

Farm Bureau President: No More Mr. Nice Guy

Stallman Says Farmers And Ranchers Have Had Enough Of Those Who Want To Drag Agriculture Back To The Day Of 40 Acres And A Mule

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The farmers and ranchers I know are fiercely independent individuals who are willing to do whatever it takes to take care of their families, their animals and their land. But that doesn't mean they go looking for fights.

In fact, most of them face so many everyday challenges, like bone-chilling weather and tough economic conditions, that they would just like to stay out of the limelight and live in peace.

But there are a growing number of these battle-scarred men and women who have had enough of the attacks from the growing list of critics, environmental groups and even some of their own elected officials. They have had a long couple of years listening to the Michael Pollans of the world, reading incredibly biased coverage in Time magazine and watching pseudo-documentaries like Food Inc.

You can almost hear them say, "Enough Already!" They are mad as heck and they don't want to take it any more.

American Farm Bureau President Bob Stallman captured that sentiment in his powerful opening speech during the organization's 91st annual convention in Seattle this week. Stallman, who was elected as the national organization's 11th president in 2000, delivered the most hard-hitting speech I have ever heard him give, and for many in the audience, it was his best.

"A line must be drawn between our polite and respectful engagement with consumers and how we must aggressively respond to extremists who want to drag agriculture back to the day of 40 acres and a mule," said Stallman. "The time has come to face our opponents with a new attitude. The days of their elitist power grabs are over."

Filling a void

It's been a long time since we have had farm leaders inspire audiences with messages like Mary Elizabeth Lease used to deliver in the late 1800's, when she reportedly told farmers to "raise less corn and more hell".

Some farmers still remember when the charismatic Oren Lee Staley fired up members of the National Farmers Organization in the early 1960's to fight food processors for higher prices, telling them: "American farmers have retreated as far as they can. We do not intend to retreat any further."

Clearly, there's been a void in the number of top leaders, both from the public and private sector, who are willing to use the bully pulpit to stand up for American agriculture in more recent years. Stallman indicated that he is ready to take off the gloves and lead the fight. His audience loved it.

It's not that the Farm Bureau is unwilling to engage divergent interests. As Stallman stood

before his convention attendees, an estimated 4,500 farmers and ranchers from all across America, he pointed out:

"As I scan this hall, I see farmers who embrace all the tools of modern agriculture. I see people who choose modern organic production...I see folks who plant conventional seed and those who use biotechnology. I see families who raise livestock in sheltered, climate-controlled conditions. I see feedlot operators. But also among our ranks here in Seattle, I see farm and ranch families who produce grass-fed beef, free-range pork and cage-free eggs."

Despite the diversity, farmer's missions of feeding the nation and the world, caring for the environment and respecting neighbors' rights has not changed from when AFBF was founded in 1919, Stallman added.

"But the ways in which farmers and ranchers carry out their mission have changed, which is not understood or respected by critics of modern agriculture.

"We must not let the activists and self-appointed – and self promoting – food experts drive a wedge between us," he emphasized.

Sustainability?

Noting that there is a lot of talk about "sustainability," the Texas native described the term as "the most overused and ill defined word in the policy arena today."

"The first sustainability for agriculture has to be economic sustainability," noted Stallman. "Without that, farmers and ranchers will not be on the land to provide all of the rest of the 'sustainables' that some are demanding."

Stallman defended his organization's opposition to cap and trade climate change legislation and pointed out how the bills as currently proposed would threaten our ability to increase food production.

According to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization, the world will have to produce 70 percent more food in the next 40 years to feed an extra 2.3 billion people who will share our planet, he explained.

"At the very time that we need to increase our food production, climate change legislation threatens to slash our ability to do so. The exact level of land that will shift to trees will depend on the price of carbon – a number nobody knows at this point – but USDA suggests we could easily be talking about 59 million acres.

"That's like setting aside every acre of land used for crop and food production in California, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

"The United States would be less able to provide the world a viable hunger safety net. Food prices here at home would shoot up. The result? Less food security and our climate would not improve, not even by one degree.

"I don't know about you, but that is not the kind of American agriculture I want to leave behind for future generations," Stallman said. Δ

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