

American Farm Bureau Federation

Stallman retires with warning on excessive regulation

American Farm Bureau chief cites threat to 'land of liberty'

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — The final address of retiring American Farm Bureau Federation president Bob Stallman contained a warning to both farmers and the government about excessive regulation.

With too many restrictions over where and how agriculture can be practiced, the U.S. would no longer be the "land of liberty" and would not be able to feed itself for long, said Stallman, who is retiring after 16 years at the Farm Bureau's helm.

"Bad government should not be the straw that breaks us," he said during AFBF's

annual convention in Orlando, Fla., on Jan. 10.

As farmers contemplate the organization's policies regarding government assistance, they should remember that such federal aid seldom comes with no strings attached, he said.

"When we ask and receive from the government, it does bind us," Stallman said.

The Farm Bureau did push to include risk management tools, such as an enhanced crop insurance program, in the 2014 Farm Bill, but federal assistance is ultimately a short-term method for dealing with lower farm incomes, he said.

The long-term goal should be increased trade through

agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which will create greater demand for farm commodities overseas, Stallman said.

While government overreach is a concern for agriculture, the industry has an optimistic future with genetic engineering, robotics and other technological advances promising improved productivity at a lower cost and environmental impact, he said.

Technologies such as genetic modification are currently controversial, but Stallman said he's optimistic about public acceptance since consumers vote with their dollars and biotech crops are already widespread.

"Those who claim to speak for the average consumer but shop only at Whole Foods will eventually have to come around," he said, referring to a grocery chain known for high-end and organic foods.

Farmers can no longer complain that they have no way for the public to pay attention to their story, as social media applications have greatly opened the channels of direct communication, he said.

"Never have there been more tools that allow us to engage," Stallman said.

When asked about the recent takeover of a national wildlife refuge headquarters in Oregon, Stallman said there's no rationale for such illegal acts but sympathized with the plight of the Dwight and Steven Hammond,

ranchers whose five-year arson sentences for burning federal rangeland sparked the protest.

"What happened to the Hammonds, we don't think showed a lot of justice or fairness," he said.

Stallman said a distinction should be drawn between the problems with federal land management encountered by the Hammonds and the standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The armed protesters haven't created a climate that's conducive to reasonable debate over federal policies on grazing and similar issues, he later told Capital Press.

"Tying it to the guys occupying the building is absolutely the wrong approach," he said.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Bob Stallman, who is retiring as president of the American Farm Bureau Federation after 16 years, warned farmers and the government about regulation during the group's recent convention in Orlando, Fla.

Farmers grill USDA chief on issues

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Growers who attended the American Farm Bureau Federation's convention this week got the rare opportunity to directly grill USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack about his agency's policies.

Vilsack began his Jan. 10 speech at the meeting by commending farmers for their adaptability and urging them to promote the industry's evolution to consumers.

For example, few people outside agriculture realize that most of the allergens in peanuts have been eliminated through breeding, he said. "You can either manage change or be managed by change."

The USDA chief then took questions from the audience and followed up with a press conference with media representatives. Following is a summary of some of his replies:

Oregon arson charges

A rancher in the audience said he was nervous about setting back burns to reduce fuels and stop wildfires that threaten his property in light of the arson charges against two Oregon ranchers. Dwight and Steven Hammond, a father and son, recently reported to prison for five-year sentences after being convicted of setting fires that burned public land, which led to protesters taking over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Vilsack said he doesn't know enough about the case to comment on it, as the fires occurred on property owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which isn't under the USDA's jurisdiction. He then turned the subject to funding for firefighting efforts by the U.S. Forest Service, which is a division of his agency.

Some ranchers are frustrated with the restrictions on grazing in national forests, which the Forest Service re-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, left, fields questions about food stamps, firefighting, immigration and other issues directly from growers during the 2016 American Farm Bureau Federation convention in Orlando, Fla. Beside him is Bob Stallman, who is retiring as the Farm Bureau's president after 16 years.

quires to maintain environmental health, Vilsack said. If the agency were able to devote more resources to conservation, the improvements would allow the agency to permit more grazing, he said.

However, 62 percent of the Forest Service's budget is currently devoted to firefighting, up from 16 percent two decades ago, he said. No other agency has to pay for such disasters out of its operating budget, Vilsack said.

