

Farm Bureau Convention

Stallman sees challenges, opportunities for farmers

Congress needs to get to work, Farm Bureau leader says

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

SAN DIEGO — Bob Stallman's vision for the future of American agriculture includes a consuming public that understands modern farming and ranching is a business that involves significant risk and tough decisions. It's also a place where

American agriculture is in a position to "feed the billions of people who will join us on this planet," Stallman said during his opening address at the American Farm Bureau Federation's 96th annual convention.

Stallman, longtime president of the Farm Bureau and a plain-spoken cattle and rice producer from Texas, laid out the challenges and

opportunities that confront farmers and ranchers.

Farm Bureau would like to see immigration reform that provides a stable farm labor force, a cure for rail and port congestion and Endangered Species Act rules that "balance species needs with human needs," Stallman said.

The organization also seeks a national approach to food labeling rather than "patchwork" regulations adopted at the state or local level, he said.

Stallman said political

gridlock in Washington must end.

"We've had a long winter of division and inaction in Congress," Stallman said. "Now is the time for Congress to get back to work, to do their job so you can do yours."

"There are signs that compromise is possible," Stallman said. "We can't ignore the left and the right, but we can speak to the center."

Producers too often run into problems with government regulation, he said.

He singled out the proposed "Waters of the U.S." rule as an example of government over-reach. Many producers believe the EPA wants to expand its control over water quality to include wetlands, ponds and even seasonal ditches on private land.

"What they really want to do is take away your control over how you use your land," Stallman said.

He said the Farm Bureau "loudly and clearly" expressed its opposition to the EPA and Corps of Engineers, summing it up with a "Ditch

the rule" campaign.

"I've got two more words for the EPA and the Corps," Stallman said, quickly adding "No, not those two words," as delegates laughed.

"That's enough," he amended.

Speaking later to reporters, Stallman said agriculture must "bridge the knowledge gap" but has benefited from the public's "inherent fondness" for farmers and ranchers.

"We do a pretty good job of getting our way, if you will," he said.

'Show your values first, then show your expertise'

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He could have been describing Stefani Smallhouse, a former BLM wildlife biologist and a mom who raises cattle and forage crops with her husband in southeast Arizona.

But Smallhouse said she has as much trouble communicating with the other side as anyone else. She said an acquaintance told her recently, "I don't eat bread anymore because it's been re-engineered."

Smallhouse was so stunned by the scientific disconnect that she didn't know what to say, but empathized as a mom.

"There's so many issues you can't sort them out," Smallhouse said. "You go to the grocery store and you're supposed to worry about gluten, GMOs, organic?"

"I think many of us tell our story," she said. "But how do I compete with the Internet?"

She agreed with Arnot's advice that angry responses to uninformed claims don't work.

"Show your values first, then show your expertise," she said. "We are too quick to be offended."

Resistance to change emerged during the convention's policy book adoption

process, a day-long affair in which Farm Bureau sets its positions on economic, environmental, political and social issues for the year to come.

Farm, non-farm issues

Some of the topics covered by policy have nothing to do with farming. One section declares Farm Bureau is opposed to the insertion of Muslim Sharia law in U.S. courts, while another insists the "Star Spangled Banner," in English, must remain our national anthem.

This year, Farm Bureau's Resolutions Committee recommended deleting the "Family and Moral Responsibility" policy, which among other things defines a family as people who are related due to marriage "between male and female."

Delegates from Arkansas, Indiana and Georgia rose in opposition. "I want this back in our book," an Indiana delegate said. The vote wasn't even close; the policy was retained.

At a news conference afterward, Stallman was asked if such policies didn't unnecessarily close off Farm Bureau from segments of American society, such as same-sex couples, who might otherwise support agriculture.

Stallman said the Resolutions Committee recommended deletion because it questioned whether the policy directly relat-

ed to the organization's mission, which is to improve economic opportunity for farmers and to improve the quality of rural life.

"The delegates made it very clear on the floor that they didn't want to delete it," Stallman said. "Our delegates felt very strongly about having that in our policy book, and they put it back in."

