

## *AgriTalk*

Mike Adams with House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R.,Okla.)  
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NOTE: This is an Unofficial Transcript of an *AgriTalk* interview.



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**Mr. Mike Adams:** We are very happy to have with us now the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas, a lot to talk about. Mr. Chairman thanks for joining us again.

**Mr. Frank Lucas:** Oh it's a pleasure as always Mike and you're right, there are a lot of things going on here at the nation's capital.

**Mr. Adams:** Before we get to the farm bill, we have a lot to talk about on the farm bill, but some other things. First of all, Secretary [of Agriculture Tom] Vilsack announcing the plan to close some 259 local USDA offices and labs across the country. What are your thoughts on that announcement? Do you think it's a good plan, not a good plan, any concerns about it?

**Mr. Lucas:** Well Mike I'm still sorting through it and I was a veteran of the 2005 effort by the Bush Administration to close 665 facilities that didn't go anywhere. But we're now caught in a situation here in the nation's capital where the federal budget is so far out of balance where the deficit has grown to such a tremendous degree I think all of us on the Ag Committee and for that matter other committees across congress understand there are going to be some of these kind of things. Now the Secretary is obligated to have public discussions about the proposals and they will get to explain all of this, and for the record six of these facilities are in Oklahoma that are going to be closed, so I understand personally the pain issues. But I think they've done a good job of trying by attrition to reduce the number of USDA employees and in many cases these are very small offices, some that don't even have full-time staffers, but any time you're talking about reducing the availability of services in the countryside you have to ask what's going on at the home office in USDA and I think the Secretary will get to discuss all that, but it is just simply a sign of how tough the budget process is going to be in Ag and across the entire federal government this coming year.

**Mr. Adams:** Now along with this you have the Obama Administration wanting to consolidate and merge some departments and agencies within federal government including U.S. Trade Representative's Office. We heard yesterday from Susan Schwab, former U.S. Trade Representative. She does not like this idea. She thinks it would hurt agriculture. What are your thoughts?

**Mr. Lucas:** Well, I have to admit to you it causes me some angst too. The House Agriculture Committee has always had a very good relationship with the U.S. Trade Representative. That doesn't matter whether he or she was appointed by a republican or democrat president. We've always had a good working relationship. I think we've been able to get across to the Trade Representative how important agriculture is in the negotiations and all the negotiations that they are engaged in. I would also say that after working diligently for three years to expand the size of federal government I'm pleased to see the President talking about some shrinkage, but maybe we need to focus on a bigger effort and maybe things like perhaps combining the entire Energy Department with the Department of Commerce. Those kind of goals would be more meritorious, but at least I'll give him credit now after three years of growing government in one small area he's talking about some shrinkage.

**Mr. Adams:** Now another area would be food safety. There have been those that for years have been calling for a single food safety agency. Others have expressed some concerns about that. What are your thoughts? Is that the way to go do you think to address the food safety issue?

**Mr. Lucas:** Mike in food safety you basically have two regimes, one that focuses on safety issues at the production point and up to the production point and then you have another regime that focuses on the processing and the delivery of the food. I think having USDA in charge of essentially the producer side and having the FDA in charge of the processor side and ultimately the delivery points all the way to the consumer has really served us well. Having two sets of eyes kind of watching over each other at the common point has served us well. I know there are many people who believe that they should be consolidated. I've listened to my friends on the Energy and Commerce Committee discuss for my entire tenure in congress basically that everything should be run out of the Food & Drug Administration, FDA, but I would tell you I don't think no matter how well intended or how much effort those good folks over there put into it, I don't think they understand the production side and I want farmers and ranchers to deal with people who are not only concerned about food safety, but understand what's involved in making those products, be it the animal, be it grain, be it whatever, making those products come into existence. I'm not in favor of combining the programs because I just don't think it ultimately is in the consumer's interest.

**Mr. Adams:** So it sounds like it may be a tough go to get congress to green light some of these plans that the President is pushing for.

**Mr. Lucas:** That's the politest way you can put it Mike.

**Mr. Adams:** All right. We're talking to the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Congressman Frank Lucas from Oklahoma. All right, now we turn our attention to the farm bill. We're hearing more and more predictions now that you're not going to be able to get this farm bill written this year. Some have said if you don't get it even put together by Memorial Day it has no chance of getting done this year. What are your thoughts, are you optimistic you'll get it done this year?

