



## **National Bison Association**

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### **Weekly Update from the National Bison Association**

A news and update service *exclusively* for members of the National Bison Association.

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***February 17, 2017***

## **IBC Registration Open- Agenda Available**

Online registration for the fifth-ever International Bison Conference is now available on-line at <https://bisoncentral.com/international-bison-conference/>.

Participation in the International Conference this year will be limited only by the lodging and meeting facilities at the Big Sky Resort in Montana's beautiful Gallatin valley.

"Big Sky is a beautiful location for this gathering of the international bison community, so it is critical that attendees register early to make sure that they are a part of the action, and to take advantage of early-bird, which goes up on May 16th," said Jim Matheson, NBA assistant director.

An overview of the IBC agenda, and related activities, is also available on-line at [www.ibc2017.com](http://www.ibc2017.com). Registration is \$325 for the first person and \$250 for additional registrants for members of NBA, Canadian Bison Association and Montana Bison Association.

Sponsorships for the conference are still open. To find out more about the sponsorship opportunities, contact NBA Executive Director Dave Carter at [david@bisoncentral.com](mailto:david@bisoncentral.com).

## **Free Bison Advantage Workshop - Feb. 18**

Come and learn the ABC's of raising America's National Mammal – The American Bison (AKA Buffalo). A free Bison Advantage Workshop will be held at the Beaver Creek Buffalo Ranch in Sherman County, North of Goodland, KS beginning at 8 am MDT on Saturday, 18 February.

This workshop will be presented by the National Bison Association and Ken Klemm, a local buffalo rancher with 29 years' experience from calf to table.

At noon, a bison chili lunch will be provided for the morning workshop attendees (donations accepted). Following lunch, ranch tours will be available for workshop participants. More ranch tours will be available for the public starting at 2:30 pm. Dress weather appropriate as the tours

are conducted in open vehicles. Space is limited – first come, first served.

To wrap up this educational and fun day, a panel discussion titled: “The Bison Advantage - Bison and Modern Day Agriculture” will be held at the Goodland High Plains Museum in conjunction with the highly-acclaimed traveling “Bison” exhibit (on loan and sponsored by the National Buffalo Foundation, the Kauffman Museum, the National Buffalo Museum and the Klemm Buffalo Ranch). Come to the museum at 7 pm MDT to view the exhibit, learn more about this great animal and the business opportunities available.

Contact Ken Klemm for directions and more information at [ken@thebuffaloguys.com](mailto:ken@thebuffaloguys.com) or 785-899-5804

## **On-Line Survey Seeks Input on Farmers’ Market, Agritourism Promotional Needs**

Financial resources provided by the USDA’s Farmers’ Market Promotion Program are equipping the National Bison Association to develop new marketing resources to help farmers’ market participants, direct marketers, and agritourism enterprises to boost their business.

As a first step, the NBA is soliciting information regarding the types of information, materials and format that will help members best connect with their customers. We’ve developed a brief on-line survey to gather input from our members on those priorities. Please click on <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TVBKNMS> to take this 17-question survey.

Dave Carter, NBA executive director, explained, “The USDA last fall awarded the National Bison Association with a significant grant to bolster the marketing outreach for smaller produces involved in farmers’ markets, on-farm sales, agritourism and other enterprises. We have a great working group that will be helping us develop these resources. But, as a first step, we need to know what resources are most needed by our members.”

Please complete the survey by Friday, February 24th.

## **Another Record High for Wholesale Bison Prices**

As the conventional agricultural economy continues to struggle, the bison marketplace is demonstrating strong resiliency, with wholesale prices for young bull carcasses and most bison meat cuts reaching new heights

The latest USDA wholesale bison price report issued by the USDA AMS Market News Service, pegs the value of young full carcasses at \$485.96/cwt., which is \$3.82/cwt. higher than the previous month, and \$54.76/cwt. higher than the previous year. At \$452.06/cwt, heifer carcasses were \$23.36/cwt. lower than in December, but still \$36.34/cwt higher than in January 2016. Old bulls and cows were slightly lower than in December, but still stronger than in January 2016.

The slaughter of heifers was surprisingly high in January, accounting for 59 percent of the young bison processed under federal inspection. That compares with an average of heifers accounting for 51 percent of the slaughter in January between 2009 and 2015.

The USDA wholesale bison market report for January can be found at:  
[https://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/nw\\_ls526.txt](https://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/nw_ls526.txt)

The NBA five-year Price Tracking Report is available in the members' section at  
[www.bisoncentral.com](http://www.bisoncentral.com).

