CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 2419, FOOD, CONSERVATION, AND ENERGY ACT OF 2008

SPEECH OF

HON. RUSH D. HOLT

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

Mr. HOLT. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to commend the Conference Committee for its hard work on the Farm Bill, and for all of the improvements the final bill makes to existing nutrition, conservation, organic farming and other important programs. But I also must express my great disappointment that, in this year of record crop prices and soaring agricultural profits, we have let a precious opportunity go by to implement real reform to the extremely outdated commodity and price support programs in the bill.

The good news today fills a long list. According to the USDA, more than 11 percent of U.S. households are food-insecure. Today, we will approve more than $10 billion in funding for programs that provide American families with low cost, healthy food, including more than $1 billion for The Emergency Food Assistance Program and more than $1 billion for the USDA Snack Program. This bill also increases the minimum benefit for food stamp recipients and excludes retirement and education savings accounts from the assets to be considered in determining eligibility. And I am particularly pleased to see that it includes $5 million in funding annually for Community Food Projects grants, which funding I have previously urged Congress to maintain and which I engaged in a colloquy about with the gentlelady from Connecticut Ms. DELAURO in connection with the Fiscal Year 2008 Agriculture Appropriations Bill.

Similarly, the bill before us today will authorize almost $8 billion in conservation funding, including increasing funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by $3.4 billion, adding more than $1 billion in new funding for the Conservation Security Program, reestablishing the funding level for the Wetlands Reserve Program at $1.4 billion, and doubling funding for the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. And I was especially pleased to see that the House-passed provision that would have restricted USDA conservation programs from encouraging farmers to reduce their use of toxic pesticides in implementing integrated pest management programs was removed from the final bill, and I would like to thank the two dozen Members who joined me in sending a letter to the Conferees to request that the pesticides discrimination provision be removed.

The Farm Bill supports organic farmers by providing $22 million in funding for the USDA's organic certification cost share program, which defrays the costs that organic producers incur when seeking organic certification, provides $5 million in funding for organic marketing data, and authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to make payments of up to $20,000 per year, capped at $80,000 over six years, to a producer for conservation practices related to organic production or the transition to organic production. I have long supported facilitating the conversion to organic farming, and was delighted to have the support of this chamber when it voted in favor of my amendment to the Fiscal Year 2007 Agriculture Appropriations Bill to more than double the funding for the Organic Transitions Research program.

Therefore, although I will be voting in favor of this bill today, for all of the good that it will do, I note that there is still a substantial amount of good that it should have done, and will not. Although the commodity programs in the bill account for less than 13 percent of the Farm Bill funding, and represent a decrease of $60 billion compared to the last Farm Bill in 2002, we could have, and should have, done better.

First, although cuts to direct payments totaled $300 million, that represents a decrease of less than one percent to the $50 billion program. At the same time, subsidies for commodities such as soybeans and wheat have actually increased, despite the fact that prices for those commodities have also increased—by more than 100 percent and 200 percent, respectively, since 2002. The House-passed Farm Bill would have guaranteed $840 million in funding for the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program over five years, but in the final bill the program was cut to one tenth that amount—only $84 million. According to news reports, the amount of international food aid provided represents less than 1 percent of the Farm Bill's total cost, while at the same time the bill preserves the trade-distorting subsidy programs that make it virtually impossible for farmers in developing nations to compete.

And finally, I was troubled to learn that an 11th-hour change was inserted into the bill by the Conference Committee, despite it not having been debated or voted on in either Chamber, that would negate a U.S. Court of Appeals, DC Circuit ruling mandating disclosure of USDA data relevant to producer compliance with subsidy programs. In reaching its decision, the Court stated that ''there is a special need for public scrutiny of agency action that distributes extensive amounts of public funds in the form of subsidies and other financial benefits.'' No title of the Farm Bill has been more hotly debated than the commodity title, the original justifications for which have all but evaporated over time, and thus it troubles me that a provision that not only goes to the very heart of that matter but also appears to fly squarely in the face of a recent court ruling on the subject is being put before this body without debate or a specific vote on the merits. In fact, I intend to request a hearing on this last-minute language.

Therefore, this is one of those decisions that is not clear cut. On balance, I feel that the good news in the Farm Bill outweighs the bad, although not by much. I want to commend my colleague from Wisconsin Mr. KIND for his continuing leadership in working to develop a Farm Bill that more equitably reflects our modern day needs and economic realities, and I want him to know that I look forward to working with him and others in the future to address the shortcomings of this bill.

COMMEMORATING RANDY JEFFERS

HON. NICK LAMPSON

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 15, 2008

Mr. LAMPSON. Madam Speaker, I rise today to commemorate a true Texan, Randy Jeffers of Amarillo, Texas.

Mr. Jeffers is the 2008 chairman of the 90,000 strong members of the Texas Association of Realtors, TAR.

The tireless leader of TAR, Mr. Jeffers has worked day and night to ensure that the eternal American dream of homeownership will not be denied to any Texan, even in these challenging times for the real estate market.

As a former realtor and real estate course instructor, I fully recognize the sub-prime mortgage crisis facing our Nation. The real estate market affects every city, town, county, and State in our country, and as we have all seen, the wellbeing of the housing market is key to the overall strength of the U.S. economy.

This Congress and the Texas Association of Realtors have worked hard to address serious issues facing our housing market, and we are working together toward a balanced solution that turns the market around, stops falling prices, stops abuses, aids stable homeownership, and preserves our vibrant communities.

Mr. Jeffers was not able to come to Washington for his legislative conference this year, but I wanted to set the record straight that Mr. Jeffers passionately believes that real estate is a major driving force behind a strong American economy and he is working hard to champion his industry at every opportunity.

IN HONOR OF ARKANSAS' THIRD DISTRICT POLICE OFFICERS

HON. JOHN BOOZMAN

OF ARKANSAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 15, 2008

Mr. BOOZMAN. Madam Speaker, I rise in support of National Peace Officer Memorial Day and recognize the sacrifices and honorable service of law enforcement officers in Arkansas and throughout the country.

Their efforts were first honored with this special recognition in 1962 when President John F. Kennedy designated May 15th as Peace Officers Memorial Day and the week as National Police Week.

The law enforcement career path attracts many brave Americans. Today there are more than 900,000 sworn law enforcement officers serving, which is the highest number ever.

With the honor of the badge also comes the possibility of anguish. On average a law enforcement officer is killed in the line of duty in the United States every 53 hours. Earlier this year, the Third District of Arkansas experienced the loss of an Arkansas State Trooper who sacrificed his life while on duty.

My appreciation for these Americans who help protect us every day is immeasurable. We must recognize and honor the efforts of these brave men and women not only this week, but all year long.