

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Jobs, jobs, jobs -- farms, farms, farms

By Lynne Finnerty

This year, Labor Day must have seemed a bittersweet celebration to many, with more than 15 million Americans on the unemployment rolls. Farmers and ranchers typically don't belong to labor unions. They can't go on strike, because that would mean hungry livestock and potential crop losses. But, here's one good reason to think of farmers around Labor Day: because agriculture is creating jobs at a time when our nation needs them—badly.

According to a joint USDA-Purdue University report, agriculture will generate an estimated 54,400 job openings each year for the next five years for college graduates with degrees in food, renewable energy and environmental specialties.

USDA on Aug. 31 predicted that our agricultural exports would set a new record this year at \$137 billion. That translates into more than 1 million American jobs, thanks to farmers' and ranchers' productivity and high demand for their products around the world. Next year's ag exports are expected to be equally strong.

If Congress approved the free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, we could add nearly \$2.5 billion more to the annual export tally, along with 22,500 more jobs. Every \$1 billion in agricultural exports supports 9,000 U.S. jobs, according to USDA, including transportation workers, food processors, packers and others.

Another report, released in August by the Battelle Institute, an independent research group, looked at agriculture's impact on the economy of the productive North-Central U.S. The report values the 12-state region's agriculture, forestry and value-added products system at \$125 billion, supporting 2.4 million jobs. The industry is poised to expand with new markets such as health, specialty crops, biofuels and other biobased products. That opportunity, however, depends on whether the U.S. makes adequate investments going forward in research and development.

Clearly, one way to create jobs is to have a strong agriculture. To make that happen, government should not hamstring farmers and ranchers with unnecessary regulations.

One of our strengths, obviously, is trade. To take advantage of this, we must continue to open foreign markets by negotiating and ratifying trade agreements that eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers.

And, believe it or not, allowing some non-citizens to work on U.S. farms plays a role in creating jobs for Americans. It's simply a fact that most Americans don't choose to make a career out of picking produce for two to three months out of every year. If farmers can't get the workers they need to harvest crops when they're ready, we will lose up to \$9 billion worth of agricultural

production per year. That's thousands of American jobs at stake. Comprehensive immigration reform should be part of our nation's job-creation plan.

The president, Congress and even political candidates will float lots of job-creation ideas over the next few months. They should take a look at what's working in America's heartland. Maybe the "jobs, jobs, jobs" mantra should become "farms, farms, farms."

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Lynne Finnerty is the editor of FBNews, the American Farm Bureau Federation's official newspaper.