

Good afternoon, Chairman Chambliss and Senator Santorum. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an important sector of the Pennsylvania agricultural economy - specialty crops. My name is Keith W. Eckel and I am a producer in Lackawanna County, growing 325 acres of fresh market tomatoes, 90 acres of sweet corn, 50 acres of pumpkins and 550 acres of field corn. I believe that the provisions in the next Farm Bill should include substantial re-thinking of how commodities are dealt with in our domestic and global economy.

Specialty Crop Impact on the Agricultural Economy

It is important to note that specialty crop farmers produce nearly one-half of the monetary value of all crops produced in the nation. Pennsylvania agriculture generates more than \$609 million of production value in specialty crops alone. Yet, our national farm policy has long overlooked the needs of fresh fruit, vegetable, mushroom and other specialty crop producers. The next Farm Bill must develop and sustain specialty crop programs and align them with the agreements made at the World Trade Organization (WTO). The allocation of federal resources must be aimed at addressing the issues of concern to specialty crop growers, given the extensive impact we have on the agricultural economy both locally and nationally. Specialty crop growers do not want direct payments; rather we seek opportunities to participate more fully in other Farm Bill programs.

You are likely aware that the Commonwealth is the number one producer of mushrooms, shipping fresh mushrooms all around the nation and globe. Tremendous numbers of roadside stands and farmers' markets dot the landscape across the Commonwealth, providing citizens a safe and fresh supply of nutritious and affordable food. Adams County, just a few miles to our south-west, has the fifth-largest acreage of apple orchards among all counties in the nation.

I look at Pennsylvania agriculture and see diversity and vibrancy. However, there are fewer farms and farmers today than there were when I first entered this business. The programs of the next Farm Bill must help ensure that a safe, affordable and nutritious supply of fresh fruits and vegetables is available for future generations. Time is overdue to include provisions for specialty crops. Along those lines, I would like to applaud Secretary Johanns for his commitment to the future of America's specialty crop producers in his research and data collection for the next Farm Bill.

Regional and Commodity Differences

The most densely populated areas of America are the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern states. The fresh fruit and vegetable growers of the Northeast are best suited to provide a safe and affordable food supply to meet the demand of these nutrition-minded consumers. Recognizing this, Congress must take into consideration the regional and commodity differences that exist, and the next Farm Bill should reflect the unique needs and limitations of Northeast farmers. The climate, topography and nature of agriculture is vastly different here than in many other areas of our nation.

World Trade Organization Negotiations

I have been closely watching the progress of negotiations, or lack thereof, at the Doha Round of trade talks. I am hopeful that the WTO will come to an agreement before the President's Trade Provisional Authority expires. Having said that, it does not take a scholar to conclude that the talks are not going very well. The simple question I pose to the Committee is "what happens if we pass a new Farm Bill and later learn that the WTO has a very different approach to agriculture than what the writers of the Farm Bill anticipated?" Historically, Congress has written a Farm Bill and not re-visited the issue for five to seven years. I believe it is poor public policy to pass into law a new Farm Bill without having the WTO agreement in hand.

Risk Management Tools

While there are about twenty different ways to obtain crop insurance for corn production through seven different crop insurance programs, very few specialty crops are even eligible for crop insurance coverage. The needs of specialty crop producers have largely been ignored. I urge Congress to pass legislation in the next Farm Bill to make risk management tools available that work for producers. A few weeks ago my farm was flooded by more than a foot of rain in three days. In many places my crops were a total loss. Due to the inflexibilities within the current structure of crop insurance programs, my real losses far exceed the insurable losses. My situation is not unique and it is why Pennsylvania producers have been seeking disaster assistance. I am sure that both of you know what damaged crops look like. Imagine looking at those crops through the eyes of the producer who planted the crops and is unable to use a viable and effective risk management tool.

More disheartening is the disconnection between the federal agency writing the rules, the insurance agent selling the policy and the adjuster assessing the claim. Quite a few years ago, I had been paying premiums on crop insurance policies for one of my crops, only to learn that this specific crop was not eligible for crop insurance coverage in the first place. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on education and outreach within the Risk Management Agency. I applaud the Pennsylvania General Assembly for including \$3 million in the FY-07 Budget to subsidize the crop insurance premiums of producers. States underserved by crop insurance need a similar commitment from the federal level.

Conservation

Conservation programs, and the funding of these programs, must be approached carefully. I would caution your Committee and Congress that not all conservation programs reach the producer. Moreover, some of the conservation programs unfairly compete with producers who are seeking land to rent. In writing the next Farm Bill, I encourage Congress to ensure that the beneficiaries of the programs provided for in the conservation title are agricultural producers -- not absentee landowners or non-farm interests. I also call for a more common sense approach to CREP and CRP programs. These programs were never intended for enrollment of entire farm tracts. However, that seems to be common practice in the Northeast. Agriculture and the environment will benefit the greatest from increased technical assistance and cost-sharing for implementation of best practices on farms. Government should work with the producers for

environmental stewardship rather than create programs which can work against us.

Research

Each year budgets get tighter and it seems that agricultural research is receiving less and less funding. The constant evolution of technology in agriculture is promising. However, without the adequate research to implement and manage new technologies, producers are ill-equipped. I urge a commitment by your Committee to fully fund agricultural research and Cooperative Extension initiatives. It is imperative that we continue to invest valuable resources in Extension initiatives, particularly for specialty crop producers. It was through Extension and research that the specialty crop producers were able to cut costs by fifty percent through improvements to fertilizer and pesticide application practices - benefiting producers, consumers and the environment.

Labor Needs

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the labor needs of the specialty crop industry. No matter if one is growing tomatoes, plums, apples, pears, cantaloupes, potatoes or mushrooms, producers need a viable and effective guest worker program to ensure the crops are planted and harvested. Any approach to immigration reform must be comprehensive. Closing down the border will not make our nation safer, if we are then forced to rely on foreign countries for our daily supply of fresh fruits and vegetables. My farm and hundreds of others in the Commonwealth will be out of business without these workers. It is not a matter of inexpensive labor - it is a matter of reliable and skilled labor. Agricultural work is backbreaking, brow-sweating labor. I need reliability in my work force and without it crops will rot in the field.

Agricultural producers are very patriotic people. We want a secure border. We do not support amnesty. We do, however, need a guest worker labor force that is legal and readily available. Producers are not able to tell the apple tree to stop producing nor can we postpone the ripening of the tomato on the vine. The cyclical nature of farming will go on with or without a labor force to harvest our crops. We ask Congress to provide a transition period for a legal and viable guest worker labor force.

Conclusion

I want to thank you for convening this hearing and considering the issues that confront our agricultural industry. My comments today stem from two basic premises. The first is that regional and commodity differences must be taken into account; the second is that the Farm Bill should reflect a common sense approach to public policymaking. Specialty crop producers in Pennsylvania and across the nation deserve and will appreciate a more balanced Farm Bill.

Thank You.