## **Local Bison Producer Builds Soil Through Regenerative Grazing**

*(From KOTA –ABC)*

777 Bison Ranch near Hermosa has developed healthy and diverse range land by using holistic management practices for over 30 years.

"One of our biggest goals is how do we preserve the integrity of buffalo and bring back diversity in the grasses so we've been using the buffalo as a tool to help regenerate the prairie," said 777 Bison Ranch Owner Mimi Hillenbrand.

The ranch has 1800 bison that are run on rotational grazing through 25 different pastures during the growing and non-growing seasons.

"We use their hoof action to help break up the soil, to create litter and also to help water infiltration get back into the soil," said Hillenbrand.

The rotational program starts in the spring.

Grass is growing fast, we try to move the buffalo fast. When the grass slows down in the middle of the summer, then we move the animals slower."

As a result, prairie land at the ranch has increased its plant diversity by 100's of grasses and is constantly building top soil.

"The more plants you have out here, the more sun you collect, and the more plant material you can make which in turn more forage for the bison to eat."

Read more. <http://www.kotatv.com/content/news/Local-bison-producer--413553423.html>

## **Bison Meat Health Benefits**

*(From the Health Street Journal)*

*Editor's note: I wanted to thank Kayla Fioravanti from Red Bison Cedar who wrote the majority of this article on the health benefits of bison meat.*

### **Bison meat**

Did you know that bison meat is America's original red meat?

It has been rediscovered due to the amazing nutritional value of bison meat.

Both Mayo Clinic and American Heart Association recommends bison as a heart-healthy red meat.

Readers' Digest Magazine listed bison as one of the five foods women should eat due to its high iron content.

### **Bison meat and growth hormones**

According to Kayla Fioravanti, a second-generation bison business owner, "It is illegal to give growth hormones to bison. You can see it as one of the codes of ethics of the NBA, "Abide by all laws of any jurisdiction within which they carry on activities as bison producers. This includes no use of growth hormones in bison."

### **Interesting fact**

Did you know that bison are the only mammal known to never get cancer?

### **Bison meat and antibiotics**

According to Kayla Fioravanti from Red Bison Cedar, "We belong to the National Bison Association and one of the tenants of membership is a commitment to not use antibiotics in bison on a subtherapeutic (non-therapeutic) basis. It is not illegal to give bison antibiotics, but we don't believe in giving to them unnecessarily. The practice of giving antibiotics in an animals feed is highly unlikely in a grass-fed and grass-finished diet since they eat the grass below their feet, but it is always worth asking the rancher directly. We don't mind assuring our customers of our practices."

Read more. <http://www.healthstreetjournal.com/bison-meat-health-benefits/>

## **Roberts: First farm bill hearing to be held in Kansas**

*(From Kansas Agland)*

The nation's first farm bill hearing will take place in Kansas.

Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, the chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, and ranking member Debbie Stabenow, D-Michigan announced the hearing on the 2018 farm bill Wednesday.

According to a press release from the committee, the hearing will be Feb. 23 at McCain Auditorium on the Kansas State University campus in Manhattan.

"It's time to get to work on another Farm Bill, and we're heading straight to the heartland to talk directly to producers," said Roberts in the release.

"Our producers have had time to employ the programs in the current Farm Bill, and they have a lot to say," he said. "We need clear direction on what is working and what is not working in farm country, and we will be listening to see what needs to be adjusted."

Roberts added he remains committed to putting farmers and ranchers first.

"As we begin to have discussions about the next Farm Bill, we will need input from farmers and families all across the country," said Stabenow. "I am looking forward to this first field hearing in Chairman Roberts' home state to hear directly from producers and others who care about rural America so we can craft a bill that continues to strengthen American agriculture as well as small towns and rural communities."

The hearing will feature testimony from a variety of agricultural producers, who will be announced soon.

A time for the "Hearing in the Heartland," also will be announced at a later date.

The hearing will be webcast live on [ag.senate.gov](http://ag.senate.gov).

## **Tribes, Wildlife Advocates Spar with Ag Groups Over Bison Bill**

*(From the Bozeman Chronicle)*

Tribal groups and wildlife advocates faced off with agriculture groups Thursday as the fight over transporting bison to a Native American reservation moved to the Montana Legislature.

