

The Oklahoma Farm Report- Radio Oklahoma Network

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Ron Hays with House Ag. Comm. Chairman Frank Lucas (R., Okla.)

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Mr. Ron Hays: We're talking today with the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, second term in that role, Chairman Frank Lucas from Oklahoma's Third Congressional District. Mr. Lucas, congratulations on being named chairman once again for 2013-2014.

Rep. Frank Lucas: Oh, thank you, Ron. Being a fifth generation farmer from Western Oklahoma and an Ag Econ graduate from Oklahoma State, it's nice to be able to put the experiences and the education to work in this role, and the confidence of my conference leadership for another two years as chairman of the Ag Committee.

Mr. Hays: I do have to say that I think you did a little bit better job than Mr. Peterson on pronouncing the names of your new members. Maybe you had an easier list, I don't know.

Rep. Lucas: Well, it just shows how many new members there are, once again, on the Ag Committee. And as we gear up to address all the things that need to be done, have to be done, will be done in this session of Congress, we've got some new faces to work with and to bring up to speed.

Mr. Hays: One thing that Mr. Peterson mentioned with his opening comments that I thought was very, very enlightening, he indicated that he had had a conversation a couple times, in fact just in the last little while, with the Speaker, and kind of seemed to be saying we'll work something out in regards to trying to get regular order moving on a farm bill this go around in 2013. Your thoughts about what Mr. Peterson was saying, and anything that you've had in conversations with John Boehner, Eric Cantor and the like.

Rep. Lucas: I think what Collin was reflecting is the ongoing effort that both he and I have been engaged in, trying, whether it's the Speaker, the Majority Floor Leader or the Whip, trying to get the attention of leadership, the majority leadership, and to get

them to understand that while there are a lot of important things going on here— budget issues, CRs, and sequestration, and war and peace, nonetheless a comprehensive farm bill affects not only everybody in rural America that produced that food and fiber, but every consumer.

Collin has been very, very focused on the dairy portion of the bill, and has spent a lot of time, in particular, trying to work with the Speaker on that subject. The Speaker did serve on the Ag Committee for, I think, 16 years, perhaps. But I've also put my effort into that.

And right now we're in a position where, like certain parts of the last session, it's hard to get the attention span of what I call management because there's so many things going on all around them simultaneously.

But I'm optimistic we can get her done. We came very close in the last session. And even though we technically start over in this session of Congress with a brand new bill, a lot of work has been done, a lot of the hearings have been done. We just need to be given a little bit of flexibility so we can do our work.

Mr. Hays: In your mind, what will it take to get the Speaker to sign off on allowing regular order to occur?

Rep. Lucas: I think the first thing, Ron, perhaps is not so much the Speaker, but we are about to address the debt ceiling issue. The federal government is now 16 plus billion dollars—trillion dollars in debt, and the President can no longer write any checks on the checkbook. That's got to be addressed.

We had these automatic cuts that were agreed to last summer sequestration. Huge effect on the military. But it also affects all of the non-nutrition portion of the farm bill, even the one-year extension of the farm bill. That's got to be addressed. And then the federal government is only funded for the first half of the year. That runs out in March.

So I understand why management's consumed by all these other issues. But in that stage, Collin and I and the committee will get our new members up to speed, we'll do the preliminary work so that when people can focus around here on a variety of things, we'll be ready to go.

Mr. Hays: I take it that obviously you seem to be pleased with the statement that was made, attributed to you, in regards to the announcement by Mr. Vilsack and Farm Service Administration, FSA, in regards to the signup starting February 19th of the one-year extension, including for direct payments and for the ACRE program. Is that key to get this out in front of some of these fiscal discussion?

Rep. Lucas: Oh, yes. It's important for a number of reasons. Number one, by extending the last farm bill from five years to six, you have to extend the safety net that's a part of it. And the direct payments are a big component of the safety net out there for production agriculture. So having the Secretary follow the law and

announce those signups that will begin, and then people will be committed for this next year, that's a very important principle to tie down.

Also, from the perspective of writing the next farm bill, that protects the budget baseline numbers, the money that's set aside for those direct payments this time, because we need that in whatever the next farm bill looks like, those resources to be available to craft the next safety net, whether it's price protection or revenue protection, whatever the case may be, or a combination of the two, as we advocated in the House. We need that resource space to know we have something to work with.

So the Secretary followed the law. I'm pleased with that. The Secretary now will make sure that producers have that safety net again for a sixth year. I'm extremely pleased with that. But it also creates a budget situation that makes it easier for the Ag Committee, then, when we do write the next farm bill that is ultimately passed all the way through and signed into law by the President, it makes it easier to have resources to craft that next farm bill.

Mr. Hays: At this point, would you envision probably some cuts to this current year that folks will be signing up for here starting February 19?

Rep. Lucas: I wish I had a crystal ball that was clear enough to look in and say one way or the other. I think we start off on the assumption that by signing up for that direct payment that it's coming. We start off by assuming that the resources that are in crop insurance will be there. We start off with those assumptions. Who knows what kind of twists and turns the whole process will take?

But if there are cuts in broad federal spending, whether it's sequestration or whatever the ultimate budget CR deal is, at least I'm confident this time that it will affect the whole of the federal budget, and that's better, because as few of us as are out in the countryside now, we become more and more of a political target because we have the fewest votes to cast, even though we still do one of the most important things for this country, which is feed the nation and the world. So yes, every step down the road we go I think is that much better towards securing our resources. But there are a lot of things in play this year.

