



Staying True to Rural Upbringing A Visit With House Ag Chairman Lucas

To say the current Chairman of the House Ag

Committee has strong agricultural roots is an understatement. As he puts it, “My family’s been in western Oklahoma since 1900 and we’ve been farmers that whole time.” In fact, the farm on which he and his wife Linda live has been in the family since 1912. His father was a grade A dairyman and raised beef cattle, giving the future lawmaker his first introduction to cutting alfalfa. Currently, they are “cow/calf people” and raise wheat.

As for his interest in politics, Congressman Lucas came by it honestly. Having been involved in 4H and FFA, student government seemed like a logical progression. At Oklahoma State University he was elected to the Student Senate and was chairman of the College Republicans.

“When I went home after college to farm, my neighbors persuaded me to run for the state legislature. When my predecessor, Congressman English retired, my neighbors said, ‘Hey Frank, 85% of the problems aren’t in the state, all the challenges come from DC. You need to go to where the real problem is.’ I’ve always been interested in the political process, I’ve enjoyed trying to make a difference and that progression led me from one step to the other.”

Farm Bill. While he has been involved with farm bill negotiations in the past, this will be the first time he goes into it as Committee Chairman. When asked about his priorities Lucas said, “Starting in 1996 we made some dramatic changes away from the old supply/control Federal management programs to farmers making their own decisions and we added to that in 2002. Back in those

days we had money and actually increased conservation spending by \$17 billion on a variety of programs from EQIP on down that were important for rural America. My goal is to preserve the good things from the last three Farm Bills and do it within the money available to us.” Things worth preserving:

- **Flexibility.** “Producers being able to plant crops they want and make decisions about what’s best for their farms or ranches. In almost every segment of agriculture that is an important element.”
- **Direct Payments.** “I think the most WTO compliant part of the Farm Bill, which doesn’t apply to all commodity groups but the traditional ones, is the direct payment program. We need to remember no matter what we come up with here, we are part of WTO. So I’ll try to build on the market compliant portions.”

“My biggest challenge is trying to make sure my colleagues know rural America is still out there and farmers and ranchers still raise their food and fiber.”

“Crop insurance is popular in many parts of the country, research programs, rural development and all that. But it’s going to be a tighter budget than any Farm Bill since I’ve been here. As a committee working in a bipartisan way, we’re going to have to craft the best possible Farm Bill with whatever money is available.”

Biotechnology. With the delays in the final determination regarding the regulatory status for Roundup Ready® alfalfa, farmers are concerned about the increasing difficulty in approving new biotechnology traits. Lucas sees the benefits of biotechnology and recognizes the importance for sound science to guide USDA decisions.

“We need to remember something like 75 different products have been approved under current rules so alfalfa was not the first event. You might get that impression reading popular media, but 75 other products had already been approved. I just want USDA and the courts to follow the existing Federal law.”

Lucas added, “There’s a mechanism for scientific review, to determine the safety of products. When a product meets scientific standards set by Federal law, the appropriate use needs to be permitted. I’ve told the Secretary if lawsuit issues are inhibiting the process then let’s discuss how to make the process more efficient while maintaining high standards of peer-reviewed science. If we’re asking agribusiness to invest tremendous sums of money to develop these crops, we need to say, ‘If you play by the rules and you develop a good product, you should be able to market it, and producers and consumers should be able to benefit from it.’”

Cellulosic Ethanol. Many within the alfalfa and forage industry have an interest in using forage crops in the production of cellulosic ethanol. Congressman Lucas is on board as well saying, “We need to increase all sources of American energy and cellulosic is a part of that equation.”

Climate Change. When asked if climate change will be debated this session, Lucas was quick to answer, “No.” Adding, “The focus, I think, will be reducing the ongoing annual deficit and slowing down the growth rate, stopping hopefully, the growth of the national debt, and putting us on a solid economic footing.”

As one of the few legislators actively engaged in farming, he has a daunting task. “Many people are so many generations removed from the farm or rural America that they forget where their food and fiber comes from.”