

AFBF President Bob Stallman
Annual Address to Members
94th AFBF Annual Meeting, Nashville, Tenn.
Many Voices, One Vision
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Good morning!

Farm Bureau members, distinguished supporters, honored guests, welcome to the American Farm Bureau Federation's 94th Annual Meeting. And welcome to Nashville, the country music capital of the world.

When you think about how country music has changed over the years, it brings to mind some interesting parallels to agriculture.

When I was a kid, the top country songs were country-blues songs by Hank Williams, the train sounds of Johnny Cash and blue-collar anthems by Merle Haggard.

Today's country music sometimes sounds as much like pop music as it does country. And people's lives are different today, so the songs have changed.

Whether you prefer a Miranda Lambert song, or George Strait's "Amarillo by Morning," there's something in the country playlist to suit everyone's tastes.

We've seen similar trends in agriculture. Consumer tastes are all over the map, and they continue to change.

But one thing that will never change is that consumers need farmers and ranchers to produce our food and other commodities we consume in our economy. You, America's farmers and ranchers, are innovative and productive enough to meet all of those diverse demands, and ensure that we continue to meet the growing overall demand for food, fiber and fuel.

Our Annual Meeting also causes me to reflect on our unity within Farm Bureau, despite agriculture's amazing diversity.

It's impressive to see farmers and ranchers from pastures, orchards and fields across every region of our country come together and determine what is in the best interest of agriculture overall. We truly are Many Voices, One Vision.

Our Annual Meeting is a time to recognize the importance of singing from the same songbook to keep agriculture going strong.

That's what Farm Bureau is all about, and I am so honored and proud to be a part of it. Thank you for being Farm Bureau members and leaders. And thank you for joining us here in Music City, U.S.A.!

Now I have to admit in the solitude of the open road, on the way to my next Farm Bureau meeting, I have been known to sing along to a country tune. There are also times when I practice my cowboy singing skills in the privacy of my home.

Well, sometimes that's not so private, and it requires a degree of tolerance from anybody within earshot. In my case, that anybody is a special somebody.

I'd like to introduce to you the person who is most inspired—maybe I should say horrified—by my vocal talent, my lovely wife, Stacey Bryan. Stacey, while we don't always agree on musical taste, thank you for sharing my passion for agriculture and for Farm Bureau. Would you please stand?

Farm Bureau members, I begin with these words to you on why your farms, your ranches and your rural communities matter. In spite of reports you might have read, you are relevant.

America's farmers and ranchers produce the food that our nation, and much of the world, needs. The U.S. is the world's top exporter of crops. Each farmer already feeds an average of 155 people, and estimates are that food production must double to meet global demand.

When you're keeping people fed, I would say you're pretty darn relevant.

In addition to producing our food, rural communities also produce many of our nation's men and women in uniform who are protecting our democracy. Rural residents account for just 17 percent of the U.S. population, but it has been estimated that they make up anywhere from 20 percent to as much as 40 percent of our military.

And while there may be fewer of us in rural America than in other places, we will work harder. We will work longer. We will always stand up for the values that are the bedrock of our nation.

Rural voter turnout surpasses the national average. Farm Bureau members embrace their right and responsibility to vote. And as anyone who is familiar with Farm Bureau knows, our members are active in engaging with their elected officials throughout the year to advocate for the policies that our grassroots leaders have said are vital to the success of agriculture and our nation.

Our issues are often complex and sometimes misunderstood by those outside Farm Bureau. For farmers and ranchers, they are not political issues. They are not "red" or "blue" issues. They are issues of survival!

Farm Bureau must remain vigilant, always on guard, for policies or regulations that threaten us with real and substantial impacts on our ability to farm. And we must never stop working to address your concerns. That is our job!

To do that, it's also incumbent upon us to make your issues, everyone's issues.

We know very well that we need the public's support to maintain a policy and a business environment in which farmers and ranchers can continue to be productive. The recent farm bill debate shows this. Congress finally addressed the expiration of the farm bill when the specter of \$7-a-gallon milk made the news.

The farm bill debate has been a frustrating process, but it was actually refreshing to see an instance where the media connected the dots and the public began to understand that farm policy has important impacts for them at the grocery store.

