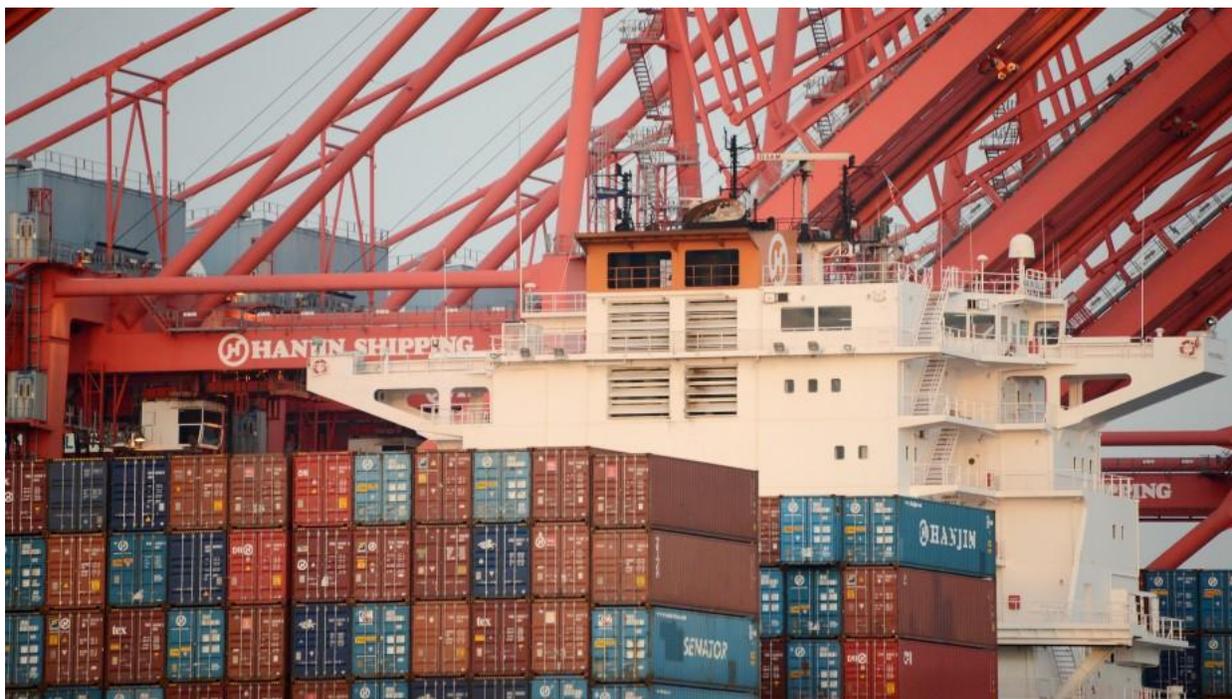


Getting From Farm to Table

Agriculture groups need to push for better infrastructure to get their products to market.

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Labor troubles can cause shipping containers to stack up beside idle cranes, as they did in 2012 at the Port of Los Angeles. (ROBYN BECK/AFP/Getty Images)

April 22, 2015 Down on the farm, American agriculture may be the most competitive it's ever been, but farmers and ranchers face real challenges in getting their products to markets through the nation's waterways, rails, roads, and ports—especially overseas.

The passage of a five-year farm bill in 2014 means that farmers know the safety net they have from the government through 2018.

Commodity prices are down compared to the boom years from 2006 to 2012, but farmers used the profits from those years to buy new tractors, harvesters, and storage structures that make U.S. agriculture "more fit than many of its global competitors," DTN/*The Progressive Farmer*, an Omaha-based agricultural news service, wrote last year in a special series titled "Ag's Great Affluenza."

But once the grain, meat animals, and other products leave the farm, there is trouble. Locks and dams need to be rebuilt, roads need to be resurfaced, trains need new tracks, and ports need modernization and stable labor relations.

Modernizing this infrastructure will be a challenge for Congress, the executive branch, the private sector, and all the farm lobbying groups used to focusing on the Agriculture committees, where they are well-known and usually get what they want.

The easiest to accomplish may be the reconstruction of locks and dams on the Mississippi and other rivers. They were built between 1900 and 1930, constructed with great fanfare in an era when the country was proud of big construction projects to control Mother Nature, but they have languished for decades, mired in environmental conflicts and financing problems.

Amazingly, the same "do-nothing" 113th Congress that passed the farm bill also passed the Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014. The WRRDA provided authorization for construction and new methods of financing through the Inland Waterways Trust Fund and the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. The issue now, of course, is appropriations. But on April 15, the House Appropriations Energy & Water Development Subcommittee approved more funding than President Obama requested for the Army Corps of Engineers, which undertakes the construction projects.

Farmers, of course, also need roads and rails to get their products to consumers. Congress has been unable to pass a full-term highway bill and still is trying to figure out how to refill the Highway Trust Fund, which is in danger of going bankrupt at the end of August because of declining income from the federal gas tax. The tax has not been raised or indexed to inflation even as gasoline usage has gone down. Congress seems unlikely to meet a May 31 deadline for a multiyear reauthorization bill, but highway groups have vowed to keep the pressure on for a long-term bill.

Improvements in railroad service may be even harder to achieve. As energy production has increased in North Dakota and other western states, the railroads have wanted to serve that market as well as their traditional agricultural customers. Last year, the Canadian Pacific and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe lines had shortages and delays that cost farmers millions of dollars due to crop damage and lost business. Under pressure from Democratic Sen. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and others, the Surface Transportation Board required the railroads to release more data on the backlogs, and the pace picked up. The basic problem is the infrastructure itself. The railroads have promised to modernize their rails and cars, but that will take years. The railroads acknowledged management problems in 2014, but pressure is needed from Congress and the STB for companies to live up to their promises to do better.

Once the products get to port, there's another set of problems. WRRDA provided authorization to maintain, dredge, and modernize ports. The bigger fear is labor conflicts. After a contract between the Pacific Maritime Association and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union expired in July 2014, there were nine months of negotiations and labor disruptions in West Coast ports that cost farmers—especially growers of perishable potatoes, fruits, and vegetables—millions of dollars in lost sales. After intervention by Labor Secretary Thomas Perez, the ports and the union reached agreement in February on a five-year contract. But union members still haven't given final approval, and the situation requires constant monitoring.

These transportation issues are more of a challenge for farmers than passing a farm bill. They require farm leaders to work with other industries and often not be in the driver's seat. In Congress, they require working with committees that farm groups don't know as well as the ag committees.

The leaders on transportation issues are not the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union, or the commodity groups, but the Waterways Council Inc., which represents the inland waterways and the ports; the National Grain and Feed Association, which represents country elevators and other providers of services to agriculture, and the Agriculture Transportation Coalition, which includes agriculture exporters and importers and freight forwarders as well as agriculture trade associations and state departments of agriculture.

Pressure from farmers played a major role in passing the waterways bill. In this age of drought and population growth, it's a moral as well as economic tragedy for food and feed not to get to consumers on time. Until farmers need to focus on the 2018 farm bill, their leaders would be wise to focus on measures to bring stability to the nation's transportation systems.