

Chairman Mike Conaway Talks Farm Bill and More- 2018 Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Convention in Ft. Worth

March 24, 2018

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of a speech delivered by House Ag Committee Chairman Mike Conaway (R., Tex.) at the 2018 Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Convention in Ft. Worth on Saturday. The audio was posted at *The Oklahoma Farm Report Online* (<https://goo.gl/1mcGG4>)

Conaway: Farm bill. We're going to get that baby done. We've had a hundred plus, 110 hearings. We did 21 hearings on SNAP alone. Three years of good, hard work looking at what was working, what was not working, how was the '14 Farm Bill being implemented, and we're ready to go.

Collin Peterson and I worked well together. He's a good guy. He's a friend. And on everything except SNAP I thought we had it going the right direction. He's got all of his priorities in the bill, I've got mine in the bill, the non-SNAP target. And I thought we were working well together on SNAP. To get what we've done, as I said, we did 21 hearings over the three years.

Focused on policy. Previous attempts to reform SNAP had started with how much money we're going to cut out of it, particularly in 2013, when we had that aborted attempt at a farm bill there, the idea was just cut money, cut spending, but go find a policy that does that. Well, nothing could be more wrongheaded than that. So instead we've spent the last three years looking at policy.

And this is a really important policy because it's an important program to folks that are on it and it's an important program for taxpayers. And so we wanted to focus on policy. Not one time did I talk about cutting money out of SNAP. Not one time did I talk about kicking people off of SNAP. It was all about the policy.

I also said I don't know if I can afford that policy, but let's at least craft what the policy ought to look like. We'll then score it, see how much it costs. If we can afford it, fantastic. If we cannot afford it, then at least we know what the goal is and we'll try to move whatever it is we need to do to get toward that goal.

So we've done that, and come up with a good policy. I'll describe it to you here in a second. And sent it over to CBO. They sent it back. And we can afford it. Now, my mandate this time with the '18 Farm Bill was I can't spend any new money and I won't have to cut spending, so I can hold what I've got based on what the '14 Farm Bill did. It's a hundred billion less than

we thought. But that new number that CBO's got out there, whatever I change, I've got to stay within those numbers.

And that's what I've done with SNAP. I'm not taking any money out of SNAP. Whatever dollars are changed as a result of policy changes we plow back into SNAP and to the programs that I'm about to talk to you. On the other side, all the other programs, I'm deficit neutral there as well.

Now the bad news is we did six listening sessions across the country, and over 300 plus good citizens came up and talked to us about what they were trying to accomplish, and not one person asked for less money. They all wanted more money. Well, I don't have any more money, and so that section, the non-SNAP portion, I've got to live within our means on that piece of it, and I've got to find money for a foot and mouth disease vaccine bank that we don't have. That's a new program.

I've got demands in other areas that we're going to have to make priority choices on. And so this honeymoon period that I've experienced over the last three years as being chairman of House Ag is about to come to a screeching halt, because I'm about to disappoint some folks, and I'm about to have to say no to some things that are really important to individuals out there. But that's the only way I can get this thing done, and I'm going to get this thing done.

Folks in production agriculture, folks living under this disaster we've had from an economic standpoint in the last five years, a 50% drop in net farm income, the worst since the Depression, you deserve sound agricultural policy that you know what it's going to be over the next five years. There is no reason for us not to get this done by September 30th. There's no reason for extensions. There's no reason for the drama associated with not getting our work done.

Yes, we have hard decisions to make. Yes, there are going to be difficult things to come to grips with. But we're not going to be any smarter in October of this year than we are right now. And so for my money we need to get this done and get it done on time.

With respect to the SNAP program, that was described by my colleagues across the aisle as "extreme partisan policies." Keep that in mind. So Peterson and I were working. He had the language on SNAP since February the 7th. He's had the concepts that we were going to pursue since last October. And I assumed he was working with his members to socialize that within them. He didn't. He simply told them that Conaway's just doing what he did in '13 and we don't need to be a part of it.

I spent most of March thinking we were negotiating in good faith, and then last week or the week before last his team sent him a letter saying—and I've never seen this happen before—but every Democrat on the House Ag

Committee sent him a letter saying we don't trust you to negotiate nutrition, so get off the field. And then last week he sent out a press release that said the House Democrats on the Agriculture Committee are no longer interested in working on the farm bill. They went to the sideline.

Well, okay. I'm disappointed. Hurt, quite frankly, that they weren't willing to be a part of the solution. But that does not mean we're stopping. We're going to go forward. I have to find 218 votes on the floor. Could be Republican votes, could be Democrat votes, it doesn't matter to me. I don't care. I got to find 217 other votes for my farm bill. The SNAP is the big issue.

