

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

2011: Ringing in a Good Year

By Tracy Taylor Grondine

As we ring in 2011, the song “Feeling Good,” by jazz singer and songwriter Nina Simone comes to mind. Like the song’s lyrics, it is a new dawn, a new day, and many in agriculture have good prospects for feeling good.

Economic indicators show that U.S. agriculture is poised for progress this year. While some producers are certainly facing individual challenges, due to weather or other factors, the numbers for the sector as a whole look strong. Last year, farmers saw a record \$92.5 billion net cash farm income and prices for many commodities soared. For example, cotton markets hit levels not seen since the Civil War.

While no one knows just what's going to happen this year, one has to think farmers should see reasonable returns, especially with net numbers as good as they were last year. And if the general economy and job creation improve, and if our nation can grow some new export opportunities, there might be even better revenues in store.

With the new 112th Congress, agriculture will also have new opportunities. With a likely congressional shift toward small business concerns, issues such as tax and regulatory reform could find traction. The new Congress should also be friendlier on the trade front and will hopefully pass the three stalled bilateral trade agreements with Korea, Colombia and Panama. There will likely also be more congressional activity having to do with adding some common sense to environmental regulations, which could bode well for agriculture in the new bipartisan Congress.

Also, for the first time ever, major organizations in the agriculture sector have joined together to work on a long-term effort to engage on food issues. Coupled with a new spirit of activism among individual farmers and ranchers, today’s agriculture may be more prepared than ever to communicate and interact with the companies who buy and the people who ultimately consume farm products. The broad agriculture community will present a much stronger force to combat naysayers, while collaborating on emerging food issues and concerns expressed by consumers.

Alas, with opportunities come challenges. The cynics will continue to try to disparage U.S. agriculture to consumers. And let’s not forget there’s a farm bill to be written by a new agriculture committee that will include new members unfamiliar with farm policy. And there is the new pressure that all Americans will feel related to righting our nation’s economic ship.

But, the positives outweigh the challenges, and farmers are worth their salt when it comes to rising up to meet obstacles. So, as we continue to ring in 2011, the tune that comes to mind is more jazz than blues. American agriculture is facing a year of noteworthy opportunity.

