

Posted on Tue, Feb. 07, 2006

Farmers urge lawmakers to maintain commodity programs

By Elliott Minor

Associated Press

AUBURN, Ala. - Alabama and Georgia farmers, hurt by spiraling costs for fuel, fertilizer and pesticides, urged U.S. congressmen to preserve commodity programs on crops such as peanuts and cotton that help them remain on their family farms.

"We as producers of agricultural commodities can control very few things, a fact that was really driven home last fall when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita slammed into the Gulf Coast," said Eufaula, Ala., farmer Walter Corcoran Jr. "Not only did this destroy the actual crops in the affected area, but it sent shock waves through the economy as fuel prices skyrocketed during the most critical time of harvest."

Corcoran, one of about a dozen farmers testifying Tuesday before members of the House Agriculture Committee, said farmers need stable agricultural policies to help them cope with situations that are out of their control, such as natural disasters and higher production costs.

They represented a broad spectrum of agriculture, from Georgia's Vidalia onion and blueberry industries, to the Alabama landscape industry, to tree farmers from both states.

About 200 farmers attended the hearing at Auburn University. It was the second of about a dozen field hearings the panel will conduct through August to learn what farmers would like included in the next farm bill, scheduled to be passed in 2007.

The first hearing was held Monday in Fayetteville, N.C.

Farmers were in general agreement that the 2002 Farm Bill had served them well, but they are also concerned that Congress may not be able to treat them as generously in the next farm bill because of the nation's huge budget deficit.

"On the last farm bill, we had a budget surplus for the first time in 30 years," said committee chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte, a Virginia Republican.

"That's a situation we no longer find ourselves in," he said. "We are facing budget deficits again. The president has been offering tight budgets and we've been responding as best we can. We don't know how much money will be made available to us next year when we write the farm bill."

Goodlatte said lawmakers will also have to consider trade issues that weren't as pronounced when the 2002 Farm Bill was passed.

"We are the world's largest exporter of agricultural products," Goodlatte said. "We are also the world's largest importer. We are much more open in terms of low tariffs and lower subsidies than most other developed countries, Europeans, Japanese and so forth. We have a lot of disputes with them."

Goodlatte also expressed concern about the World Trade Organization talks and the suit by cotton growers in some developing nations who contend they are being hurt by high U.S. farm subsidies. He predicted the United States could face similar actions on corn, sugar and rice.

"We're going to have to be cognizant of that as we write the new farm bill," he said.

A major concern of growers attending the hearing was President Bush's proposal to slash the maximum amount farmers could collect from commodity programs. The current limit is \$360,000. Bush wants to reduce it to \$250,000, which some see as a disincentive for farm expansion and increased production.

"I have respectfully disagreed with him," Goodlatte said. "We want to keep the programs operating the way they are now. You shouldn't penalize people for becoming more efficient."

Elliott Minor has covered agriculture and rural issues for The Associated Press since 1984.