Rep. Willis Curdy, D-Missoula, presented [House Bill 419](#) to the House Agriculture Committee on Thursday. The bill would strike a requirement that wild bison transported through Montana be deemed free of the disease brucellosis — which can cause animals to miscarry — before they can be transported anywhere.

That portion of law has been the center of a political struggle between state livestock officials and Yellowstone National Park over moving bison to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation for a quarantine operation, through which the animals could be certified disease-free. Curdy said his bill was aimed at resolving that conflict and allowing quarantine to happen at Fort Peck.

“House Bill 419 is designed to address one technical point in Montana law,” Curdy said.

The bill garnered support from wildlife advocates and tribal officials, who said the law hasn’t been applied consistently and was a discriminatory roadblock to sending bison to Native American tribes. Dennis Jorgensen, with the World Wildlife Fund, said that the law would fix a redundancy and that the law as it is now is akin to requiring a sick person be deemed healthy before they can see a doctor.

“In order to be sent to tribes to be quarantined, Yellowstone bison must first be quarantined,” Jorgensen said. “It’s clearly redundant.”

But agriculture groups lined up in opposition, citing worries about brucellosis transmission and the potential for the cattle industry to suffer if wild bison are sent to new areas in the state.

“The law that we have in place and the way that the Department of Livestock is currently managing the species is working,” said Nicole Rolf of the Montana Farm Bureau Federation, adding that the changes the bill proposes “would potentially put our industry in jeopardy.”

About 5,500 bison live in Yellowstone now, and a 17-year-old management plan fueled by fears of brucellosis calls for a population of about 3,000. Wildlife managers want to kill about 1,300 bison this year to reduce the herd’s number, which they do through hunting and slaughter.

In 2016, Yellowstone National Park proposed establishing a quarantine program at Fort Peck, both as a way to augment other bison herds and to reduce the number shipped to slaughter each year. But state livestock officials blocked the move citing the portion of state law that requires wild bison be certified brucellosis-free before they can be transported and released somewhere else.

The Fort Peck Tribes have built a quarantine facility that meets federal standards. It can hold up to 500 animals, and they want to use it to augment other bison herds around the country. But representatives of the tribe said Thursday that they need this bill to become law for that to begin.

Full story: [http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/wildlife/tribes-wildlife-advocates-spar-with-ag-groups-over-bison-bill/article\\_56b7cd28-993a-5a7a-991d-85016172d050.html](http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/wildlife/tribes-wildlife-advocates-spar-with-ag-groups-over-bison-bill/article_56b7cd28-993a-5a7a-991d-85016172d050.html)

## **Bison's Return to National Park 'Rights A Wrong'**

*(From The Western Producer)*

Bison returned to Banff National Park Feb. 1 after a 140-year absence.

Sixteen wild Plains bison were released into the park's Panther Valley, where they will be held in a 45-acre pasture and monitored by Parks Canada for 16 months to acclimatize.

Sometime around June 2018, they will be released into the full 1,200 sq. mile reintroduction zone along the eastern slopes of the Rockies within the park, where they will interact with other native species.

Bison were once the dominant grazers in the park and beyond, according to Parks Canada. "The restoration of bison to Banff will return a keystone species to the landscape, foster cultural reconnection, inspire discovery, and provide stewardship and learning opportunities," it said.

"In the long-term, by re-establishing a new wild population within its historical range in Banff National Park, this will be a key contribution to national and international bison conservation efforts."

The 16 bison released last week came from Elk Island National Park. Most of them are pregnant two-year-old animals and all were health tested and quarantined for three weeks before release. The return of bison to the park was welcomed by Bison Belong, a group that has encouraged their reintroduction for years.

"It rights the historical wrong of the elimination of this magnificent animal," said Harvey Locke of Bison Belong, in a news release.

"The return of bison to the landscape represents hope for nature and is an important step toward reconciliation with indigenous people."

Read more. <http://www.producer.com/2017/02/bisons-return-to-national-park-rights-a-wrong/>

## **Minneopa State Park Bison Herd Set for Expansion**

A yearling bull introduced into Minneopa State Park's wild bison herd has begun assimilating into the herd, and park officials hope the animal will help perpetuate the herd once he reaches sexual maturity.

Bison herds are made up of cows, calves and yearlings, said Minneopa area naturalist Scott Kudelka. Bulls are generally solitary unless they have a harem of females to guard.

The Minneopa herd's lead female initially tried to drive the yearling away, and the yearling has also been sparring with another young bull in the herd who will eventually be removed. According to Kudelka, these are good signs for the bull.