A reporter asked if that was wise.

"The delegates decide whether it's wise or not," Stallman replied.

Stallman, a Texas rice and cattle producer, characterized the policy work as "an affirmation of our current policies, with some tweaking."

He said major issues haven't gone away, but decisions in many cases lie with entities other than Farm Bureau.

The Waters of the U.S. proposed rule and water quality rules will remain "front and center," and farmers and ranchers have made their objections clear to the EPA and Corps of Engineers. Farm Bureau supports Country of Origin Labeling (COOL), but a legislative solution by Congress is required, Stallman said. Immigration reform and concerns over who controls farm data are continuing issues, he said.

Stallman said Farm Bureau benefits from the public's "inherent fondness" for farmers and ranchers. "We do a pretty good job of getting our way, if you will," he said.

Leno, Vilsack

Comedian Jay Leno, former longtime host of "The Tonight Show," was Monday's keynote speaker. He drew his share of laughs from the crowd, but some of his material appeared to misfire. At least two of his jokes were ones he told in an episode of Jerry Seinfeld's "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee" show last year. At the convention, an extended bit on obesity and American eating habits fell flat.

"Listening to Jay Leno crack junk food jokes in front of an audience of commodity farmers is kinda awkward," one attendee said on Twitter.

Another featured speaker, former Navy SEAL trainer Rorke Denver, tried to relate to the audience in starker terms. Denver said he'd spent time connecting the dots between "farmers and warriors" and had come to a conclusion.

"When people are hungry they go to war, they start killing each other," he said. "If you do your job, I don't have to do my job."

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack's appearances at the convention weren't so grim. At one point, Stallman called Vilsack on stage, said he was "loyal to the outfit," and presented him with a "U.S. AG" branding iron. "I know one thing as a fact," Stallman said. "Secretary Vilsack rides

for the brand of U.S. agriculture."

The men enjoy a good working relationship, and Vilsack appeared genuinely touched by the gesture.

"This means a lot to me, because of the people in this room, and the people you represent who are out on the farms, ranches and orchards today, doing the hard work of preparing the food that we so casually enjoy," he said. "You are the best at what you do."

At a news conference Monday, Vilsack said he wants to attract new people to farming and increase the diversity of operators. He said one-third of the nation's farmland is owned by people who aren't principal operators. With owners aging and selling, "there's a potential for more and more land ownership to get into the hands of people who are not working the land."

He said tax incentives might allow for land transitions to beginning farmers.

On other issues, Vilsack said hopes for to collaborate with Congress to repair the "broken" immigration system, "bring people out of the shadows" and stabilize the agricultural workforce.

Approval of the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement is important to farmers and ranchers, Vilsack said.



Courtesy American Farm Bureau Federation
Charlie Arnot, CEO of the Missouri-based Center for Food Integrity, urged attendees of the American Farm Bureau Federation's annual convention to have honest conversations with consumers about agricultural issues.

Speaker: Farmers must engage consumers

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

SAN DIEGO — Charlie Arnot has figured out the best spokesperson to explain agriculture's point of view on GMOs, animal care and other controversial topics. Based on surveys, he knows who the public would believe.

"If you find a university scientist who's also a mom and farmer, that's your ideal messenger," he said during a workshop at the American Farm Bureau Federation's national convention on Monday.

He was only half kidding. Arnot, CEO of the Missouri-based Center for Food Integrity, said there is a gulf of misunderstanding and disbelief between what consumers believe, what scientists know and what producers practice.

The bad news is, the gap is getting wider. The Internet, which was supposed to connect us, has done the opposite, Arnot said.

"On-line communication has made us more tribal and insular," Arnot said. "We only communicate with those who share (our) interests."

Arnot's workshop, "When Consumers and Science Collide," was one of the best attended sessions of the convention. Several hundred people crammed into the meeting room, taking every seat, standing along the walls and filling the doorways.

Arnot said the public still trusts farmers, moms and scientists, but develops beliefs based on what they hear from friends or seek out on the Internet.

