse asked them to talk about the tactics and tools they'll use to get their message across to the people in power going forward – and to the public that places them there.

“The biggest thing,” says Ohio farmer Gary Baldosser, “is to remain involved at some level.”

The young leaders said packing a political punch with lawmakers has four important facets – learning about candidates; voting; building relationships with legislators, their aides and government officials; and talking to those in power about agriculture and its needs.

Stacie Euken, who raises crops and livestock in Iowa, says farmers need to know their candidates, know what they stand for and know what their political party's objectives are.

“If you don't vote, you can't complain,” Nebraska cattle farmer Anne Burkholder says.

“Our decision makers are further and further removed from their agricultural roots,” says first-generation Kentucky farmer Ryan Bivens – one reason he and others believe it's ever so important to build relationships and have conversations with lawmakers.

“Always make sure people getting elected know the importance of agriculture,” says Keith Wedgworth, the Florida sugar and rice farmer.

Californian Jeff Fowle says farmers can't “stick their heads in the sand. [They] have to come out of their comfort zone and talk to those people.”

In politics, money talks, too – that's why some of these young leaders stressed the importance of hosting or being involved in political fundraisers and PACs.

“Cash flow is a driving force in American politics, whether we like it or not,” VanderWerff of Michigan says.

“PAC funding is going to be huge,” Arizona farmer Josh Moore says. (See our earlier article, [“PACS pave the way in rural America,”](#) to read more about PACs and how the agriculture community uses them to pack a punch.)



Anne Burkholder
Nebraska

“Regardless of the changing demographics, farmers and producers will always have a ‘power’ that is unyielding. We produce for our communities, for our families, for America,” Romero, the farmer with operations in Hawaii and New Mexico, says. “We may have fewer and fewer farmers and farm families, but the power is unrelenting. It's a matter of expressing that power and influence.”

Besides the communications training many of these individuals gained through FFA, Farm Bureau, their commodity groups and agricultural leadership programs, some had communication or marketing experience through internships or jobs they held before returning to the farm. Many of them draw upon that training and experience in expressing their power and influence.

Communicate they do – through one-on-one visits with lawmakers at home and in the nation's capital, and with consumers, using social media, educational programs and more.

Young leaders still understand the importance of telling agriculture’s story to reporters, and Missouri hog farmer Chris Chinn reminds farmers that a letter to the editor can still have power.

“If you get a captive audience, you need to make farmers their friend,” says Ben Boyd, who grows cotton and other crops and livestock in Georgia.

As for tools and tactics to influence policy in the face of changing rural demographics, Chinn says farmers need to continue to use social media.

“Social media has given us a whole new definition of ‘friends’,” Bivens says.

And, those friends are increasingly important.

Chinn says that “even if it’s one conversation at a time, people need to share.”

Zach Hunnicutt of Nebraska talked about how social media and mobile technology help spread agriculture’s message. “I can do more with a smart phone than I could have 10 or 15 years ago,” Hunnicutt says. “I can have a grassroots voice.”

“I reach so many people through social media,” Kansas farmer Stacey Forshee says, “because somebody I reached has shared.”

Several of the farmers with whom *Agri-Pulse* spoke also stressed the importance of educating people – young and old – about agriculture.

The farmer-leaders spoke of reaching a community through farm tours; youngsters through ag safety or Ag in the Classroom programs; and moms through blogs or programs like “Field Moms,” an initiative through which Chicago-area mothers visit farms.

John Lee and his young black farmer colleagues in Arkansas are teaching an earlier generation of farmers about new programs and technology that can make farming easier and more efficient.

There’s another facet to education – using it to encourage youth to pursue farming as a career. Burkholder, a Nebraska cattle farmer, didn’t grow up on a farm herself. She was a city kid in West Palm Beach, Florida. She’s found her place in agriculture, though – and says we’ve got to “teach kids that coming back to rural America holds a future for them.”

Going forward, Chinn is hoping that next generation in agriculture will be even better communicators at a younger age. She thinks they may have more and better conversations because they have quickly adopted technology and social media and they’re “not afraid to put themselves ‘out there.’”

Aspirations of leadership

Some of the young leaders interviewed want to continue to be involved in their local communities or on social media, building a bridge between the farm and residents who are a couple generations removed from it, or serving their governments, grower organizations or Farm Bureaus at the local or state level. Others have higher aspirations or hope to reach a more



John Lee
Arkansas

widespread audience, maybe moving up the ladder within grower groups or farmer organizations.