Wildfire suppression should be treated the same as the federal reaction to hurricanes or floods, which is paid for with funds from the Federal Emergency Management Administration, he said.

Food stamps for junk food

An audience member demanded to know why the USDA didn't try harder to discourage people from spending their food stamps on junk food, which received spontaneous applause. Vilsack responded that the issue was more complex than it would seem on its face.

USDA has studied how people enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program use their benefits, and it doesn't differ much from how other consumers spend their food money, he said.

Discerning which foods

should be excluded from SNAP would be complicated for technological and policy reasons, Vilsack said. For example, should shredded wheat that contains sugar be prohibited? If certain fruit juices contain more sugars than soda, is it fair to allow them?

"How would you distinguish between items like that?" Vilsack asked.

Only about 20 percent of the people enrolled in SNAP aren't in the workforce and their benefits are limited to 90 days per year, he said. Vilsack said it's a tough question whether people with low incomes should be blocked from making food decisions such as celebrating an occasion with cake.

"We don't want to stigmatize people," he said.

Overregulation of agriculture

When asked about the heavy regulatory burden faced by farmers, Vilsack responded that USDA's role primarily involves helping growers who are affected by rules enacted by other federal agencies. To this end, the USDA has cost-share programs available to assist with improvements on farm properties, as well as technical assistance for farmers, he said. The agency can assess farmers' conservation efforts to verify they're com-

plying with requirements and help them access markets for ecosystem services, such as carbon credits generated from growing crops, Vilsack said.

Labor and immigration

A farmer asked whether it's realistic that the federal government will reform the H-2A agricultural guest worker program to reduce barriers and make more foreign employees available. Vilsack said there's a growing recognition of a problem with H-2A but he hasn't communicated specifically about this program with the U.S. Department of Labor, which oversees it.

However, he said his broader hope is that comprehensive immigration reform will be passed by Congress, which would address farmworkers who are already in the U.S.

While such a solution isn't probable in the current political climate, hopefully members of Congress will learn why such change is necessary over the coming year, Vilsack said.

"There needs to be a process in which people come out of the shadows and acknowledge they haven't been here legally," which could involve the assessment of fines, he said.

Biotech convert preaches for mandatory labels

Lynas believes labeling will dispel consumer fears

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Consumer acceptance of genetically engineered foods would increase if companies were required to label them, according to a controversial proponent of biotechnology.

Food manufacturers and conventional agriculture groups have come out against mandatory labeling efforts, but Mark Lynas of the Cornell Alliance for Science, a nonprofit group, believes embracing labels would be a strategic move for the industry.

Lynas, an environmentalist who once opposed genetic engineering, said consumers would likely stop worrying about transgenic ingredients once they realized how common they are in food.

"You can dispel fear by letting the sunshine in, essentially," Lynas said on Jan. 11 during the American Farm Bureau Federation's convention in Orlando, Fla.

"The more transparency you have, the more comfortable people feel with it," he said.

Labels for genetically modified organisms would not have to exist in a vacuum — manufacturers could convey positive messages about biotech crops, such as the reduced usage of insecticides or lower levels of carcinogenic acrylamides in potatoes, Lynas said.

While some have called for voluntary GMO labeling, Lynas said this approach would not be effective because many companies would avoid making the switch while those who adopt labels would be singled out by critics.

By fighting labels, food

manufacturers and agriculture groups also create the perception that they want to obscure facts from the public, which confirms critics' allegations of a conspiracy, he said.

If food companies were required to label GMOs, it would eliminate one of the most persuasive arguments that opponents have against biotechnology, Lynas said.

Some food industry representatives are apprehensive about mandatory labeling due to the precedent it would set, possibly resulting in new pressure to label other production practices.

Charlie Arnot, CEO of the Center for Food Integrity consumer research nonprofit, said he applauds the recent decision by the Campbell Soup Co. to voluntarily label products made with GMOs.

However, it would be impossible for food manufacturers to disclose all the information that consumers care about — such as worker and animal welfare — unless they attach a scroll to their products, he said.

"Today the issue is GM labels, the next year it's going to be something else," Arnot said.

Lynas acknowledged that there's no scientific justification for GMO labels, but said they may be worth adopting to calm the current rancor.

