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Mike Adams and Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kansas)

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Mr. Mike Adams: Now we turn our attention to the farm bill and that process that has taken another turn because the super committee couldn't come up with any agreements and recommendations, so the recommendations made by the ag committees now goes by the wayside, and we're back to, I guess, the old fashioned way of putting together a farm bill, which is fine with our next guest, Kansas Senator Pat Roberts. Senator, thanks for joining us on AgriTalk.

Senator Pat Roberts: Yes, sir, it's a pleasure to be with you.

Mr. Adams: You were very outspoken in that you didn't like the way the process was going with the recommendations from the leadership of the ag committees to the super committee. You felt like you were left out of that process.

Sen. Roberts: Well, I don't know if I'd say left out so much as we just didn't, we were not invited to participate to the full extent, and I think that's...well, it was unprecedented. This was the most odd and unique farm bill process I've ever seen, and I've seen quite a few. We still don't have the final language of what was put together. But on at least what we understand, I was pleased with some things and others gave me great concern.

And so on crop insurance and conservation, we've made some progress. On the commodity title we still don't know, but I just fear the commodity title would take us back to 1985 instead of looking ahead to 2020. I don't see a situation where it would be in the best interest of American agriculture and our farmers and ranchers to be farming for the program once again, as opposed to the market, or in a situation where we would be inviting a WTO challenge.

So we're going to have to start from square one. We're going to have to go back to regular order, which we should do, and we ought to have open and transparent hearings, and all members of the committee should be involved, and I think that that's what we should be doing and I think we will do that.

Mr. Adams: How do you see it playing out? We know there's a lot of disagreement among some sectors within the ag community of which direction we should go – not that that's really unusual – but are you concerned about a lack of unity within the ag community itself as we go through this process?

Sen. Roberts: I don't think, after holding some hearings, and we were in the field to some degree, and then the super committee situation took over, as I say, this was a very unique situation, and I'm not trying to point any fingers here. Folks did the best they could. But in regards to all of the farm organizations and the commodity folks, they may have some disagreements, but largely they agreed we need to do a better job in regards to crop insurance, and then they had a lot of other ideas as well. That sort of fell by the wayside in terms of our real priorities.

But they may be singing a different hymn, but they're in the same church and the same church pew, I can assure you. And when it gets down to ...[inaudible]... and our budget situation and what we just must do in behalf of our farmers and ranchers, I think we can get a pretty good unified situation in farm country.

Mr. Adams: Do you think the number we kept hearing floated out there for budget cuts for ag spending, as far as a recommendation to the super committee, will that pretty much be what you think will be a target to shoot for in this?

Sen. Roberts: Well, that's difficult to say. We've got to go through, you know, we're punting three times on first down here. First we've abrogated our responsibility to a committee that was doomed to failure, apparently, and now we're going in through a sequester process, which would be very difficult, and then you have a threatened veto by the president. So we've got to go through all those sequences of what, and what happens to agriculture during that time I don't know.

We'll be fighting hard to protect agriculture, but also fighting hard to maintain what farmers and ranchers know have to happen in regards to our good faith efforts to contribute to deficit reduction. So what number is out there down the road, I just can't tell you, facing a sequester or what happens in the future. But one thing I will say, that we ought to let policy drive the number, and not the number drive the policy. And I think we got ahead of ourselves in these negotiations that were given to the committee.

Mr. Adams: Talking with Kansas Senator Pat Roberts, Ranking Member on the Senate Ag Committee. It's kind of been a foregone conclusion by some that direct payments are going to be gone, one way or the other. Do you think that's the case or not?

Sen. Roberts: Well, I think basically that is what a lot of folks have said. Rather than concentrate on one program or another program, I think you've got to look again at

the policy and what makes sense. And again, what we came up with was something that resembled 1985 or in those years, where farmers were making decisions on what the government program was, and farming the program, not for the market. We don't need to go back down that road again and invite a WTO complaint.

