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Lucas Pushes for Ag Answers

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By Ashley Stockamp

When will agriculture producers see the so-called benefits of the Waxman-Markey bill? Congressman Frank Lucas asked this of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack in a letter about the new cap-and-trade bill. Lucas refers to the bill as a cap-and-tax, saying it will only hurt farmers by taxing energy use.

The Waxman-Markey bill addresses the use of clean energy through cutting greenhouse-gas emissions 83 percent by 2050. The bill would require businesses to obtain emissions permits if they emit 25,000 tons or more of greenhouse gases annually.

Companies can offset the cost by taking part in clean energy initiatives, like funding alternative energy sources throughout the world. Companies will be limited on the number of offsets allowed on each permit.

Lucas's concerns center around the lack of promised benefits for the agriculture industry. He said Vilsack has been stressing the benefits but has not followed up.

"I simply want the secretary, as President Obama's point man on rural America, if this stuff is good for us, I want him to explain to me and rural America how it is good for us, exactly where in the bill it is good for us, and if the language is going to appear in the bill somewhere later then I would like him to explain the plan for that," Lucas said.

He said he sent the letter hoping it would lead Vilsack to explain his stance on the current wording of the bill and how the bill will assist rural America.

"I am essentially calling the secretary's bluff on the effect of cap-and-trade, or cap-and-tax as some call it, on rural America, and if he has information he has not shared the specifics on yet, it's time because this bill goes to the floor in a couple of weeks," he said. Oklahoma Pork Council Executive Director Roy Lee Lindsey Jr. is concerned for the Oklahoma pork industry, which is already taking a loss of \$45 million this year.

"If your losing \$20 a head, how can you afford \$500 more or even \$50 more?" he asked. While there are no direct fees, he said, the cost of maintaining emissions records and reporting those records will increase production costs.

"Adding any cost at this point will push people out of business," Lindsey said. Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association Executive Vice President Scott Dewald shares similar concerns for the beef industry.

“It quite frankly does not look good for anybody in production agriculture ...,” he said. “Secretary Vilsack continues to say this is a net win for production agriculture but I have yet to see how this will be a net win.”

Dewald said he was happy with the letter Lucas wrote to Vilsack on behalf of production agriculture. He said OCA’s view are similar to those of Lucas.

“We have the same questions as Congressman Lucas,” he said. “Show us in black and white where agriculture will be a net winner.”

Clay Burtrum, a cattle producer from Stillwater, was briefed on the bill during a recent trip to Washington, D.C. He is also concerned with the legislation’s impact on agriculture.

“Us as cattlemen, we support a comprehensive energy plan and strategy and believe it is the best interest of the United States, but we also believe that we need an open and free market to have the driver of competition within the industry including the renewable energy sector,” he said.

He said the cattle industry was devastated by the use of corn in ethanol. The supply for corn dropped significantly, causing feed and supplies to increase.

“We don’t need to prop up one side of the industry with the expense of another,” Burtrum said. “We think we can accommodate both food and fuel over time but we need a level playing field for all people that are involved in the energy policy.”

The bill is expected to come to the floor July 4, and Lucas said the 1,100-page bill mentions agriculture seven times. He said there are few on the floor outside of the House Agriculture Committee who feel the bill should include more agriculture.

The agriculture committee is holding a hearing June 1 at 2 p.m.

The authors of the bill, Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., were not returning calls. Vilsack would not discuss the letter and his communications department would not comment.