Kate Danner, of Illinois, who didn't plan to return to the farm when she went off to college but now loves her role in her family's century-old farming operation, has this goal for now: "I'm going to be the best farmer I can be."

Miguel Diaz, a Colorado potato grower, says his main goal is "to be a good voice for the rest of growers that don't get involved" – for his area and in taking messages to Capitol Hill. "Everything else is a bonus," Diaz says.

Dow Brantley, who raises rice, cotton, corn and soybeans in Arkansas, didn't pinpoint specific goals in representing America's farmers, but knows he'll stay involved. "I just want to be a part of it," he says.

"There is always going to be a need to stand up, as there are fewer and fewer of us," Bivens says. "We've got to work together."

Jacob Chisholm of Minnesota says he's setting his goals high, hoping to serve on the board of a sugar cooperative or help lead a company someday. "We need to have people willing to stand up and be the voice," he says.

Tamara Choat, who raises beef and horses and has a butcher shop and meat processing plant in Montana, says her leadership goals are more local. As a business owner in her community, she'd like to lead there by expanding her business and creating jobs. She says she and her husband want to be leaders in the business world in their community and their state.

South Carolina urban gardener Eric McClam says his goals are local, too. He plans to continue to promote agriculture through agri-tourism. A recent festival at his agribusiness, City Roots, drew more than 3,500 people.

McClam is not the only one who plans to continue to tell agriculture's story to the non-farm community. Fourth-generation California farmer Josh Pitigliano says, "I think my goal is to get what we do out to the masses – out to the urban people."

Justin Sobie's family has its own history-rich farm story, thanks to an immigrant grandfather who built a Florida legacy of nearly 25,000 acres. Sobie says, "We have to have the younger generation know what happened in the past ... where our roots came from ... to keep us grounded."

Josh Moore wants to help revitalize rural America. If that means working to do so on a national level, he's game. "Wherever they need me, I'll be," Moore says.

Wyoming auctioneer and cattle rancher Adam Redland says he's "in this to preserve our way of life."

Zach Ducheneaux, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, raises cattle and quarter horses. His main goal, he says, is "to start to train the next generation of leaders" – and he's on his way. Ducheneaux created a horsemanship internship on his farm and spoke in July to a group of young Native Americans at the Native Youth in Agriculture Summit, the brainchild of Odessa Oldham, a young Navajo ag leader from Wyoming.



Miguel Diaz
Colorado

Also on Oldham's wish list is leadership within the Native American agricultural community through the Intertribal Agricultural Council or as a USDA tribal relations liaison.

Another Native American leader, Romero, wants to help tribes have stronger economies based on agriculture.

One young leader, already in politics, is looking toward agriculture's Holy Grail. Jason Frerichs, now a state senator from South Dakota, says he'd like to be the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture someday.



Odessa Oldham
Wyoming

Yet, as vast and varied as many of these leaders' goals are, Idaho cattle rancher and former National FFA western region vice-president Seth Pratt shared a dream important to many of these young farmers after college. "I want to go back home and raise cows and kids," Pratt says.

Advice to agriculture's next generation

What advice do these young leaders have for those who will follow them?

One message rang clear from these people who are leaders in their farm organizations, grower groups, communities and churches: "Get involved."

"It doesn't matter [at] what level," Bivens says.

The overarching theme from many seemed to echo the Nike motto, "Just do it."

McClam, who farms in South Carolina's capital city, Columbia, hosts several thousand school children each year on tours. He tells the youngsters that farming is a viable career path, due to the mounting desire for uniqueness. (He raises 100 crops.) "There's a need for more farmers," McClam says. "We're not replacing them as fast as they're dying."

"Agriculture is more than just farming," South Carolina's Antron Williams says. He urges young people interested in agriculture to look also into careers such as seed, biotechnology and agricultural journalism. Williams points out that there are all sorts of opportunities for agricultural advocacy.

Several leaders urge young people to grab all the opportunities they can, and many encourage building connections as early and as often as possible – in their communities, through FFA, in industry groups, with legislators, among consumers.

California rice farmer Nicole Van Vleck encourages young people to take advantage of agricultural leadership program opportunities. "You need to go to D.C.," she says.