“These are all normal behaviors for the animals and we’re seeing the yearling fit in really well,” Kudelka said.

The present-day plains bison population is descended from fewer than 100 original animals, According to the [American Genetic Association’s Journal of Heredity](#). Many conservation herds are hybrid bison, bred with cattle in the 19th and 20th century to help bolster the numbers of the animals and prevent inbreeding in the small herds.

“At one time, there were 30-60 million wild bison in North America,” Kudelka said. “By 1889 there were 440 wild bison left, in private herds and parks like Yellowstone.”

**Read more.** <http://greatlakesecho.org/2017/02/16/minneopa-state-park-bison-herd-set-for-expansion/>

## **Bison, Cars Endangered by Deep Snow in Wyoming's Grand Teton**

*(From Fox News)*

Unusually deep snow in Grand Teton National Park has made life dangerous for bison lumbering on the park's only plowed highway and for motorists traveling the route, prompting park workers to escort the big animals to safer areas and urge drivers to slow down, park officials said Tuesday.

The problem is that bison, which can weigh up to 2,000 pounds, prefer to use the road rather than struggle through the 3 feet of snow that accumulated recently.

Vehicles have killed at least one and possibly two bison in the park so far, this year after cars and trucks killed five in all of 2016. On Saturday, a truck killed a bison on U.S. Highway 26-89-191. A bison hit in January has yet to be found.

Hoping to prevent a run of collisions that can be just as dangerous for motorists, park officials in trucks guided small groups of bison along several miles of the highway twice over the last four days.

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Read more. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/02/14/bison-cars-endangered-by-deep-snow-in-wyomings-grand-teton.html>

## **This Pet Bison Watches Action Flicks and Eats at the Table**

*(From the New York Post)*

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam — as long as you have the number of a really good carpet cleaner.

A Texas couple has turned their ranch house into a little slice of the great plains by taking in a pet bison and giving it free run of the place. The 11-year-old beast, named Wild Thing, even has its own bedroom.

“He’s a house pet,” owner Ronnie Bridges, 60, [told InsideEdition.com](http://www.insideedition.com). “Outside, he plays really rough but inside the house, he’s really a gentleman.”

Bridges and his wife Sherron, 44, took in the 2,500-pound bison when it was just a calf, after they sold their herd of 52 bison in 2004 to pay for medical bills.

“It was my idea to bring Wild Thing in the house when he was a young calf,” Sherron said, according to the Caters News Agency. “I told Ronnie, ‘He only lives once so we might as well do something different with him.’”

Full story: <http://nypost.com/2017/02/13/this-pet-bison-watches-action-flicks-and-eats-at-the-table/>

## **New Protein Discovery May Lead to New, Natural Antibiotics**

*(From AgriLife Today)*

Scientists have discovered a new protein that likely will advance the search for new natural antibiotics, according to a study by Texas A&M AgriLife Research published Feb. 13 in the journal *Nature Microbiology*.

The discovery has to do with how proteins regulate gene expression. Scientists know a great deal about proteins that control how certain gene clusters get their start - referred to as transcription initiation - but much less is known about transcription elongation where proteins keep gene expression going through "roadblocks" in the DNA sequence, according to Dr. Paul Straight, AgriLife Research biochemist in College Station and the paper's co-author.

"The upshot is that our discovery expands the basic knowledge of processive antitermination - a type of genetic regulation - and demonstrates that the mechanism is more widespread among bacteria than previously thought," Straight said. "Antibiotic production by bacteria involves complex chemistry that is often encoded in a collection or 'cluster' of many genes. To express these giant gene clusters requires special regulation mechanisms. Understanding these mechanisms could help a great deal in the search for new antibiotics produced by bacteria."

Full text:

<http://today.agrilife.org/2017/02/13/new-protein-discovery-may-lead-new-natural-antibiotics/>

## **Temple Grandin Named to The National Women's Hall of Fame**

*(From Colorado State News)*

Temple Grandin, Colorado State University professor of animal sciences and world-renowned autism spokesperson, has been named to the National Women's Hall of Fame. Grandin is one of only 10 women to receive the prestigious honor this year.

