

Humboldt Farmer Testifies at U.S. Senate Ag Committee Hearing

(KTNC) - A Richardson County farmer testified at a U.S. Senate Ag Committee hearing this past week. Ben Steffen of Humboldt spoke to the committee Thursday on the impacts of the drought and wildfire on agriculture, and about some of the risk management strategies that have helped them survive.

Steffen operates a 135 cow dairy, and grows crops on 1900 acres in southeast Nebraska. He says the drought has impacted crop yields and has hit the livestock industry very hard. (play audio :33 oc: “across the board.”)

Ranchers in western Nebraska were hit particularly hard by wildfires. Nearly 400,000 acres – equal to half the state of Rhode Island – burned in 2012. (play audio :23 oc: “those impacts.”)

The federal government released Conservation Reserve Program acres last year for emergency haying and grazing. That’s something Steffen appreciated, but he says efforts should be made to allow those acres to be released earlier if drought conditions persist. (play audio :29 oc: “moved up.”)

In terms of risk management, Steffen told the committee the Federal Crop Insurance Program covered a portion of the losses he sustained last year and should be maintained. (play audio :28 oc: “in our communities.”)

Until last year, Steffen said his farming operation had paid more in crop insurance premiums than they received in indemnity payments over the previous 11 years. He urged the committee to consider changes to allow individual policies to be customized to more closely fit individual farms.

Steffen also encouraged the committee to continue funding research that’s done at the nation’s Land Grant Universities. He says research from those institutions has changed the way they feed and care for dairy cows, allowing them to produce more milk and have healthier animals. He says the research also helps them find and utilize better management techniques in crop production. (play audio :21 oc: “dry spell.”)

As to the outlook for the coming year, Steffen says a NOAA climatologist testified that there would likely be no big shift in the weather trends from last year.

Steffen closed his testimony by telling Senators that securing the nation’s food supply for the future is not just responsible public policy, but a moral imperative considering the growing world population.