Farm Bureau is working through its own communications and through new, broader forums like the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance to create more understanding between farmers and consumers.

The USFRA, of which I am proud to serve as chairman, is creating a virtual "town square" for farmers and consumers to engage in an exciting national conversation about food.

We are building bridges with people who are influential in the food community—people who drive opinions and are willing to sincerely engage in conversations about the food we grow and raise.

We need to meet our customers on their own turf and we need to invite them to ours. We must acknowledge any and all concerns they have about food. Whether the issues seem real to us does not matter. The concerns are sincere and we have to address them.

Consumers really listen when we talk about our desire to continually improve sustainability, quality and safety on our farms.

One of the best ways to do that is for each of us, as farmers and ranchers, to tell our personal stories about how we are using fewer resources to grow crops and produce meat, milk and eggs—and to tell them how we care for the land and our animals.

And, perhaps above all else, we need to work much harder to be transparent in all we do. Transparency is the best way to build trust and share values with our customers. But in order to do that, you first have to walk the walk.

Consumers want to hear from you. They also want to take part in experiences. They want to see things with their own eyes and touch them with their own hands. We must open our doors—and maybe more importantly, open our minds—to consumers and their perspectives about food and agriculture. I encourage you to join the cause. Stop by the USFRA booth in the Trade Show and sign up to tell your story, or visit the USFRA website at FoodDialogues.com.

I want to share with you some of the policy successes we've had since our last Annual Meeting.

I don't have to tell you that it's been a contentious time in Washington, D.C., and Congress wasn't willing to take much concrete action in an election year. But, after the election, it was time to stop campaigning and start governing.

While farmers still need a five-year farm bill, Congress extended the 2008 farm bill for another year. The farm bill was one of only a couple of issues that rose to a level that warranted Congress' attention during the post-election, lame-duck session.

What Congress did on the farm bill is not perfect, but at least it gives us certainty for 2013.

Now, we need the new Congress to show the leadership needed to pass long-term farm policy and enact the kind of reforms that the Senate and the House Agriculture Committee have approved.

Lest anyone wonder why we need a farm bill, we should remember the drought of 2012. More than half of the country was in a severe drought last summer. Crops withered, hay supplies disappeared, feed costs soared and wildfires blazed.

Thankfully, our crop insurance program worked as intended and we live to fight another day.

The drought continues to affect agriculture. Transportation on the Mississippi River and other inland waterways is threatened by severely low water levels.

We have called for action to deepen the shipping channels so that barge traffic can get through. The Army Corps of Engineers listened and began that effort in December.

For those who are still struggling with the impacts of the drought and other destructive weather in 2012, our hearts go out to you and your families.

Farmers and ranchers know better than anyone that we can't control Mother Nature. All we can do is prepare ourselves as best we can. An important part of that preparation is having a farm safety net and good risk management programs.

Also in the lame-duck session, we achieved long-sought victories on tax issues, such as permanent, let me say that again, permanent reform of estate taxes and capital gains taxes.

Long before the rest of the country started talking about a fiscal cliff, farm and ranch families were looking at going over a tax cliff.

They were facing an estate tax threshold of just \$1 million and an estate tax rate of as much as 55 percent beginning Jan 1.

Now, most people think that \$1 million is a lot of money. But according to Iowa State University, in 2012 the average value of farmland in Iowa was estimated at nearly \$8,300 per acre. With an estate tax threshold of \$1 million, can you calculate how many acres of Iowa farmland it would take for the estate tax to kick in? It's not 1,000 acres. Not even 500 acres. It's only 120 acres.

Think about the number of acres you farm and having to come up with as much as 55 percent of the value of your land above that threshold.

The estate tax has been a threat to our heritage of families passing farms from one generation to the next. And even though it is permanently reduced, it has not gone away. It will still threaten some farms and ranches. But putting permanently lower rates and a higher exemption in place is a big victory—one that Farm Bureau members have worked hard to achieve.

In addition to the risk management and safety net provisions of the farm bill, America's farmers and ranchers need a workforce that is legal, stable and reliable.