**Mr. Lucas:** Mike, I am by education and experience and for several generations a western Oklahoma farmer. You don't survive in a place where you measure the soil in inches and you constantly pray for rain without being an eternal optimist. I think it is still possible to do, but it is a tough tough lift. On the positive side of course I have Senate [Ag Committee] Chairwoman [Debbie] Stabenow [D., Mich.]. Debbie was an absolute pleasure to work with in attempting to put the hurry-up proposal together for the super committee that never came about, but Senator Stabenow, Chairwoman Stabenow was a pleasure to work with and she demonstrated an intense amount of intensity over on the senate side to try and move things there, so that's a positive force. The fact that the existing farm bill will begin to expire at the end of September and as many of our listeners are well aware of the farm bill is a little different than other federal policy in that the farm bills that we operate under from year to year or five years at a time are temporary law. The base law is still the 1949 Act and it will take effect if we don't pass a new farm bill or extend the existing farm bill. And the '49 Act for a gentle reminder to some of my younger farmers and ranchers that's the old allotment process. That is so dramatically different than how federal farm policies worked at least for the last 20-plus years. Going back to the '49 Act we just don't want to do that, so there is that stick there to help push us along.

But ultimately if we have a chance at making this happen Mike I've got to have the farm groups, all the different commodity groups and all the general different farm organizations in all the regions we kind of need to pull together. And historically in the past even though there have been extensions on farm bills and they've been like the '96 bill pushed past and not exactly in regular order, there was a consensus built among the commodity titles in all the regions and we pushed together. We are not exactly pushing or pulling together at this very moment and we've got to overcome that. If we can get there again then I think it's possible Mike, but absolutely, when the naysayers point out how difficult the senate situation will be, point out how difficult the budget situation is in the house that's all true. It's a tough go this time.

**Mr. Adams:** Are you frustrated that there isn't more unity or consensus within agriculture for the next farm bill?

**Mr. Lucas:** I discovered in the hurry-up process to try and craft something for the super committee is that the attitudes that have prevailed in congress in general in recent years who seeped a little bit into the Ag advocacy communities here in DC. It's important to take care of your commodity group and it's important to take care of your region, but as we tried so hard in the super committee effort you've got to give everybody the ability to participate. You've got to give everybody the ability to prosper. What might be the ultimate program for wheat or the ultimate program for

soybeans for example might not work for everybody else. Crafting a farm bill that enables everyone to have a chance to prosper, yes to receive their fair share, but still prosper is the challenge. And let's face it, we have in the last 20 years had a program that was essentially based on the direct payment system and everything else kind of complimented that. The direct payments are an incredibly tough political lift in this body and many of the national groups and the commodity groups have recognized that, and over the course of the last six months advocated shifting away. If you go Mike to a more insurance-based safety net, whether it's working to use insurance to guarantee some sort of revenue levels or using insurance to guarantee the traditional production levels, offset Mother Nature. It is very hard to make that work for everyone, so...

*[Break]*

**Mr. Adams:** Welcome back to AgriTalk with the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas. All right, I want to talk about the budget situation. We heard from [Rep.] Collin Peterson [D., Minn.] your ranking member the other day. He said you may not have that budget figure of how much money you're actually going to have as you are writing the farm bill. Everyone is kind of looking at that 23-billion that you offered up to the super committee last year now as being the floor, most expecting the number to be greater than that, certainly not less than that. Do you have any regrets now about submitting a figure of 23-billion? Does that hinder you do you think in any way now as you write the farm bill?

**Mr. Lucas:** No Mike. Remember the Budget Committee Chairman [Paul] Ryan [R., Wis.] used a 40-something-billion dollar number. President Obama himself used a 33-billion-dollar number. Had we been able to have been a part of a super committee process, and it's worth noting the Ag Committee House and Senate were the only bipartisan, bicameral process where a committee did its work and had something ready to go we would have tied down the farm bill for the next five years and done it at that \$23-billion in savings figure. That's the best number we could have hoped for and now I think Collin is right, I don't know for sure. The senate has not a budget in nearly three years. Will the house do another budget proposal this spring? What are the CBO scores going to be on baseline? Think Mike for a moment about the insurance monies that have been paid out on livestock and crops in the southwest because of the big drought. When that's incorporated the cost of using insurance-based programs is going to go up dramatically. I mean just all those pieces are influx, so Collin is right unfortunately on this occasion, as he frequently is right on many things.

**Mr. Adams:** Doesn't that just add to the difficulty when you don't even know what your budget number is?

**Mr. Lucas:** Yes. 2012 could either be described as a Maalox year or a Pepto year, but one of those two. Collin and I are going to pump a lot of stomach acid, but ultimately whether it is a farm bill this year or an extension for a year something has to happen.

