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2018 Farm Bill: A Win for West Virginia

As Washington D.C. continues to tackle the task of passing a comprehensive 2018 Farm Bill, West Virginia farmers anxiously wait in anticipation while important programs hang in the balance. At first glance, one may think these programs minorly affect the Mountain State, but that cannot be further from the truth. Previous farm bills have netted West Virginia \$17 million for conservation efforts, \$1.9 million for Specialty Crop Block grants and 351,391 West Virginians rely on monthly assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In addition, \$120 billion for invasive species control and \$200 billion for management of preventative disease outbreak for the U.S. may be discontinued without a new bill. Clearly, if Washington cannot move beyond their differences, not only will West Virginia farmers lose but so will those who consume the food they produce.

The USDA defines the Specialty Crop Block Grants program as designed to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops within the United States. Specialty crops can be anything from maple syrup to lavender depending on the state. Essentially specialty means crops that are not widely grown. This matters in the Mountain State because we do not have the landscape to grow cheap, in-expensive, high yield crops. Instead, our state has shifted its focus toward high-end, specialty crops which yield a higher per pound gross profit. Therefore, our farmers maximize the limited real estate in West Virginia. Why this program matters because many farmers lack the capital needed to start up these types of operations. Without these grants, several successful agribusinesses would not exist today as used to cover large expenses that are barriers to the business or to test a product.

As West Virginia continues to lead the way with our Veterans to Warriors to Agriculture program, the United States Department of Agriculture has taken note. Within the 2018 Farm Bill, language exists that lays out veteran farmers as a priority.

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From our program, we have proven that agri-therapy can help our service men and women heal from the unseen wounds of war. At the same time, veterans can be a solution to a growing age gap and lack of new farmers in our country. As the USDA makes federal resources available for these types of programs, a state that has one of the highest per capita veteran populations will surely benefit from this new vision.

From the rolling hills to the vast forests, West Virginia is one of the most beautiful states in the nation. Although, invasive pests like the emerald ash borer insect or the multiflora rose bush have created problems for our farmers, state parks and forests. For example, federal resources are being matched with state funds to combat Japanese barberry in Cacapon State Park. Without these federal resources we have no way to slow these pests down and more pesticides will be necessary to combat the challenges that will ensue. If future generations are to enjoy West Virginia's natural beauty it will, invasive pest programs will be a part of that equation.

Sustainable agriculture is a popular buzz word these days, but not easily defined. In general, it means using our resources without exhausting them. In a state with an abundant access to fresh water, conservation and the efforts of the Natural Resources Conservation Service is vital to our state. From addressing food deserts schools to assisting our farmers with the implementation of conservation practices, the Farm Bill provides much needed resources and technical assistance. This is only possible through shared resource programs which are authorized through the bill. Without these programs, many of our schools would have not started farm-to-school programs and West Virginia would not be leading the effort to clean up the Chesapeake Bay watershed through an entirely voluntary approach.

We may only play a small role in our nation's agricultural might, but our 20,600 small, family farmers play a vital role in our state's economy and local communities. From the poultry industry in the Eastern Panhandle to the local farm stand providing their neighbors with fresh produce, our farmers grow \$800 million worth of food annually. These farmers rely heavily on the assistance authorized within the Farm Bill. If Congress fails to pass a new version, the consequences will affect consumers and farmers alike. What hangs in the balance is a safe, reliable food system. With a safe, reliable food system, you have many problems. Without one, you have one problem. Congress must act and they must do it soon.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