Those extreme partisan policies are this. We have a bridge or a gap between the unemployed in this country, and the skill set they currently have or don't have, and all those new jobs that are going to be out there, and the skills that they need to get those jobs. We need a bridge between those. Well, we think SNAP can act as a good bridge.

And so what we're going to do is we're going to plow a significant, unheard of amount of money into education training that will be based at the state. States will do it. It will be mandated that anybody 18 to retirement age who is not pregnant, who is not mentally or physically disabled and is not a caretaker for a child under six, that person can participate in the program if they want to. If they want to participate, then they'll need to work for 20 hours a week, or they need to train, or they need to do an apprenticeship, or they need to do subsidized work, whatever it is that's out there. We've got an array or list of things that are out there.

If you want to help yourself, we're going to help you. We're going to give you that hand up. We're going to get you on that ladder to success that gets you off these programs and having you take care of your family the old fashioned way. If you choose not to, if you say well, you know, that food stamp thing is just not worth it, don't want to work, great. We're Americans. That's your choice. So not one person gets kicked off the program. Anybody who wants help can get it. States are going to have the funding to make that happen.

That's the extreme partisan politics that the Democrats are worried about. That's why they abandoned rural America. And that's why, when you look at a map of red and blue, why all of our country, our flyover country is red and the rest of it is blue, because they don't understand the value of work. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* said most farm families out there are working two and three jobs to keep it together [article here, <https://goo.gl/w6AkPc>]. Those folks are not afraid of work. Everyone in this room is not afraid of work. There is dignity in work.

And there's no reason why we can't ask people to help themselves. And if they want to help themselves, then by golly, we're there. I had two ladies

come to me, one of them was in a listening session, and said—stood up, incredibly brave young woman—said I'm the reason we need SNAP to stay in place. I was 18 years old, single mother of a three-year-old—think of that—and I didn't like my future. I wanted to go to school. So a combination of SNAP and the other programs, and hard work, and really good effort to make that happen, I got an undergraduate degree and became a teacher. Went through for a while and I've gotten a master's degree, and now my daughter and I are on our own, and our definition of public assistance is what we do for other people.

That's the success story. That's what SNAP ought to get to. That's what we ought to measure. That's what we ought to demand. And that's what we're going to do. And so I've got to find 217 friends to make that happen moving forward. But it's the right thing to do. If you want help, we're going to give it to you. If you don't, [you don't have to].

Now, we're going to modernize the asset test. We're going to modernize all those kind of things to try to bring this into the 21st century. Those asset levels haven't been changed since 1977. We're going to raise the minimum benefit. We're going to do some other good things as well. But at its core it says this: if you want to help yourself, then we stand ready to help you.

And it couldn't come at a better time. This economy is going to get better and better. There are going to be new jobs out there, new opportunities. And that's what this SNAP program ought to be about. Yep, we're going to feed you in the meantime, but we want to help you get a job and start moving up that ladder of success.

Those are the extreme partisan politics, partisan policies that drove my Democrat friends to the sideline. Shame on them. But if they want to come back and help, if they want to pitch back in, if they see the wisdom of what we're trying to get done, come on back in and get this thing helped. Because like I said, I've got to have 218 votes. I don't care which jersey they wear, I just need yeses out of 217 other people to make this forward.

We're going to get that done next month. Floor time gets really jammed up in May and June and July. My counterpart in the Senate, Pat Roberts, will have a bill that he will do, that they will have to make happen. And then we'll go to conference and we'll start struggling with the differences between the Senate bill and the House bill the old fashioned way and come to grips with it. But I'm going to put a House bill on the table and out to the American people that I can defend. And I'm quite frankly excited about having that conversation over the SNAP issues.

Now, we did some other stuff. The budget act that we did three or four weeks ago, a month ago now or further than that made some good changes to some of the things that are important to you. We lifted the caps on insurance of livestock programs. That's going to revitalize that entire crop

insurance program for livestock producers out there. We reset the disaster program on livestock and moved that, we backdated that to any fires that happened after January 1st of '17, so we did some good stuff already that made it—and we fixed cotton, and we fixed dairy. That got done previously, and that made my path on this farm bill just a little bit less difficult, so to speak.

Trade. We've got a President who is a master negotiator, and he is in negotiating mode right now. And we're scared. I'm scared that we'll screw this up. All I keep saying to the President or to his—I don't talk to the President while this Russian thing was going on, but through the communication system like this—is Mr. President, you're the trader. You're responsible. Don't screw it up.

Trade is vastly important to production agriculture. We grow and produce way too much stuff that we can't eat and consume in the United States. We've got to be able to sell it someplace else in the world. So the trade policies, the way he's negotiating has real world effects. When he went after China the sorghum price dropped about a buck a bushel right off the bat. Soybean prices are down as a result of that. So there are real world consequences to however you're negotiating that, Mr. President. We trust you to get it right, but don't screw it up.

