

WISCONSIN FARMERS UNION

For immediate release: May 8, 2008

For More Information Contact:

Adrienne Joseph or Sue Beitlich

715-723-5561/715-379-2712 or 608-769-7625

wfuadriennej@charterinternet.com or wfusueb@charter.net

Wisconsin Farmers Union calls on Congress to pass farm bill

Chippewa Falls, Wis. (May 8, 2008) – Wisconsin Farmers Union is pleased that the U.S. House-Senate Farm Bill Conference Committee announced negotiators reached an agreement on the farm bill on Thursday, May 8, 2008. WFU is asking for statewide support in calling upon Congress to pass the farm bill.

The farm bill includes many of WFU's top priorities and will benefit all Americans, with more than 73 percent of spending going toward nutrition programs, and additional spending going toward conservation programs, renewable energy and rural development.

"The phrase 'farm bill' has become a misnomer in many instances. Hundreds of billions of dollars spent in this bill go toward nutrition programs benefiting all Americans," said WFU President Sue Beitlich. "Many do not realize a small fraction, approximately 16 percent of overall spending, goes directly to farm programs."

While that fraction of the bill did not include all of WFU's top priorities, Wisconsin family farmers will benefit from many of the bill's provisions. The Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program, which helps to pay farmers when market prices drop based on a certain formula, has been restored to its original level and has been extended for five years.

"High input costs, such as the price of fuel, feed and fertilizer, have affected many farmers in our state, and we continue to see costs rising. We are pleased this program has been restored to its original level," Beitlich said.

In addition, the MILC program includes an input cost adjustment factor and increases the current cap on the amount of milk covered by the program. Further details of the bill are expected to be released over the next few days.

The farm bill also includes a permanent disaster assistance program, a National Farmers Union initiative, which is crucial for farmers experiencing unpredictable weather conditions.

"Last summer alone, Wisconsin experienced a cycle of extreme flooding and drought, causing the government to declare 14 counties in Wisconsin a federal disaster area one month and Gov. Jim Doyle to declare a statewide drought emergency in another. With weather conditions like these, it is difficult for small family farms to continue to thrive without assistance," Beitlich said. "We are proud of our representatives who fought for this program to be included in the bill."

WFU also praised the inclusion of mandatory country of origin labeling (COOL) and interstate shipment of state-inspected meat in the farm bill.

However, WFU was disappointed that direct subsidy payments were not eliminated from the farm bill.

“More than enough talk has gone on about direct subsidy payments in the past few months,” said Beitlich. “The majority of farm payments included in the bill only kick in when market prices are low (counter-cyclical); direct subsidy payments give agriculture a black eye in the media while failing to provide meaningful support to farmers.”

Other improvements in this legislation included lowering the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) payments limitations for commodity payments from \$2.5 million to \$750,000 for farmers, and instituting an AGI limit for non-farmers participating in conservation programs.

“Although there are compromises in any piece of legislation,” Beitlich added, “WFU believes that direct payments should have been eliminated, with those funds redirected to commodity, conservation or renewable fuel programs and that payment limits for conservation payments be consistent with commodity payment limitations,” she added.

The 2002 Farm Bill expired last September. The U.S. House and Senate have passed three extensions since March. Further delays of a new farm bill are unacceptable.

“We are pleased with the bipartisan effort to pass a good farm bill,” Beitlich said. “Now it is time for this bill to be signed into law and begin providing support for farmers who put food on our table.”

Despite bipartisan agreement over the farm bill, President Bush threatens to veto this bill. Wisconsin Farmers Union is calling on members of Congress to pass the farm bill with a two-thirds majority making the bill veto-proof.