'Achievements have changed the course of American history'

"We are pleased to add 10 American women to the ranks of inductees whose leadership and achievements have changed the course of American history," said Betty M. Bayer, the Hall's co-president and professor of women's studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

A professor of animal sciences for more than 20 years, Grandin has made enormous contributions to the livestock industry. Her autism allows her to think in pictures, and that ability has made her a visionary in her field. Her insights into animal behavior shaped innovative approaches to livestock handling, including methods and designs for humane slaughter that have become the industry standard.

Full text:

<http://source.colostate.edu/temple-grandin-named-national-womens-hall-fame/>

## **Colo. state vet sees decrease in Bovine Trichomoniasis cases**

*(From TheFencePost.com)*

The Colorado Department of Agriculture's State Veterinarian's Office has seen a steady decrease in Bovine Trichomoniasis cases in the last three years. Bovine Trichomoniasis, commonly referred to as "trich," is an infectious sexually transmitted disease in cattle, resulting in abortions and infertility.

"Ranchers who co-mingle their herds have a state requirement to test their bulls for trichomoniasis because there is a higher risk of transferring the disease. Testing and monitoring herds for 'trich' is the best method of controlling this infection. Cattle owners should talk to their veterinarian to determine the best management practices for their herd," said State Veterinarian Keith Roehr.

"Trich" is a costly, yet preventable, infection that can affect dairy and beef cattle. If bulls become infected, the percentage of open cows can increase from 5 to 30 percent. Trich is a venereal disease of cattle caused by *Trichomonas foetus* (T. Foetus). The T. foetus infection causes fertility problems, such as early embryonic death or abortion of the calf, and is asymptomatic in bulls.

Full text:

<http://www.thefencepost.com/news/colo-state-vet-sees-decrease-in-bovine-trichomoniasis-cases/>

## **Bill Seeks to Protect Livestock in Utah**

*(From The Associated Press )*

A Utah lawmaker wants to send people to jail for harassing farm animals with drones, all-terrain vehicles and even dogs under a proposal that is unique in the U.S. but has gained an unlikely opponent.

Republican Rep. Scott Chew, who also is a rancher, said that he introduced the bill last month because farmers incur significant costs and hardships when livestock are injured.

The measure is the first of its kind in the country, said Lora Dunn, an attorney for the Animal Legal Defense Fund, a national animal rights organization.

The Humane Society of the United States said the plan was redundant and may discourage members of the public from getting close enough to livestock to expose farmers' mistreatment of their animals. Utah already has a law against injuring or killing farm animals.

Full text: <http://tinyurl.com/zqu6j4g>

## **Georgia Conservation Innovation Grants**

*(From USDA NRCS)*

NRCS is requesting proposals for the FY2017 Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program in Georgia, designed to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies. For fiscal year 2017, up to \$500,000 is available for the Georgia State CIG competition.

Individual grants will not exceed \$75,000 from NRCS. Funds will be awarded through a statewide competitive grants process. Proposals are requested from eligible groups such as government or non-government organizations, individuals, or others, for competitive consideration of grant awards for projects between one and three years in duration.

Proposals are due by February 28, 2017.

Read more. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ga/programs/financial/cig/>

## **Food Industry Proposes Simpler, Standardized Product Date Labels**

*(From Agri-Pulse)*

In an effort to simplify food purchases and reduce [food waste](#), grocery manufacturers and retailers have launched an industry-wide effort to adopt standard wording on packaging about the quality and safety of products.

The new initiative streamlines the myriad date labels on consumer product packaging down to just two standard phrases. “BEST If Used By” describes product quality, where the product may not taste or perform as expected but is safe to use or consume.

“USE By” applies to the few products that are highly perishable and/or have a food safety concern over time; these products should be consumed by the date listed on the package – and disposed of after that date.

Currently, more than 10 different date labels on packages – such as Sell By, Use By, Expires On, Best Before, Better if Used By or Best By – can result in confused consumers discarding a safe or usable product after the date on the package, according to the [Food Marketing Institute \(FMI\)](#) and the [Grocery Manufacturers Association \(GMA\)](#).

These two major trade associations for retailers and consumer product manufacturers are leading the voluntary effort. They’ve encouraged their members to immediately begin phasing in the common wording with widespread adoption urged by the summer of 2018.

“Eliminating confusion for consumers by using common product-date wording is a win-win because it means more products will be used instead of thrown away in error,” said Jack Jeffers, vice president of quality at Dean Foods, which led GMA’s work on this issue. “It’s much better that these products stay in the kitchen – and out of landfills.”

