

Farm Visits Might Enlighten Regulators

By John Hart

In June, when the House Agriculture Committee was considering climate change legislation, House Ag Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-Minn.) expressed the frustration shared by farmers and ranchers who are facing increased scrutiny from the Environmental Protection Agency when he said, "A lot of us on the committee do not want the EPA near our farms."

In September, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) brought EPA officials to his home state to visit a farm to gain a first-hand understanding of the marvel of American agriculture. Grassley, a farmer, made the invitation when he discovered that the agency official responsible for writing the proposed "indirect land use" provision covering U.S. ethanol production had never set foot on a farm.

Farmers and ranchers all across America would certainly welcome the opportunity to show regulatory officials their operations and share with them their commitment to producing crops in an environmentally friendly manner. People who live and work in rural America understand farmers have always been America's first and foremost environmentalists because of their commitment to the land, but this is not as apparent to someone who has never visited a farm or ranch.

The well known quotation from President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s still rings true today: "Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the corn field." America's farmers and ranchers are committed to the environment. Their livelihood depends on it. However, they are rightfully worried when government regulations go too far, threatening their operations and the opportunity to make a living.

There are currently a number of new regulatory burdens facing farmers and ranchers, and they are deeply concerned how the ever increasing regulatory costs and red tape will impact how they produce the fuel, food and fiber for America and the world.

One message farmers and ranchers would likely share during an on-farm visit: If regulations go too far, it will be too burdensome and expensive to comply. "If expenses are too high and the return is too low, I may be forced to go out of business," many would say.

One regulatory challenge that concerns farmers is the proposed changes by EPA to the Renewable Fuel Standard. A major worry is how EPA defines "agricultural land" in the proposed regulation, which could allow EPA to dictate how a farmer manages his or her land. The regulations could potentially prohibit farmers from converting pastureland or forestland to cropland to produce ethanol.

Livestock producers also are concerned about EPA's proposed rules to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act. The new regulations could require more than 90 percent of the livestock industry to obtain expensive permits, which could force many producers out of business.

Farm Bureau is also concerned that EPA will extend the reach of the Clean Water Act to directly target agricultural runoff from farms and ranches. A worry is that EPA will impose strict, burdensome and costly regulations that wind up telling farmers how to farm.

Sen. Grassley is asking for continued dialogue and cooperation from the EPA officials who visited Iowa farm country. It is possible to build something bigger on that initial visit? Seeing crop and livestock production first-hand and visiting personally with farm and ranch families would surely add a perspective that cannot be gained from behind a desk, a thousand miles away.