For too long, we have dealt with the shortcomings of a broken farm labor system. The results have been labor shortages, lost crops and bureaucratic nightmares.

Our nation's leaders can't continue to avoid this issue. We need solutions!

This year, we will offer a reasonable, practical and common-sense farm labor option that works for growers and workers alike.

Through the efforts of state Farm Bureau leaders from all regions of the nation, a credible and workable farm labor proposal is taking shape. We are part of a broad coalition of groups united and committed to crafting a labor plan one that gets us beyond the shortcomings of past AgJobs proposals and past the serious limitations of the current H-2A temporary agricultural worker program.

This new proposal will be stable, like H-2A, but that is probably where the similarities end. This plan can work for all farmers and ranchers in all production sectors and all regions—from Washington apple orchards to New York dairies.

The plan establishes a new visa program that would give both employers and employees' stability and flexibility into the future, while recognizing the current workforce that has contributed to our farms and communities.

Farmers could offer workers either a contract or at-will work.

We will only solve the big problems, like farm labor reform, when diverse interests work together.

Once again, this proves that Farm Bureau rises to meet extraordinary challenges. We close ranks and find solutions.

If only our elected leaders could use this same kind of realistic, down-to-earth approach to fix our nation's fiscal challenges.

We just elected and re-elected leaders for a new term. We must let them know that our nation can no longer afford political drama, manufactured crises and self-serving jackass stubbornness. We have grown tired of that "reality show."

Our economy has been taken to the precipice. And even after the "fiscal cliff" debate earlier this month, we remain on a collision course with the true reality of our nation's debt.

People are hungry for leadership. They want leaders who will look beyond the next election—leaders who, like you, believe in and stand up for something that's bigger than themselves.

We have some big problems to solve, and we can't begin to solve them until we at least agree to talk with each other and agree that those problems even exist. Now, as we prepare for the president's second term and the 113th Congress takes office, it is time for our nation to come together!

We also achieved some significant regulatory victories in 2012. The best example involves the child labor rules. After proposing changes that would have prevented many young people from working in agriculture, the Labor Department withdrew its proposal and said it would work with us on educating farm families about the importance of farm safety. No one cares more about the safety of their kids than farm moms and dads.

We appreciate the efforts of Secretary Tom Vilsack and several members of Congress to ensure that the administration listened to farmers and ranchers.

And, again, we would not have been able to achieve that victory without you. Farm Bureau members wrote, called, e-mailed, Facebooked and tweeted about this issue, and your message was heard.

But that doesn't mean we can rest easy and assume that the parental exemptions in the child labor rules will always be protected.

We need to make sure that our heritage of family farming is protected, with parents teaching their kids the ropes and instilling in them respect for the land, for animals, for agriculture and for the deep satisfaction that only comes from hard work. I think that's something our country could use a little more of these days, don't you?

While we always strive for common-sense dialog with members of the regulating community, sometimes talk isn't enough. When the government insists on pursuing unlawful regulations, we take our case to court.

We currently have a number of cases in progress.

Exactly two years ago, we filed suit in Pennsylvania against the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA's unlawful regulations for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed claim the power to set federal limits on nutrients from each and every farm across the landscape—regardless of cost or feasibility.

In October, we argued that only the states in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, not the federal government, can dictate how states change their regulations, land-use restrictions and economies to meet water quality standards. We are waiting for the judge's decision in that case.

Why should you care about what happens in the Chesapeake Bay watershed? Because if the epa can do it there, they can do it anywhere—and they will.

Another case involves the government's roughshod attempt to bully a poultry farmer through illegal enforcement actions and threats of steep, daily fines unless she applied for a Clean Water Act "discharge" permit. She knew her farm was not "discharging" anything more than ordinary rain water off her farmyard. So she took on the EPA, and the West Virginia Farm Bureau and the American Farm Bureau joined her in fighting back.

The presiding judge granted Farm Bureau's request to join the case, recognizing AFBF and I quote, "as a veteran advocate in the courts."

Of course, EPA vigorously fought Farm Bureau's involvement in the case. But the judge said that, under EPA's reasoning, virtually every farmer would need a federal permit if rain water could wash dust particles off their land.

