

Women in Agriculture

Remarks by
Terry Gilbert, **Chairperson**
American Farm Bureau Women's **Committee**

I really appreciate this opportunity to come to this beautiful country on behalf of American agriculture and the women who serve this great industry. I want to take a few minutes to give you an idea of some issues facing American agriculture and how women are contributing both on and off the farm.

Our agriculture industry has changed dramatically over the past 10 to 20 years and so has the role of our farm women. It doesn't seem that long ago that the work of our farm women with organizations and other rural groups was pretty much confined to support functions - in other words, cooking and serving the food for events, decorating the meeting hall and so on.

Now this is not to say that we no longer are willing to do those things. We are and we do. However, American farm women also are stepping forward in many leadership capacities, in administration, public affairs, public relations and education, just to name a few areas. In fact, our nation's Secretary of Agriculture is a woman from California with a long and successful record of service to farmers and agribusinesses.

Now more than ever, our farm women are being called upon to educate the public about farm issues and farm life and to represent agriculture in the public policy arena. As the business of producing food and fiber has changed, so have the issues facing rural America. Our consumers are showing concern about food safety, the use of farm chemicals, the treatment of farm animals and farming's effect on the environment. In many instances, rural women are accepting the responsibility for communicating our message to young people and the non-farm public. I'm pleased that Farm Bureau has taken a leading role in doing this.

As chair of our national women's committee, I spend much of my time speaking about agriculture's importance to our society. Farm Bureau is very active in promoting the industry. And we do that in many ways.

I'm especially proud of our work in agriculture education. Like many nations, the United States is becoming more and more urbanized, meaning that fewer people have any knowledge of agriculture and rural life. A great irony in our agriculture

industry is that as our farmers have used technology to become more productive and more efficient, it has meant that America does not need as many farmers as it once had. Because of our incredible productivity, we produce far more food than we can consume. As a result, about 30 percent of our farm production is exported.

Because of this supply-and-demand situation, many American farms have gone out of business or consolidated with others. In the past 60 years, the number of farms in the United States has declined from 6 million to about 2 million. Our rural population has declined, and farmers now represent a much smaller percentage of our citizens.

In my state - Kentucky - the population is now about evenly divided between people who live in the cities and people who live in rural areas. We've lost about 20,000 farms in the past 15 years, many of them to urban development. Because we represent such a small fraction of our society, American farm families are doing more than ever before to ensure that the non-farm public understands our problems and supports our efforts to resolve them. We realize that if we don't tell our story, no one else is going to do it for us.

Most of our young generation - including many who live in rural areas - know little or nothing about agriculture. But Farm Bureau and other farm organizations are heavily involved in promoting agriculture education in our schools. Farm Bureau has an Agriculture in the Classroom program that is reaching thousands of youngsters while helping teachers to utilize agriculture information to teach math, science, geography, economics and other subjects.

In Kentucky and some other states, we operate a lending library to provide teachers with classroom materials with agricultural themes. We share creative ideas and information to strengthen programs to help achieve the common objective of increasing agricultural literacy.

We have an Adopt-A-Classroom program that links city youth with farm families. Once we've matched a farm with a classroom, the two communicate regularly and the students have an opportunity to learn first-hand about how farms operate. This program also includes farm visits. This is a great way to give students some first-hand knowledge of what farming is all about.

We also have several types of programs to train teachers in agricultural education techniques. In my state, we have a very popular meeting each year where dozens of teachers are trained in what we call "Ag Literacy." This is a two-day meeting where we provide materials and instructional ideas - and the teachers receive continuing education credit for participating. We've found that many of these teachers previously had never been exposed to farm people.

Our rural women also are very involved in promotional activities. We have several special events that we celebrate to bring recognition to farmers. These are events like National Agriculture Week and National Farm-City Week. We recognize Ag Week during the week that begins our spring planting season. This helps us recognize the contributions that agriculture makes to our society. We celebrate this in many different ways from state to state. Most events are targeted to attracting attention from our news media.

National Farm-City Week is commemorated each year during the week of our Thanksgiving celebration. This is conducted to help bridge the gap in understanding between our urban and rural populations. We especially try to involve young people in these activities.

We have another event called "Food Check-Out Day" which we use to inform Americans about how they enjoy the most affordable food supply in the world. On average, Americans only spend about 10 percent of their disposable income on food, which is the lowest rate in the world. I believe that here in Spain, that figure is about 18 percent. We draw attention to food check out day by comparing how our citizens spend far less money on food than they do on taxes.

We're also involved in many community events like local festivals and fairs. We'll hand out literature, sell food, exhibit farm equipment or animals - whatever it takes to attract attention and build understanding of agriculture. Farm Bureau likes to emphasize community involvement. Many of our women are active members of other community business and civic organizations.

I am especially encouraged by the progress Farm Bureau women have made in determining and supporting our public policy issues. More of our women are serving as directors of their local Farm Bureaus and are involved in the policy debates. Farm Bureau's primary purpose has always been to improve the quality of life in rural communities. We do this in many ways, but most importantly through working with our political leaders to ensure public policy and programs that benefit farm families. Our farm women not only are indirectly involved with this process, but a growing number are serving in political leadership positions on the local and state levels.

We still have a long way to go in this area, but we are moving in the right direction.

One of our biggest concerns is finding ways to attract young farm women. In many cases, the young farm wife has an off-farm job and is juggling that with raising children and assisting with the farm operation. We're doing more to try to shape our programs and activities to fit in with these busy schedules, but it's not easy to find young women who have the time for volunteer leadership work. Especially since so many are involved with school and church groups.

Before I close, I want to tell you about what a wonderful organization Farm Bureau is. We have over 4 million members throughout our country, and it is truly like belonging to one big family. We have differences of opinion on issues and solutions to problems, but we share the same common commitment to improving our overall quality of life. First and foremost, we pull together to ensure that farmers can make a decent living and have an opportunity to pass the farm along to the next generation if they so desire. But we also strive for many other things that contribute to the quality of life. We work for better schools, for fair taxation, for effective and efficient government, for quality health care, for better roads, for a clean environment . . . and so on.

We touch the lives of many people and are involved in many aspects of our society - not just farm production. And although we have fewer farmers than ever before, we have been able to maintain a strong voice. In fact, we are regarded as one of the most influential organizations in America, right up there with senior citizens, labor unions and other major business groups.

I've found that if you are a Farm Bureau member, you have family all throughout our nation. It's truly a fraternity and has enabled me to have many wonderful friends from all types of farms and all parts of our nation.

Being with you here today is another wonderful experience that I will cherish. Thank you.