



# Opinion-Editorial

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE • FARM SERVICE AGENCY

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## Thank a Farmer

*Reflections on National Farm Week -- By Bill Wehry*



September 30, 2010 -- In many parts of the Commonwealth, harvest time is well underway. As summer comes to an end and many of Pennsylvania's farmers and ranchers are busy gathering the bounty of their work over the past months, I believe it is an important time to reflect on all which these producers do every day for our nation.

As Americans, we are fortunate to live in a country where the strength of our agriculture economy provides us with an income advantage over the rest of the world. In America, less than 10% of family income is spent on food – much less than even other western nations – freeing up extra income to save for retirement or send our children to college. Most Americans don't consider this during trips to the grocery store.

And most Americans couldn't tell you that agriculture is responsible for one out of every 12 jobs in America, or that we enjoy a \$20 billion dollar agricultural trade surplus each year. With over 7.7 million acres of farmland, Pennsylvania has a particularly thriving and vibrant agriculture industry that is a leading driver of economic activity across the state. In 2009, Pennsylvania farmers generated over \$4.9 billion in agricultural commodity exports.

Many don't know that today's farmers produce double the yields their grandfathers produced on the same fields 50 years ago; that they harvest crops with twice the speed, reducing waste caused by spoilage or weather destruction; or that most farmers and ranchers also keep their own books and run their own businesses, in the face of natural disaster and rapidly fluctuating commodity prices.

Indeed, more than ever before, the vast majority of Americans are increasingly disconnected from the folks who provide us with food, fiber and fuel. That's not entirely a surprise, considering America's agricultural producers make up roughly one percent of our total population.

Yet if there is a group of Americans that fully embody our nation's values, it is the farmers and ranchers of the United States. These resilient men and women ply their trade from sunrise to sunset - or longer - seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. They produce bounty from nature's gifts and struggle through adversity when natural disasters wreak havoc on the crops they grow. They pamper the soil and the plants that spring from it; carefully tend to their livestock; steer hundred-thousand-dollar harvesting machines; pluck fruit, nuts and vegetables from trees and vines; and still find time to manage their business spreadsheets with the patience of an accountant.

Although our farmers and ranchers may be unique, they are the first to admit they are ordinary people with jobs to do, and challenges to endure. They understand and appreciate that our values as a nation are rooted deeply in rural America and the land. Farmers are great stewards of the land with an appreciation for sound conservation efforts to protect our most precious natural resources. For a farmer, looking for new and better ways to protect the air, soil and water is vital to sustaining production over generations.

Every day, we as Americans owe America's farmers and ranchers our deepest gratitude. They have helped America become strong and stay strong. They've long provided America with the highest quality food and fiber and today they are helping to lay the foundation for a new energy economy in America – one rooted in our forests and fields, not foreign oil fields.

This week, as you visit the grocery store, a restaurant or farmer's market, I am asking that you join my colleagues and me at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pennsylvania Farm Service Agency in thanking America's farmers and ranchers. I'm certain they will be grateful to know that their fellow citizens appreciate their role in making America a truly great nation.

**About the Author:** Appointed by the Obama Administration, Bill Wehry currently serves as Executive Director of USDA's Farm Service Agency in Pennsylvania. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) works to increase economic opportunity and improve the quality of life for rural Americans. Some of the agency's efforts include facilitating income support, disaster assistance and conservation programs, providing operating loans for the procurement of farm equipment, seed and fertilizer, as well as offering ownership loans to help new and veteran producers purchase a farm. FSA also works to procure various commodities to benefit low-income families through domestic food assistance programs. More information about the Pennsylvania FSA is available at [www.fsa.usda.gov/pa](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pa).

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