And so it never occurred to me that he could have gotten the president or the premier of North Korea to the table the way he's done it. He negotiated that and made it work. I took a team to Canada last October to try to convince our Canadian counterparts that our guy's serious about NAFTA and you guys need to come to the table. You need to be serious about NAFTA as well. He's gotten them to the table by what he's been doing.

So the trade issues are unsettled right now. A lot insecurity in that regard. But this President's really good at it, and I think he's going to make this...get it to happen. But the quicker the better for all of us.

On the farm bill, we've got some trade promotion authorities and spending that we're trying to restore into the farm bill. It doesn't have a baseline, so it's part of that money I've got to come up without an existing piece, but we're going to work to make that happen as well. As an example, Europe spends more on promoting wine than America spends on every other product we produce in terms of trade promotion, so it's an important program, and we're going to try to get that done as well.

A lot of other issues out there, but the main thing is I'm going to need your help. When we get all the stuff lined out and ready to go, I need everybody in production agriculture, everybody in rural America to say to whoever you need to tell it to, get this job done because we need this policy. We need the assurance of the next five years to understand what it is.

There's a certain elegance in knowing what the program's going to be. Right, wrong, or indifferent, it's better to know what it's going to be for the next five years. You can then make those plans, your bankers can make the plans that need to be made, and you can react to what's going on in a much better basis. No reason for this thing to slide, none. Other than just the inability to force people to make decisions that are going to have to get made. They're going to be hard. They're going to make some folks upset. But we've got to move this thing forward, and I'm committing to making that happen.

Let me take that hat off and just share with you something from my heart that I've been talking to folks for a long time about, and that's a direct threat to the democracy that we currently enjoy. John Adams wrote that only a moral people can self-govern, that religious and moral people can self-govern, but anybody else can't, because they don't have the core values. They don't have the values on which that can happen.

As I look around this country, I'm deeply concerned that we're losing that moral authority, we're losing that moral high ground that allows us to voluntarily comply with laws that perhaps we don't like but we know that we're going to have to, that allows us to treat people with respect back and forth and to prosper this country. We've been at it for 230 years under the current Constitution. A pretty terrific document, put together by some really smart guys. And I think divinely motivated, divinely guided individuals.

I take an oath. I took it when I joined the Army. I took it every two years when you guys give me—John, and Dudley, and Richard and others in District 11 give me the high honor of representing you. Part of that oath says I will defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

We have good men and women in uniform right this second putting their lives on the line to back up that particular oath, standing between us and some really bad guys. I'm going to leave you with a challenge to see what you're willing to put on the line to protect and defend that Constitution, where are you willing to step up and do something about what's going on in this country right now.

The only way we can turn the tide on this moral decay that we're in is to live a code. I live the Judeo-Christian model. Jesus Christ is my personal savior. And I try to live this, [do] this every day. Whew. Some days I'm better at it than others. But you have to live a code as well. You have to live a code as well. You and your family, all of us have to engage. II Chronicles 7:14 says people who are called by my name, if they will turn from their wicked ways and pray, and seek my face, I will hear them from heaven, I'll forgive their sins and I'll heal their lands.

That's where we are, ladies and gentlemen. We are at a precipice of a disaster. There are things going on in this country today that God cannot

bless. We have killed 60 million babies in 45 years. The family unit has deteriorated. There are more children being born today out of wedlock than being born in wedlock and all the wreck that that has. There is filth coming out of Hollywood that God cannot abide.

All these things and many others are going on in this country, and it's now time for you and me, me especially, to stand up to those forces, to look people in the eye and say those...that...that...whatever it is you're trying to do, God can't bless that, this country can't long abide that, the Christian values on which this nation was based and sustained for 230 years say that's wrong. Now, it comes at a risk. [*Applause.*] Thank you.

There's the challenge. Are we up to it? When we stand in front of folks and say...risk being ridiculed, risk being ostracized, risk being made fun of, risk being [tossed], risk being criticized, all those kinds of things, not the risks that the Christians in other parts of the world, particularly where radical Islam is afoot, at the risk of having our heads cut off, but we're going to have to risk something to save this country.

When Benjamin Franklin finished up the Constitution in Philadelphia 1787, 230 years ago, he came out of that—oldest guy there, which makes me feel good about old guys getting to do stuff—see, that's not bad. [*Laughter.*] A woman asked him, said good doctor, what have you given us, a monarchy or a republic? And he looked at her and said, a republic, madam, if you can keep it. Think about that. That's not a one and done.

Today we, you and I, are the keepers of a republic that we've grown up in, we've taken for granted, but we love and adore. What will you be willing to risk to keep that republic? Because we are the keepers. God bless each one of you. God bless Texas. And God bless the United States of America. [*Applause.*]

[*End of recording.*]