Just a few weeks ago, not long after Farm Bureau was allowed to join the lawsuit, EPA did an abrupt about-face and withdrew its regulatory action against the farmer.

Well I don't know about you but to me, it looks like EPA wants to back away from a fight it should not have started!

Let me ask you a question. How many of you would be willing to stand up if the heavy hand of government were to knock on your door and threaten you with fines of \$37,000 a day unless you did as you were told? How many of you would risk your farm to help protect other farmers like you?

Well let me introduce you to a farmer who had the courage to stand up for what's right!

Please look at the screen.

[Plays Lois Alt video]

We are not yet to the end of this story! AFBF is proceeding with efforts to continue the case and get a favorable court ruling on behalf of all farmers and ranchers.

Let's recognize the Alts for their bold and courageous move to stand up for themselves and for all of agriculture.

I've talked about some of the things that Farm Bureau is doing today some of our successes and some of our challenges. Now I want to talk about the future and about what we are doing so that we can continue to stand up for farmers and ranchers tomorrow.

Farm Bureau has been reinventing itself for nearly a hundred years now. But this is the most thorough examination we've done of where we want Farm Bureau to go in our next hundred years to answer such questions as "How do we adapt to the trends that exist today, and how do we continue to meet your needs and the needs of farmers well into the future?"

This effort is called the Centennial Development Project. I hope that many of you have added your voices as we have sought input across the Farm Bureau spectrum.

Let's face it. If you just keep singing the same old tunes, people stop listening. So we're writing a new song.

All state Farm Bureau presidents have been engaged in this process. They are working to refine and sharpen the questions we need to ask and then provide the answers that take us down the road to a second century of Farm Bureau success.

So far, our stakeholders have told us that they need a strong Farm Bureau. They want a Farm Bureau that speaks for all farmers—big, small, organic, conventional, young or old. They want a Farm Bureau that is true to its heritage, but one that is also nimble and offers new programs and services that meet the needs of a new generation of farmers and ranchers.

This Centennial Roadmap will offer a plan for implementing changes to the organization. The Roadmap will be refined and adopted—through our normal governance structure—by early 2014. Changes will be implemented by 2019, in time for our organization's 100th birthday.

To continue the kinds of successes I have talked about today, we will be guided by our grassroots. And we will have to be politically strong. And yes, we must remain financially strong. If we accomplish this, the Farm Bureau movement will march forward, and we will ensure that Farm Bureau remains the nation's most influential agricultural organization.

Within the American Farm Bureau Federation, we are poised to push the agenda you give us like never before. In fact, we are retooling and realigning our professional staff for the challenges of this new day. We are renewing and refocusing our strategic advocacy effort to obtain even higher levels of success.

We must do all of this to have a successful future!

Farm Bureau members, we live in turbulent times. But Farm Bureau always has been about uniting diverse interests. If we remain united, our common vision will show us the way.

Since I am a Texan, I can't help thinking of a brave group of volunteers from the great state of Tennessee who risked everything they had in the fight for Texas' independence from Mexico. Their leader was Davy Crockett.

Crockett was a member of Congress. His values were straight, true and simple. He is known for saying, "Be sure that you are right, and then go ahead."

In my home state, that sentiment continues to live on through the creed of the Texas Rangers.

Stated by Texas Ranger Captain W.J. McDonald around the dawn of the 20th Century, the creed is this: No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps on a-comin."

The sustained spirit to keep on a-coming is also what pushed the formation of the American Farm Bureau Federation, back in 1919.

That aspect of our organization has not changed we keep on a-coming! And our sense of what is right with and right for rural America will lead us on.

Up and down the halls of Congress, in our courts and in all the places where engagement takes root, respect for Farm Bureau is drawn from a deep well.

It springs from your credibility and the sincerity with which you tell your story of agriculture. It flows from a genuine sense that you care and that you strive to always do a better job.

Thanks for doing everything you do for agriculture, Farm Bureau and America.

I am honored to serve as your president and I thank each and every one of you for being Farm Bureau members. You uphold a sentiment best embodied by three simple words—Farm Bureau Proud.

God Bless you.

God Bless Farm Bureau.

And God Bless America.