We cannot go back to the '49 Act. That would be so disruptive as to be almost beyond belief. Something has to happen, I just don't know yet how all the pieces are going to play out, how all the pieces are going to interact. I am confident Chairwoman Stabenow will get a bill out of the Senate Ag Committee and across the senate floor if it's humanly possible; I just don't know if it's humanly possible there either.

**Mr. Adams:** Collin also said he was fairly confident that you would be able to get a good bill out of Committee, but was concerned about what would happen once it got to the floor, the outside pressures and attacks on it. How concerned are you about that, your bill being able to survive a floor fight?

**Mr. Lucas:** Well, [House] Speaker [John] Boehner [R., Ohio] said at the beginning of this two-year term of congress we would be a more open body. That meant fewer closed rules. That meant more amendments and more debate on not just farm bill, but all pieces of legislation. The fight on the floor this time will be to fight off both the left and the right. My friends on the right who don't want to spend money on anybody, and my friends on the left who don't want to spend any money on rural America. We will have to deal with both of that. Can Collin and I in a bipartisan way craft a majority in the middle with the numbers that are available to us and have policy that actually is positive for rural America? That's the great struggle that lays ahead of us Mike. I'm an eternal optimist as I said, but I understand realistically it's a hard hard fight.

**Mr. Adams:** Yes, we've heard now from Senator [Kent] Conrad [D., N.D.] who has said it has to be a farm bill that is defensible to the rest of the country. Well as you said some people don't want any kind of a farm program at all. It's going to be hard to defend whatever you come up with to people that have that position.

**Mr. Lucas:** And there is an underlying problem here that we face and it has grown with time and that is that American agriculture is so successful we've not have a famine, we've not had a time when the shelves were bare. Our fellow citizens kind of like teenagers, take for granted this highly affordable high quality safe food supply we have, and when you take things for granted then you're not necessarily all that interested in preserving it. We have to overcome that and that's the struggle on the floor. Collin and I and the Committee working in a bipartisan fashion. The Ag Committee is still one of the most bipartisan and least partisan groups out there Mike. We may disagree by region, we may disagree by commodity group, but together we pull. Can we depend on all of our friends in rural America and all the Ag groups and all the commodity groups to pull with us? If we want a farm bill they better be circling the wagons along with us and the struggle once it's engaged will have to be won. If we lose a farm bill in this environment on the floor oh my goodness, oh my goodness.

**Mr. Adams:** What is your timeline? What do you see as your schedule now playing this out through this year?

**Mr. Lucas:** I need some clarity on the money numbers and those are not here yet. I think we will continue to prepare on the committee for the process. I think that's going well, the hearings that we've done and the things that we've done, but this is just too fluid to give you a specific set of timelines. I do think any time from June on it becomes extremely hard to get anything done. In a year when you have a presidential campaign you have every member of the house and a third of the United States Senate running. And also Mike remember while we are a very non-partisan bipartisan committee this is still a federal government where you have a democrat president, a republican house and a senate that's so evenly divided as to make it extremely difficult for anyone to manage that body. That's the environment I work in that will create the kind of general turmoil while the Ag Committee is not a part of that general turmoil, it is the environment that we have to craft policy.

**Mr. Adams:** You've talked about not wanting to go back to that '49 law certainly, the possibility of an extension of this current bill. That's always kind of been a safety net here. We've seen extensions in the past. Is that realistic and can you even get that done if you need to at some point this year?

**Mr. Lucas:** I'd like to think we'll do what we have to do, but understand depending on how the senate and the house and the President handle the budget issues this coming year will they create expectations that even an extension has to reflect changes in spending patterns. I just don't know yet Mike.

**Mr. Adams:** Direct payments, you and I talked about these quite a bit. Are they for sure out do you think? Can you foresee any possibility, any way they would be in the next farm bill?

**Mr. Lucas:** If...you know that I view the direct payments as the most WTO compliant, the most defensible trade-wise part of the farm bill, the least market distorting part of the farm bill. It's ironic that they are the element of the farm bill that outside groups have chosen to attack with such intensity. If we have to wind up doing some sort of a short-term farm bill or an extension of the present language then yes, by extending present law you extend present programs. I mean that's what it amounts to. I would say it's always possible, but my goodness what a battle on the floor.

**Mr. Adams:** Yeah, that's what I was thinking. How do you extend the current law with those in there and they are so unpopular by many people outside of agriculture. All right. Congressman thank you so much. Mr. Chairman always appreciate your time. Good luck to you and we look forward to talking with you again as this unfolds and this process continues.

**Mr. Lucas:** We'll discuss it many times I'm sure. Thanks Mike.

**Mr. Adams:** All right, thank you Mr. Chairman. Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas. Wow, what a tough tough task ahead to try to get this farm bill written.

*[End of recording.]*