Mr. Hays: Some folks have suggested that in this next five-year bill that you would be writing with Mr. Peterson, with the Senate folks and whatnot, that you might actually have to squeeze in five years worth of cuts, or all the cuts that were embodied in the 2012 bill in that 2013 bill, even though you might have just four years of actual programs. How do you see this working out? Is this going to be just totally new, or how do you make this thing work?

Rep. Lucas: From my perspective, that's part of why, when this budget process sorts out over the next few months, that gives us a better lay of the land, a better perspective. Remember, the Senate hasn't passed a budget in three years. If they are actually forced to do one, which is what the language that's included in the present debt increase ceiling we'll vote on this week, if they're forced to do it, then we'll actually have spending guidelines in both the House and Senate. Because we've been passing

our budgets in the House. That will give us a blueprint to work from. That, along with how sequestration is addressed.

The bottom line is this, Ron. There's so many pieces in play, literally I don't know...sadly, I don't believe we'll know the lay of the land for several months. That's why you didn't hear Collin or myself today, in our business session, call for an immediate markup, because I think it would be foolish to start down the process now when we just don't know what the obstacles are, or what the opportunities may be yet.

Mr. Hays: So given that timeline, when is reasonable to expect markup then?

Rep. Lucas: It's kind of like beauty being in the eye of the beholder. I think Collin and I will know when it's time to go. But it can't be until there's some certainty sorted out through this process. And I would tell you that February, March, April, into May are going to be very...it's going to be a roller coaster ride up here on all the other spending issues and all the budget issues.

Mr. Hays: I take it, really, it doesn't do you a lot of good to mark up anything until you've got a little certainty about how many dollars you have.

Rep. Lucas: If we mark up a farm bill right now in the Ag Committee, and the final budget resolution is the actual spending blueprint that lays out what the appropriators are going to do, it literally makes dramatically different assumptions than we've done, then we'd have to go back and rewrite the farm bill. I only want to do this one time in the 113th Congress, and that one time I want to get it all the way to the President's desk.

Mr. Hays: So very possibly we're talking markup what, in the April, May, June time period then?

Rep. Lucas: It is certainly possible. But that's also why it's so important that we had the one-year extension of the farm bill, to carry the '08 Farm Bill through to the end of September in 2013. That's one thing I think producers can count on, and that we on the Ag Committee will fight to protect those resources that were committed to this now sixth year of a five-year farm bill.

Mr. Hays: The Obama Administration, of course, getting reorganized with the inauguration this week. We do know the indications are that U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is staying into the second term. Do you feel good about that?

Rep. Lucas: I think that's good. No need to train a new Secretary.

Mr. Hays: Obviously we've got some other players that have been important to rural America, Lisa Jackson, in particular, stepping down. A new EPA administrator. I take it that you'll get acquainted with him pretty quickly.

Rep. Lucas: Oh, absolutely. Probably one of the liveliest hearings of the last session of Congress was when we had Director Jackson before us for a number of hours. I can assure everyone, and whoever the ultimate new director is, he or she will spend a lot of quality time with the Ag Committee.

Mr. Hays: At this point, your overall assessment. You indicated we came so close. If you look back, what would you have tried to do differently last year that might have gotten you across the finish line, or was there any way to really do it?

Rep. Lucas: I don't think, Ron, in a presidential election year, in a year with so many new members, in a two-year period when you had a divided government, a liberal President, a conservative House, nobody really in control in the United States Senate, I don't think there was any way to do it differently than we did. We preserved the framework in our House passed bill. It gave options to all regions of the country that would have let everyone who produced pick the programs that were best for them, would have kept the safety net. We did the best we could in the most difficult of circumstances.

But I would also remind our listeners you still have that same liberal President, you still have a conservative House, you still have a Senate where no one has a functioning 60 seat majority. This is going to be tough again for the next two years. But that's what the voters of the nation as a whole decided to do, to make a few minor changes, but to keep the main pieces in place as they were for the previous two years. It just means that I'll continue to enjoy a little Maalox every now and then or...

Mr. Hays: One last question, sir. In regards to your home district, your home state, and of course neighbors over into Texas as well, and up into Kansas, even Nebraska, we are in definitely a real drought situation right now. The early indications are the tendencies are going to be out there to stay in the drought through at least maybe March, April, at the very least. Livestock folks obviously still out there without any sort of disaster assistance. Any way to work that in? Anything we can do to help some of these folks?

Rep. Lucas: That is one of my highest personal priorities, because as you know, Lynda Lucas and I live in the bullseye of the Southwest drought. We've started testing our water to see what the effects are of not having any rainfall to recharge those water tables. Lynda's fed some of the cruddiest garbage in the last two years that was supposedly hay.

I understand completely what my neighbors are going through, and I'm trying everything I can do to fill that hole that was created by the lack of funding in the fifth year of the old farm bill. This was before I was Chairman or Ranking Member. The livestock disaster money was only funded the first four years of the five-year farm bill. And I thought Senator Stabenow and I had come to an understanding to fix that problem in the extension of the farm bill. But when the final draft was put together in the United States Senate, lo and behold the drought money was not in it. And that's sad for Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arkansas, all of our neighbors in the region.

Mr. Hays: And at this point you're looking for a vehicle, I would assume.

Rep. Lucas: A place, a way and an opportunity. As I said, if you crack that window when it comes to the drought disaster issues, I'll drive a freight train through it if I have a chance.

Mr. Hays: The chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma Third District Congressman Frank Lucas. On the Oklahoma Farm Report, I'm Ron Hays.

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