One of the youngest of the aspiring farmers, Minnesota's Jacob Chisholm, who just turned 21, served in Washington as an intern for the American Sugarbeet Growers Association. "Get involved," he says. "Don't be afraid to ask questions."

Also, "don't be afraid to talk to elected officials," Chris Chinn says. "They are normal people." Chinn is a firm believer in farmer-leaders having a 30-second "elevator speech" ready at all times.

Having other leaders to turn to is an important tool, too, these young farmers say. “Find a mentor,” is Burkholder’s advice.

With those relationships built, communication is high on the list – both listening and sharing agriculture’s story.

“You have a voice. Be sure you’re not afraid to speak up and say what you feel,” says Kansas farmer Stacey Forshee.

Yet Quint Pottinger, a Kentucky farmer, warns, “Be careful about what you say, especially in social media. Don’t ruin your reputation.”

Bivens says people used to say that a reputation built over a lifetime could be destroyed in five minutes, but with social media today, it can be destroyed in five seconds.

Having a passion for the profession was advice shared more than once.

“Find your passion and try to build your life around your passion,” Payn-Knoper advises.

And one young leader gave important advice that transcends time and profession. Josh Beckley, a customer-harvester from Kansas, says, “Honesty and a good work ethic go a long way.”

Building ag leaders – one program at a time

As *Agri-Pulse* spoke with emerging young leaders in agriculture for its 50 under 50 listing, a common thread was woven by these outstanding farmers. Many of them spoke of being alumni of leadership development programs.

These programs are offered by communities, corporations with roots in agriculture, farmer organizations, universities and foundations. Among the benefits they offer participants are the opportunity to build important relationships, to see beyond their farms, crops and geographic regions, to learn about the impact agriculture has on the economy, to develop communication and critical thinking skills, and to experience the workings of government.

The ‘daddy’ of ag leadership programs

Joyce Watson, a board member emeritus of the Illinois Ag Leadership Foundation, was the Illinois Leadership Development Program’s founding president and CEO. In a 2012 video tribute, Watson called [Dr. Russell G. Mawby](#), chairman emeritus of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, “the father of the ag leadership programs.”

During the 1960s, when Mawby, who grew up on a family farm in Michigan, was on the faculty of Michigan State University, he was among a group of faculty members charged with developing a proposal for an agricultural leadership development program. In 1965, while working as the director of the department of agriculture at the Kellogg Foundation, in a partnership between the foundation and the University, Mawby saw the Kellogg Farmer Study Program become a reality. Since then, more than 12,000 leaders are graduates of programs with origins in the MSU model.

How it all started

As agriculture grew more complex in the first two decades after World War II, leaders in the farm community needed a broader understanding of the world and issues impacting the sector.

“Over time, because of the changing nature of political processes, we needed to have farm leadership who would be sensitive, understanding of those changes and the importance to have an understanding beyond leaders in farming,” Mawby said in the video.

Where the programs are now

Today, agricultural leadership programs exist in more than 40 states – ranging from Alabama to West Virginia, Montana to California and many states in between. Among their alumni are leaders such as Kansas Farm Bureau President Steve Baccus, Lee Strom, board member and past chair and CEO of the Farm Credit Administration, and Wendall Schauman, past chair of the U.S. Grains Council.

Ag leadership programs are also offered by ag-related corporations and grower groups. For example, for more than 30 years, DuPont and the American Soybean Association have identified and developed leaders through the [ASA DuPont Young Leader](#) program. Since 1998, Syngenta Crop Protection and the American Peanut Shellers Association have sponsored the [Peanut Leadership Academy](#).

The objective of the American Farm Bureau Federation's Young Farmers & Ranchers Committee is to find and develop young leaders. The National Farmers Union hosts a number of educational programs, including a Beginning Farmers Institute.

An even earlier start

Yet even before many of these 50 farmer-leaders we spoke to were old enough to attend such ag leadership programs, some were already leading in 4-H or FFA.

Since 1902, youth have served as leaders in 4-H clubs, and for 86 years, young people wearing blue corduroy jackets have developed leadership skills through FFA.

A number of the leaders featured by *Agri-Pulse* got their start through these youth organizations – an indication, perhaps, that it's never too soon to plant the seed of leadership.

Agri-Pulse Editor Sara Wyant contributed to this article.