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PFI Farmers Speak Up for Conservation, Beginning Farmers & Fairness in the Farm Bill – Urge Others to Do the Same

AMES, Iowa – Many farmers who want to diversify, innovate or implement conservation practices rely on key federal farm programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to help offset financial risks.

But as efforts intensify to draft the 2012 Farm Bill, lawmakers are considering big cuts to these and other provisions of the previous farm bill, as well as legislation aimed at assisting beginning farmers and ranchers and increasing access to local foods.

In an effort to shape the debate, three Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) farmer members – Jerry Peckumn (Green County), Dan Specht (Clayton County) and Betsy Dahl (Pocahontas County) – traveled to Washington D.C. in early March to meet Iowa’s congressional leaders and urge continued support for these programs.

“If you value conservation, beginning farmer or local foods programs, you need to tell your representatives,” Peckumn says. “They need to hear from people who support or have benefited from these programs, because the more people who voice support, the more likelihood they’ll get funded.”

With Iowa farmers set to start planting crops later this month, he says the sooner lawmakers are contacted, the better, before the frenzy of the growing season gets in full swing. “Calling or emailing – or even if people just write a letter and share their story – it would be a big help.”

The PFI farmers were among more than 30 independent family farmers and ranchers from 19 states who trekked to the nation’s capitol to advocate for conservation and beginning farmer funding, and fairness in the next farm bill.

The two-day event, which took place March 6-7, was sponsored by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocate for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources and rural communities.

Peckumn, who farms about 1,900 acres with his son in west-central Iowa near Jefferson, says conservation programs tend to get cut first and “at a higher percentage than other programs,” and that “organizations that put a priority on crop subsidies have a lot more money to spend hiring lobbyists.”

But Specht says that conservation programs “are one of the few ways farmers can get support for growing perennials and forages as part of a cropping system, whereas the commodity program only supports annual crops.”

For Betsy Dahl, the threat to beginning farmer funding is just as concerning as conservation cuts. As a starting farmer herself, she says she traveled to Washington D.C. to tell lawmakers how many beginning farmers depend on programs like EQIP and the beginning farmer and rancher provisions of the farm bill.

“I started with the beginning farmer program in 2010, and the EQIP program has been so helpful as I transition to organic,” says Dahl, who rents 180 acres in northwest Iowa, near Rolfe, and is in the process of transitioning half the land to organic production.

“Without those programs, I never would have gotten the bank loan. It’s a big thing to have someone behind you. With the farm bill up for re-authorization this year, I wanted to encourage our congressmen to keep funding those portions of it.”

The three farmers, who worked as a team during the trip, met directly with Sen. Tom Harkin and Reps. Tom Latham and Bruce Braley, as well as aides to Sen. Charles Grassley and Reps. Steve King and Leonard Boswell.

“They were very engaged and interested,” Peckumn says. “They didn’t make any commitments to us, but they listened to what we had to say.”

He and the other PFI farmers emphasize that the only way to gain politicians’ support for sustainable agriculture programs is for them to hear from enough people who care about EQIP, CSP or beginning farmer programs.

“Personalize these programs for [lawmakers] and tell them how what they’ve been doing does make a difference,” Peckumn says. “Thank them for their past support when it has been positive, and let them know how these issues affect you.”

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Founded in 1985, Practical Farmers of Iowa is an open, supportive and diverse organization of farmers and friends of farmers, advancing profitable, ecologically sound and community-enhancing approaches to agriculture through farmer-to-farmer networking, farmer-led investigation and information sharing. Farmers in our network produce corn, soybeans, beef cattle, hay, fruits and vegetables, and more. For additional information, call 515.232.5661 or visit www.practicalfarmers.org.

Contact:

Jerry Peckumn | Peckumn Farm | 515.370-0077 | jerrypeckumn@netins.net

Dan Specht | Prairie Quest Farm | 563.873.3873 | danspech@netel.net

Betsy Dahl | Five Pines Farm | 712.358.0028 | dahl.bets@gmail.com

Tamsyn Jones | Practical Farmers of Iowa | 515.232.5661 | tamsyn@practicalfarmers.org