"We are all exposed to complex issues we are not qualified to evaluate," Arnot said. "Consumer concern and skepticism is understandable."

Farmers can counteract that by being transparent about practices, acknowledging the risk and offering accurate sources of information, he said.

"Our goal should not be to win a scientific or social argument," Arnot said. "We have to have a conversation."

The Center for Food Integrity describes itself as a non-profit organization dedicated to providing accurate, balanced information about the country's food system. It is decidedly pro-industry; its leadership includes representatives from Monsanto, the Farm Bureau, Wisconsin dairy producers, university agriculture departments and the United Soybean Board.



Smallhouse

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

SAN DIEGO — Temple Grandin, the animal sciences professor who transformed slaughterhouses by advocating calm handling and humane killing of meat animals, received the American Farm Bureau's Distinguished Service Award Sunday.

Then she stole the show. Grandin, who is autistic and said she "thinks in pictures, not words," said agriculture must "open up the door and show what we're doing."

Given the prevalence of cameras in society, Grandin said producers who operate slaughterhouses — she refuses to call them the cleaned-up name of "harvest facilities" — ought to ask themselves, "How will this play on YouTube?"



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

About 4,500 delegates are attending the American Farm Bureau Federation's national convention in San Diego through Jan. 14.

"Everybody's got one of these," she said, holding up her cell phone camera. "You can't get away from cameras."

She said producers ought to install cameras themselves and display the images on websites for the public to view.

"I'm kind of at that point, complete transparency," she said.

"I eat all the meats," Grandin said. "Don't worry, I'm no vegan or vegetarian, but we've got to give animals a decent life."

Drones, data hot topics at national Farm Bureau convention

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

SAN DIEGO — Drones and data are like the Bigfoot of American agriculture: They'll turn the industry on its head if they turn out to be real.

For the second year in a row, delegates to the American Farm Bureau Federation's national convention packed a workshop on the prospects of using unmanned aerial vehicles to fly over fields with cameras and sensors. Backers say drones can provide precise information on crop damage, yields and the effectiveness of inputs.

This year, crowds also streamed into a presentation on "big data." Specifically, who owns the information collected by modern farm equipment, and can farmers sell it like a cash crop to interested parties? The drone presentation



Courtesy of American Farm Bureau Federation

Kevin Price, a former agronomy professor at Kansas State University and now head of research and development for RoboFlight LLC, speaks to members of the American Farm Bureau Federation about the promise drones hold for agriculture.

came from Kevin Price, who left his job as an agronomy professor at Kansas State University to head up research and development at RoboFlight LLC.

Price, who spoke at last year's convention as well, said

studies have projected drone technology will be an \$82 billion industry by 2025. He said 80 percent of the initial applications will be in agriculture.

"This is a disruptive tech-

nology, a technology that will revolutionize the way we work with agriculture," Price said.

But Price said technology adoption is stalled by the Federal Aviation Administration, which is developing rules and has not yet fully approved drones for commercial use. The FAA recently granted an Idaho company, Empire Unmanned, the first exemption for commercial ag flights.

Meanwhile, multiple companies are developing small unmanned planes or helicopters that can carry cameras and sensors.

"The technology is developing extremely rapidly," Price said. "It's changing so fast that what I tell you today will be replaced in a month or two."

Kansas entrepreneur Jason Tatge led the workshop on data. His company, FarmMobile LLC, sells a "plug and play" device that can capture the data

coming off of planters, tractors and harvesters.

Farmers can keep the information or sell it to ag tech companies or others, Tatge said.

"You control who has access to it," he said. "It's really the Wild West for these data rights. The opportunities for it are enormous."

Tatge acknowledged no one knows how much farm data is worth, although he heard off-hand that a company might pay \$3 an acre for information.

"Nobody wants to be the first one to pay for data," he said. "It's a complete chicken and egg thing right now."

The Farm Bureau and several ag companies agreed in November 2014 to a set of principles that declare data belongs to the farmer. Also last fall, the Farm Bureau produced a set of videos that explain the business and personal privacy pitfalls that accompany "big data."