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the **LEADER**

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IF NOT US, THEN WHO?

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Because if we don't, who will?

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by: Larry Wooten

“Not so good right now.” That’s how I responded to a casual ‘how are you doing’ on a phone call I received recently. Normally, “not so good” is not a response you will hear from me – I love working on behalf of farmers and am proud of the work we do. But I was obviously frustrated and frustrated enough to tell someone in an everyday greeting. I decided to get to the root of this frustration.

As we all know, agriculture is extremely important to the economic viability and success of North Carolina, especially our rural communities. We’re the third-most agriculturally diverse state in the nation and lead in hogs, sweet potatoes, tobacco, Christmas trees and many other commodities. North Carolina farmers and agribusinesses generate an estimated \$84 billion for the state’s economy each year – more than any other industry – and support one of about every six jobs.

The bottom line is that agriculture matters, and it matters in a big way. And that means that you and your opinions matter in a big way. Yet time and time again, I see discussions of critical ag issues and everyone’s opinion is heard except for those whose opinions matter most – farmers. This is why I’m frustrated and from what I’ve heard, many of you are too. Let’s take a closer look at some of the issues that have me wound up.

IMMIGRATION

The need for immigration reform is bigger than just agriculture, but the lack of workforce affects agriculture more than any other sector of the economy. Farmers need a stable, skilled workforce. This is not a new position for us – we’ve spent a lot of time beating that drum over the years. But as you know all too well, we still lack a guest worker program that truly works for all of today’s farmers.

The H-2A visa program is a complicated system that requires a lot of time and a lot of money. For some farmers, the need for workers leaves them no choice but to use the H-2A program, but for many others it is simply too complex and too costly. And because some farmers’ labor needs are not seasonal, the H-2A program isn’t even an option for them. The system is failing these farmers.

When farmers don’t have the workers they need at the times they need them, we all suffer. Farmers lose thousands of dollars as crops rot in the field. Consumers have fewer choices of fresh, local food. And when farmers are not firing on all cylinders, the economy takes a hit and we lose jobs in ag-related industries.

“Agriculture is impacted by international competition. Everything that is grown and produced in America can be produced in dozens of other countries around the world. Unless we have a workforce and a program that works to obtain that workforce, one that works for both employers and the guest workers and for American citizens, we’re going to lose out.”

– Rep. Bob Goodlatte, House Judiciary Committee Chairman

TRADE

If you’ve watched or read the news lately, there’s been a great deal of talk about trade, especially tariffs. When the rhetoric heats up agriculture often finds itself in the crosshairs of retaliatory tariffs. Why does this matter? U.S. farmers and ranchers sent nearly \$20 billion in agricultural products to China alone in 2017. In 2016, the value of all North Carolina agricultural exports was nearly \$3.5 billion. To politicians those export statistics may just be numbers on a page, but for American farmers those dollars are helping keep the lights on. And if those numbers go down, the repercussions are real.

As AFBF eloquently said in statements submitted for the record to the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee, *“The impact on American farmers and ranchers, and associated businesses, must be considered when pursuing trade actions. U.S. agriculture has strongly supported, for decades, efforts to open the world to our agricultural and other trade products.”* Farmers shouldn’t be kept on the sidelines or treated as a bargaining chip with so much on the line. It is imperative that American farmers have access to and remain competitive in international markets.

FARM BILL

Without question, the Farm Bill is one of the most important pieces of legislation when it comes to how farmers manage risk. A good Farm Bill helps provide farmers the certainty and stability they need to grow and prosper. Unfortunately, the bill has become highly politicized, putting farmers in the middle of a fight that often has little to do with agriculture.

Today, rural North Carolinians are experiencing an agricultural recession that is entering its fifth year and farmers need the Farm Bill to deal with this challenge. I can tell you that Farm Bureau is working on this issue every day, but the value of your voice on this matter cannot be overstated.

“Whether it’s low prices, over burdensome regulations, or unpredictable trade markets, it’s no secret that farmers and ranchers are struggling. That’s why we need a Farm Bill that works for all producers across all regions. Simply put, our producers need predictability – and that’s just what our bill provides.”

– Sens. Pat Roberts and Debbie Stabenow, Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman and Ranking Member

HEALTHCARE

The Affordable Care Act was meant to provide relief to the millions of Americans who were being crushed by the cost of healthcare. The law has helped a lot of people, but there are so many more who have been left behind, still suffering from the astronomical cost of health insurance. People were promised that if they liked their plan they could keep it – unfortunately that promise has been broken. When I talk to farmers and rural families, the cost of healthcare is almost always a main concern. They feel trapped, and they are desperate for solutions.

We are working tirelessly to find solutions that will provide options when it comes to your health benefits. Over the past several weeks we have been working with state legislators to pass a bill that would allow membership organizations like North Carolina Farm Bureau to offer health benefit plans. Sadly, that bill was defeated in the NC House, but we’re not going to give up on it. Too many people are hurting and forgotten under the ACA.

THE ‘AH-HA’ MOMENT

After the initial feeling of frustration and thinking of all the instances where farmers could have contributed in a very positive manner, I began to think about what we can do to ensure the farmer’s perspective cannot be ignored.

The solution is simple: we must all be leaders; we must all take action when we feel compelled.

The four issues above are not an exhaustive list – whatever you are passionate about, make sure your voice is heard. Whether you travel to DC to meet with your US Senator or simply put in a call to your county commissioners, your leadership can help us achieve our goals together. As a group and as individuals, we can help shape the world in which we live and work. **We must tell our story. Because if we don’t, who will?**