"This is a political solution to a polarized situation that needs to be resolved," he said. "You are compromising on a matter of principle but it may be politically justified."

Many opponents of genetic engineering see the technology as a symptom of broader forces controlling global food production, reflecting their view that the world is run clandestinely by powerful interests, Lynas said.

Lynas believes this mentality betrays a longing for someone being in control, even if those forces don't have the public's interest at heart.

'(Duvall) from a region that's pretty diverse agriculturally'

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As the AFBF's policy positions are decided by a grassroots process that begins at the county level, the president's role is primarily as an advocate and administrator rather than a decision-maker about the group's political stance.

For those reasons, delegates are expected to evaluate candidates on their style, speaking abilities, capacity to manage a large staff and ability to oversee a substantial business operation.

Regional differences also influence the process, as the South and Midwest are represented by a much higher number of delegates than the West or Northeast due to their sizable Farm Bureau memberships, which are often tied to insurance programs.

To win the presidency, a candidate must win a simple majority of the vote, which none of the four contenders managed to do in the first or



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Zippy Duvall, the new president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, speaks at a press conference after his election at the organization's annual convention in Orlando, Fla., on Jan. 12.

second ballots.

Rogers was the first to be eliminated, followed by Bushue in the second round.

Because of uncertainties about the electronic counters capturing all the votes, the delegates contemplated a formal rule where there would be a paper count if the margin was less than 10 percent

between the two finalists.

Instead, it was decided that the delegates who nominated the candidates could demand a paper ballot if the margin was very narrow, but this procedure proved unnecessary.

Stallman announced Duvall as the winner immediately after the third round and passed him the gavel.

"If you didn't vote for me this time, I'm going to work so hard, you're going to want to vote for me the next time," Duvall told the crowd.

When asked about the election results, delegates downplayed the influence that Duvall's Southern provenance may have had on his victory.

With more than 200 delegates, the AFBF's Southern region controlled more than 57 percent of the group's total voting delegation.

There are certain geographic alliances in the American Farm Bureau Federation, but this was not the predominant factor in Duvall's win,

said Neil Walter, a delegate from Texas.

Walter said he voted for Duvall because of his competence as a leader.

Bob Stallman said he saw the election results — which by tradition are not publicly disclosed — and confirmed there was no region that voted as a bloc to secure Duvall's victory.

Jimmy Parnell, a delegate and president of the Alabama Farm Federation, said Duvall rose to the top because he's an eloquent speaker and was able to connect with farmers of varied backgrounds.

"He's from a region that's pretty diverse agriculturally," he said.

Right up until the election, delegates were tight-lipped about their preference for AFBF president. Perhaps they were being diplomatic, but delegates contacted by Capital Press insisted there was no clear front runner and the race was up in the air.

Even so, stickers and but-

tons for Duvall and Villwock were a common sight, which in hindsight provided a fairly accurate prediction of the final face-off in the election.

Some delegates from the West, such as Don Shawcroft of Colorado, remained optimistic that the region's candidates had a genuine shot at the top job, given the unique challenges faced with ranching on federal land.

As Shawcroft said, stickers and buttons don't necessarily translate into delegates.

Once the results were in, however, Shawcroft sounded an optimistic note about Duvall's victory, noting he was excited about the new "quarterback" for the organization.

"The best thing about change is that it brings enthusiasm, even if we oftentimes resist it," he said.

Craig Ogden, a delegate from New Mexico, said he wasn't familiar enough with either Villwock or Duvall to have much of a preference in the final vote, as he was pull-

ing for Bushue to win.

"When he didn't make it into the top two, I was somewhat surprised," Ogden said.

Prior to the election, delegate Brenda Baker of Tennessee said she didn't expect the Southern region to vote as a bloc based on geography.

"As far as I know, the South has only been united once," she joked. "And that was a long time before the Farm Bureau."

However, Baker indicated that Tennessee, which has more voting delegates than any other state, had coalesced around a certain candidate, though she declined to name him.

She hinted only that the candidate's "faith and family" was a deciding factor in their support. While all four candidates emphasized their belief in God, Baker's comment may well have referred to Duvall, who serves as a deacon in his Baptist church and has four children and three grandchildren.