On the direct payments, they were not considered to be a real problem with WTO. But that remains to be seen, and we'll just have to take one piece at a time, and we'll have to go over...I don't expect this particular package to be a blueprint for the next farm bill, but we ought to really have a much more open process and member contribution, as well as the farm groups and the commodity groups.

Mr. Adams: Farm programs are constantly under criticism and scrutiny anyway, and there is certainly a large percentage of people who don't understand them and just say why do we even have them, and especially because they hear about higher commodity prices and things like that. Do you think this failure of the super committee and now the process we'll go through, does that open the door for those critics to try to push their agenda to try to do away with the farm programs?

Sen. Roberts: Well, it certainly doesn't help. We always have the critics that would like to do that. We always try to point out and emphasize the need for a strong safety net, and that's why the crop insurance program is the best and easiest and more accurate way to describe things in terms of protection to producers. And we were able to make some real strides there to strengthen and preserve it. But you're always going to have your critics.

We try to point out that we're going to have over nine billion people in the next several decades as our population increases all across the planet, and if we're going to do what we have always done in regards to food production or crop production, we're going to have to double our ag production, and so you're going to have to really emphasize that, that this isn't just a farm bill paying farmers. That's a very small slice of it.

And that's another thing that really bothers me, is how these cuts were made as you go down the different titles of the farm bill. I think they were sort of reversed in priority. But, having said that, yeah, the critics will be there. But after all, you've got to take a better look at what agriculture does for national security, for world stability, and to feed this country and a troubled and hungry world.

Mr. Adams: Historically, the ag committees have been one area of Congress that has been able to, for the most part, work in a bipartisan way, even while the rest of Congress has trouble doing that. Has that changed now?

Sen. Roberts: I don't think it's changed that much. It's just that some of us have some pretty strong opinions about policy, and whether or not the policy is in the best interest of long-term ag policy for the United States and for our farmers and ranchers. Now, that's easy for me to say in terms of my opinion, and I respect the opinions of

others. But it was based on policy, I think, in terms of any differences that we might have.

The other thing was that we knew that if we tried to get something to the committee that it was very difficult to go through the full committee process. As a result, a lot of members on the committee felt left out and weren't part of the negotiations. We need to change that.

We have to go back to square one, and so we're going to have to have hearings and we're going to have to have member input, and we're going to have to have input from all the commodity folks and all the farm organizations again, at that particular time, and it will be a new situation that we will face. We don't know what's going to happen with the sequester, we don't know what's going to happen next year, and it's an even numbered year, and you know what that means.

Mr. Adams: Mm-hmm. You know, we've kind of been operating under this assumption that if you were just told, if the ag committees were just told here's what you have to spend, we'll figure it out from there how to make that work. Is that all up in the air, too?

Sen. Roberts: Well, that's the thing that I think the chairwoman and I have really emphasized to both sides, our leadership and her leadership. Senator Stabenow and I both feel very strongly that you give us a number or we'll contribute a number, and then let us do the writing. The problem was that when that finally ended up on the table, there were a lot of people left out, including me, and we ended up with a product that we still don't know what was in it. So that has to change. That's the process part of it that has to change. But we'll be working in a bipartisan way; we have to.

Mr. Adams: Think we'll get it done in time? These things historically have gone right to the deadline or beyond.

Sen. Roberts: Hey, listen, you're talking to a former chairman in the House that took us a year and a half to write a farm bill, and we had to get an extension. So I hope we don't go down that road. But farm bills are never easy, and they're always contentious, and we always face a lot of criticism. But we will get them done. And the key is to give our farmers enough advance notice. And as one farmer told us in Wichita, "Pat, I don't care what you do to me, just let me know." And there's something to be said for that. Of course we want to do the right thing as well.

Mr. Adams: It'll be interesting. Senator, thank you for being with us. We look forward to talking with you again.

Sen. Roberts: You bet. I appreciate it, thank you.

Mr. Adams: Kansas Senator Pat Roberts, Ranking Member of the Senate Ag Committee.

[End of recording.]