

The 2018 Farm Bill – a farm and food bill for all

By Nick Levendofsky, RMFU Director of External Affairs

After many months of wrangling and back and forth negotiations, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, also known as the 2018 Farm Bill, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in both the U.S. House of Representatives (367-49) and Senate (87-13) during the last few weeks of 2018. President Trump signed the five-year \$867 billion legislation into law, surrounded by members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees and agriculture leaders on Thursday, December 20 at the White House.

The 2018 Farm Bill strengthens the diversity of American agriculture and supports the 16 million jobs at the root of America's farm and food economy. The impact of the Farm Bill reaches both on and off the farm by growing opportunities for farmers and ranchers, protecting land and water, strengthening small towns and rural communities, and supporting farm and ranch families working hard to make ends meet, especially during difficult economic times.

Rocky Mountain Farmers Union President Dale McCall gave the following statement upon President Trump signing the legislation into law: "Rocky Mountain Farmers Union is pleased with the overwhelming bipartisan Congressional action and the President's signature to approve this food and farm bill. Now farmers and ranchers can plan for the 2019 growing season with more certainty."

The 2018 Farm Bill strengthens the diversity of American agriculture by improving risk management options for commodity crop farmers and dramatically expands the coverage for dairy farmers. Building on the \$1.1 billion added to support dairy farmers in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, the bill provides improved coverage options at more affordable rates and refunds up to \$58 million in premiums paid under the former program. The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network is reauthorized at \$50 million over five years to assist state and nonprofits that establish helplines, suicide prevention training, and support groups, a provision strongly championed by Farmers Union.

The Farm Bill strengthens investments in agricultural research to support groundbreaking science that makes farmers more efficient, resilient, and sustainable, and invests \$185 million in public-private research through the innovative Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research, which will generate nearly \$4 billion in returns to the agricultural economy.

The legislation grows local food economies by securing \$500 million in permanent funding, more than doubling past investments for farmers markets, local food systems, and value-added production as a part of the new Local Agriculture Market Program.

The Farm Bill helps socially disadvantaged, veteran, and new and beginning farmers by combining initiatives to create \$435 million in permanent funding – tripling the current

investment – to educate the next generation of farmers and reach more minority farmers as a part of the new Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Program. It also helps military veterans with careers in agriculture by making risk management tools more affordable, improving access to land and capital, and prioritizing training for veterans.

It establishes historic new support for urban agriculture for the first time by creating a new office at USDA to advocate for urban farms. It also includes provisions to make it easier for urban farmers to start their farms, grow their businesses, and manage their risk.

It also grows the organic sector by providing \$395 million in permanent funding, which almost quadruples investment for organic research. The bill also offers cost-share assistance to help farmers transition into organics and strengthens trade enforcement.

There is support for specialty crop growers by continuing \$2.4 billion in permanent investments in research, pest management, and promotion of fruits and vegetables and providing \$125 million to conduct five years of critical citrus disease research.

Hemp is now legalized as an agricultural commodity, expanding the diversity of American agriculture and opening new market opportunities for farmers. Growth in the industry has been hampered by federal rules banning hemp growers from accessing water rights and bank loans, but now that it is legalized on the federal level, it will be easier for growers to cultivate the crop, much like any other commodity, plus qualify for benefits like crop insurance.

The bill adds safeguards livestock and poultry from disease outbreaks through strong investments in detection, response, and recovery, including the creation of a national vaccine bank. It also offers \$40 million in new scholarship opportunities at land grant universities for students attending historically black 1890's colleges and universities and authorizes scholarships for tribal students pursuing careers in agriculture.

The 2018 Farm Bill creates new tools to conserve and restore land, water, and forests by maintaining funding in the conservation title, which preserves unique working lands programs, and grows overall funding for conservation by leveraging private dollars.