The food industry has stepped up and made considerable progress in reducing food waste. GMA and FMI joined with the National Restaurant Association in 2011 to create the Food Waste Reduction Alliance, which is helping companies find ways to cut food waste. GMA member companies recycled 97 percent of food waste from operations and donated 156 million pounds of food to food banks in 2015. FMI members reported 1.5 billion pounds in diverted food waste, including 390 million pounds of food donated to food banks.

The food industry announcement follows extensive work by the House Agriculture Committee during the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress to explore the issue of food waste and potential solutions. “Last Congress, the committee examined the issue of food waste through a full committee hearing, roundtable discussion, ‘food waste fair’, and extensive meetings with both consumer and industry stakeholders,” said House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway. “Virtually every discussion included concerns regarding waste generated as a result of consumer confusion about the various date labels on foods and what they mean. I am pleased to see the grocery manufacturing and retail industries tackling this issue head on. Not every issue warrants a legislative fix, and I think this industry-led, voluntary approach to standardizing date labels is a prime example.”

Congresswoman ChelliePingree, D-Maine, also applauded the new industry standards, but plans to introduce legislation addressing food waste.

“Per capita, food waste in the U.S. costs a family of four \$1,500 every year. Much of that food is perfectly good to eat, but gets thrown out anyway because of confusing, inconsistent, and sometimes misleading food-date labels,” said Pingree. She plans to reintroduce legislation to set a national uniform system for date labeling which she says is “the only way to fully resolve inconsistent state date labeling laws across the country.”

Last May, Pingree, along with Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., introduced the first legislation to standardize date labels. The measure does not mandate that manufacturers put date labels

on food, but provides standardized language if they decide to do so. Part of the legislation would also make sure states cannot restrict the donation of food that has passed its quality date, i Pingree plans to reintroduce that legislation, the Food Date Labeling Act, in the coming weeks. She also plans to reintroduce another bill, the Food Recovery Act, which takes comprehensive steps at the federal level to address the problem of food waste.

## **House Hearing Kicks Off 2018 Farm Bill Effort**

*(From Agri-Pulse)*

The next farm bill needs to provide an adequate safety net for farmers, whose income has fallen because of lower commodity prices, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway said at a [hearing](#) today kicking off the 2018 farm bill process.

Conaway said Congress should “take to heart” the advice of former committee chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., who said during the last farm bill debate “that a safety net is supposed to be there to help farmers in bad times – not in good times.”

“Every hole in the current safety net that now requires mending is the result of our not fully heeding that wisdom,” Conaway said. “Had we followed his counsel more closely, I doubt that there would be anywhere near the current urgency in writing a new farm bill.”

Lucas chimed in near the end of the hearing to reiterate his advice – “We don’t do farm bills for the good times but we do farm bills to address the bad times” – and predicted that his colleagues would find out how difficult their task is over the next two years.

Referring to the tortuous path taken during the last farm bill negotiations, Lucas said, “It is a miracle that we have this farm bill.”

“It’s not perfect,” he acknowledged. “No legislative product is ever perfect.” But “at least ... we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. We have something to work from.”

There should be plenty to work on. Conaway noted that farmers and ranchers have seen their net income drop 45 percent over the last three years, “the largest three-year drop since the start of the Great Depression.”

And economists who testified today ticked off a series of indicators showing that farmers are under increasing financial pressure – persistent low commodity prices, increasing debt-to-asset ratios, and declining land values and cash rents. But they also said that there are positive signs: Despite their decline, land values are still relatively strong and are not declining precipitously; debt-to-asset ratios are historically low; energy prices and interest rates remain low; and some commodities should see an uptick this year.

“With interest rates still low and farmland values declining relatively slowly, farm debt presents a lower risk to the sector than in the 1980s,” USDA Chief Economist Robert Johansson said.

“Current data suggests interest payments on current debt relative to net farm income is about 20 percent; whereas in 1985 it exceeded 60 percent.”

Nathan Kauffman, an economist and Omaha Branch Executive for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, said that “a farm crisis on the scale of the 1980s still does not appear imminent, as farm loan delinquency rates remain low, and credit availability has generally remained strong.” But he added a caveat: “If farm income remains persistently low, if farmland values continue to

decline, and if debt continues to rise, it is possible that key indicators of financial stress, such as debt-to-asset ratios, could rise to levels similar to the 1980s over a longer time horizon.”

The upshot is that this time around, economic conditions may force farmers to take a more active role in writing the farm bill. Last time around, times were good and [they largely stayed out of the debate](#).