

The Oklahoma Farm Report- Radio Oklahoma Network

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Ron Hays with House Ag Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R., Okla.)

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of an *Oklahoma Farm Report- Radio Oklahoma Network* interview.



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Mr. Hays: Talking today with the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma's Third District Congressman, Frank Lucas. Chairman Lucas, I know that from what was said in the national media here in the last 24 hours things haven't worked out maybe like you exactly had hoped for this week regarding trying to get the framework done on this 2013 Farm Bill.

Rep. Lucas: I'm afraid, Ron, it's proven to be even tougher than I expected. We still have, in a number of areas, some critical issues. I think most everyone's aware that we're at a stage where the principals are working hard to try and work out as many differences as possible so that then we can return to the full conference and finish out the process and do it in a timely fashion.

I personally have felt for some time that with the House and Senate calendar the way they are that today, Friday, basically was the point where you had to have an all-inclusive agreement if you were going to have floor action in the House before the 13th of December, when we go home for Christmas and don't return until January 7th, and still have time, then, for the Senate, conceivably, the following week, to address the conference committee report before they would go home on the 20th of December and come back on January 7th. But we're not quite there, Ron. And it's still people working in good faith, but it's still some difficult challenges.

For instance, the nutrition issue. When you've got a Senate number that's four billion in reform and you've got a House number that's \$39, almost \$40 billion in reform, it's just challenging getting there. And we're discussing every potential reform and how it nuances in.

Dairy remains another tough topic. When you have as many friends as I have on both sides of the perspective about should supply management be a part of a new

dairy program, and if you don't have supply management, can you restrain the cost in the rest of the proposal? Probably not. And if you can't do that, then what's it going to cost to maintain the present program that generally no one's satisfied with? Probably, using a ten-year number, about a billion dollars, a billion two, billion four maybe, somewhere in that range.

And then once again the commodity title. We have made significant progress on the commodity title. I think everyone understands that you have to have a commodity title that all commodity groups in all regions can be a part of. Is it a choice concept, is it all-inclusive? There's still lots of work being done by the economists and the attorneys on that.

And just as an example of an issue, even within that discussion, how do you determine what acres, whatever version of a commodity safety net, should be able to participate in the program? Do you use the historic record base? Do you use acres currently being planted? Planted is the phrase. Do you use some combination of that planted up to base? It makes a huge difference, Ron, in that one little area alone about which way you go.

Some folks are very fond of base because it would "decouple" your...you wouldn't be making your planning decision based on your safety net. But by the same token, you have the option...you have a circumstance where, in the right situation, you would be paying people, if you're using base, program benefits when you have major price failures, potentially people who don't have a crop in the ground. We got into a lot of trouble over direct payments on that very issue.

By the same token, if you use planted, you run afoul of the World Trade Organization, the WTO agreement that we're a part of, and subject to all those court challenges. If you use planted up to base then you are not quite decoupled and you're just not quite anything. So that's just an example of one of the many nuances that we're trying to work through.

But I would tell you, even though the members are not physically in D.C. today and this weekend, the loyal staff is working on instructions provided in our last meeting, and I'm spending more time on the phone than most people would believe, and I suspect all three of my colleagues are. And if it's humanly possible, I want this farm bill done, Ron. And I believe my three colleagues want it done. We're trying hard, but it's just—in a time with no money, with the political rancor we deal with in both chambers—not of the Ag Committee, House or Senate's making—it's just...just challenging.

Mr. Hays: We've heard some talk from...again, some of the reports from places like The Hill and Politico that if you're able to get one of these major pieces done, either the commodity title or nutrition done, that the other things might start falling into place. What really has to fall into place first to let everything else come together?

Rep. Lucas: From my perspective, we have to have a consensus on the commodity title. You know my background. I'm a product of rural Western Oklahoma. My parents and grandparents lived through the drought of the '30s, and the Depression of the '30s, and the drought of the '50s, and I myself survived and watched some of my neighbors who didn't survive the economic collapse—the only way to describe it—of the 1980s, so I believe that the farm part of the farm bill, which is still the commodity title, is the key element.

A couple of my friends are also very, very focused with intensity on the nutrition title, the human safety net, the consumer safety net, so to speak. But I can assure people that whatever reforms we adopt, we will not take the food out of the mouth of any person who qualifies, who asks for help. We're going to make sure those resources go to the right place.

And dairy is just an example of strong wills, differences of opinion. Ultimately something has to happen. The Senate is on record in favor of the supply management component, but the House floor voted not to have supply management. I've supported my ranking member, Mr. Peterson, who crafted the supply management language. But at some point there just has to be a show of hands on that one and we move forward.

But that said, from my personal perspective, I think the farm part of the farm bill—the thing that makes sure we have enough to eat and enough fiber in this country—still is what makes it a farm bill.

Mr. Hays: Congressman, we've talked before about maybe the “e” word, the extension possibilities. Do the chances of getting something done on the farm bill itself as we go past this date go down, and the chances of extension now start ramping up because of not being able to get it done in 2013?

Rep. Lucas: If you look at the comments of my colleagues, Mr. Peterson is opposed to an extension of any kind. He believes we just need to get our work done, that even with the beginning of the implementation of the '38 and '49 dairy provisions, in the worst case scenario, that it will take USDA weeks, perhaps a month plus, to be able to implement anything. He would tell you that we have some flexibility there.

Chairwoman Stabenow's made it clear that direct payments, as was the main safety net in the previous three farm bills, are unacceptable. She can't vote for any or support any extension of a farm bill that has that element. I'd say when the ranking member and certainly the Democrats' voice on agriculture in the U.S. House says no, and when the Senate chairwoman of the Agriculture Committee says only if the safety net portion is not there, otherwise no, I would say that's an indication, Ron, we're not going to get an extension, and we just have to get our work done. But that's fine. We need to get our work done.

Mr. Hays: Bottom line, Congressman, how do we...where does this thing go from here? Obviously you're doing staff-to-staff right now.

Rep. Lucas: We will be in communication with each other, the four principals, just as the staff are working together face-to-face in the nation's capital. We return in the U.S. House immediately after Thanksgiving. The Senate's out for that week. But Senator Stabenow and Senator Cochran have indicated to me that if we can make progress, we can have phone conversations, we can continue to move forward. And if we accomplish the understandings we need—call them breakthroughs if you want—that they'll stand ready to do their part. I believe that's the case.

I just...just have to move the ball a little farther down the court, and in so many areas, Ron. And I'm not in a position to give details on what's been discussed and the movements that have been made, but I will tell you everybody has come a great distance to try to get to a common point on these issues. Of that I am very pleased. We just started a long way apart on some issues. We've still got a little ways to go, but we have made progress.

Mr. Hays: Of the other titles of the farm bill, any other—you've really mentioned three: dairy, commodity title, safety net and nutrition—anything else that's really got some real heartburn ahead of it?

Rep. Lucas: No. The conservation is in good shape. I would describe trade as in good shape. Most everything else. Now, in the way the bill is structured, understand also there is a Title 12, a miscellaneous section, and there's everything from [COOL] to [GIPSA], to some of the California animal issues—there's just a variety of things in there. Some of those issues probably can only be addressed by a meeting of the full conference looking each other eye-to-eye, making very public decisions.

[End of recording.]