More funds are invested in regional conservation partnerships by tripling mandatory funding, which will leverage nearly \$3 billion in new private investment in locally-led conservation over the next decade, while also streamlining requirements for farmers and local partners leading the projects.

It improves soil health and water quality by encouraging farmers to plant cover crops, providing incentives in conservation programs, driving climate-smart practices through a new soil health pilot to sequester carbon, and prioritizing the protection of drinking water by dedicating at least 10 percent of all conservation dollars to these projects.

The legislation adds 3 million new acres to the Conservation Reserve Program, expands Voluntary Public Access to allow more recreation on private lands, and designates 20,000 acres of national forest wilderness.

Under the energy title, the farm bill promotes clean energy and efficiency upgrades by including \$500 million to help rural small businesses and farmers use renewable energy and create energy installation jobs.

An important provision for the dry and arid West, the Farm Bill protects against wildfires by expanding bipartisan forest health tools and expediting wildfire prevention treatments across federal, state, and private ownership.

In New Mexico and Colorado, some farming communities will receive more assistance. Acequias, which are networks of communally-run irrigation ditches used in New Mexico and Colorado, will now be eligible for funding under EQIP, which means farmers can apply for funds that aid in technical assistance and infrastructure improvements to aid in water conservation, among other benefits.

The Farm Bill protects access to food assistance for families in need by avoiding harmful benefits cuts and eligibility changes that would take away food and create obstacles for working families. It also increases job training opportunities to help SNAP participants find and keep good-paying jobs the right way, while keeping out partisan changes to work requirements.

The legislation expands access to healthy foods by securing \$510 million in permanent funding – more than doubling investments for Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives that encourage SNAP participants to purchase fruits and vegetables. The bill also creates new produce prescription initiatives that make fruits and vegetables more accessible and affordable for families. It also establishes a “Farm to Food Bank” initiative to provide healthy, local foods to families in need while reducing food waste and strengthens oversight of state administration of SNAP to address integrity and technology issues and prevent participants from receiving benefits in multiple states, while safeguarding privacy. It also reduces burdensome paperwork for seniors to help them access food assistance.

The Farm Bill invests in the future of small towns and rural communities by expanding high-speed internet in rural communities by providing new grants that will target areas most in need and connect communities with modern internet access. The bill increases funding from \$25 million to \$350 million per year – nearly 15 times the previous amount.

Also, under the rural development title, it fights the opioid crisis by opening billions in financing opportunities for expanded telemedicine and community facility investments to provide critical treatment options for those who suffer from opioid addiction.

In a move championed by many in the agriculture world, the legislation reestablishes the position of Under Secretary of Rural Development at USDA to be a leading voice for small

towns and rural communities. It also improves rural drinking water by targeting infrastructure investments to ensure small town water systems are providing clean and reliable tap water.

It provides new opportunities for tribal communities to participate in research and extension projects and grow their economies through Promise Zone partnerships and grows rural small businesses through new investments that promote rural entrepreneurship, redevelop Main Streets, and provide essential skills training opportunities.

For Colorado's Western slope, the farm bill holds another small victory. Overlooked in the passage of this massive spending package is that Dolores County, located in southwestern Colorado, will be granted 4 acres of U.S. Forest Service land upon which to build a much-needed fire station. The new station will help the county, which is located near the San Juan National Forest, combat ever-more-frequent wildfires. The station is also expected to lower homeowner's insurance rates for residents.

Finally, the farm bill also expands export opportunities by securing an additional nearly \$500 million in permanent funding over the next decade to help farmers find new global markets for their goods. "We remain concerned this legislation did not do enough to address consolidation in the ag industry, as farmers and ranchers are facing far fewer choices when it comes to selling livestock and buying seed and fertilizer," McCall said. "The ongoing trade war continues to create uncertainty for families who make a living from the land, but a five-year food and farm bill does help to relieve some of that concern we see and hear from our members across Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico, he added."

The 2018 Farm Bill remains in place through 2023.