



## Transcript: Senator Peter Welch's Senate Floor Speech

May 15, 2024, 4:30pm

Madam President, I have good news. Senator Stabenow, leader, Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, has presented a bill that will allow us to consider an Ag bill. And we've got work to do. But as we know, for more than 90 years, the U.S. Congress has – we've always worked together on this to advance a Farm Bill, and that's critical to rural America. It's critical to all of America. It's about our agricultural and food policy and our environment. It reaches far beyond farms and fields and into the lives of every American throughout our country.

The Farm Bill, as you know, shapes the future of ag policy for every five years. It's always tough to get from here to there, so we have much more work to do. But it has been something that is essential to give our farmers the support they need. And it's also the most important legislation that we take up to support rural America. The small towns across our entire country that sustain our agricultural sector, do so much for our economy, and so much for sustaining important personal and patriotic values.

Vermont is a very proud rural state, and agriculture is a keystone of our culture as well as economy. Vermont's farmers, our dairies, our sugarmakers have shaped our small towns in rural Vermont for generations. We want to keep that going. We've worked to keep that culture of the small, family-sized farms in our state; independent farmers with most of our farms below a couple of hundred acres and town populations less than 2,500.

Madam President, Vermont is by far not unique in this regard. America will not thrive if our rural communities aren't thriving. That's a commitment all of us have to make, and it's why as the Chair of the Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy, I'm urging my colleagues to support and work with us to improve the *Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act*. It helps our farmers keep farming. It keeps our families fed – something very important to our farmers. And it keeps rural communities strong.

The Senate Agriculture Committee, under Chair Stabenow's outstanding leadership, recently unveiled the Farm Bill. Our bill has over 100 bipartisan provisions and a host of policies that many of my colleagues across the caucus and across the aisle support. It will strengthen rural America in many ways. And, by the way, Chair Stabenow included 100 bipartisan provisions, but she is totally open to more bipartisan provisions – anything we can do to improve this with suggestions from both sides of the aisle, she—and we—want to do.

The Farm Bill, as I mentioned, supports farms, families, and rural farming. It's going to improve the quality of life for families in Vermont and America. With baseline funding, that's important as we know, for the first time ever to make improvements in rural health care, our rural hospitals are hanging on by their fingernails whether it is Kansas, or Vermont, or Idaho. It's going to improve childcare availability, which is so essential to all families across the country, but especially in rural America. And it is going to help our tribes continue to have access to USDA programs.

The Senate Farm Bill will help us more efficiently build our high-speed rural broadband. And I want to acknowledge the work on both sides of the aisle to build out broadband, but we've got to maintain that. Just like we built out electricity in the '30s so that rural America is fully a part of the modern economy. This bill will invest in and it'll modernize wastewater and public water systems, and those are under enormous stress, and our local communities don't have the tax base to do all that needs to be done. There needs to be some recognition on the part of the federal government and in the Farm Bill we make that recognition. It'll help modernize our wastewater and public water systems and help remove in rural communities that – those toxic forever chemicals like PFAS. The bill will also support timber innovation and markets, including American wood products.

The Senate Farm Bill focuses, too, on cutting energy costs for homeowners in rural America, for farms, and for small businesses. And it helps folks who want to make that transition to renewable energy, so they have an affordable way to do it. It will strengthen our energy security and support energy innovation in the field of biobased chemicals in products.

The Senate Farm Bill does something that I think all of our bills should do – invest in the middle class; in the middle class and rural jobs by supporting manufacturing, entrepreneurship and small businesses, and the rural cooperatives that have been so essential to the well-being of so many of our communities. And finally, it does all this while supporting and strengthening local and regional food systems. Nothing excites people in a community more than a farmers' market. They are excited that they're getting local food. They know that it's healthy. They know they're supporting their farmers and all of us who are not farmers appreciate the role that our farmers in our communities play as custodians of the landscape.

Madam President, in the rural development energy titles of the bill alone, there's a lot to celebrate. And I'm also pleased that the bill includes many of the priorities that I and others have championed in my role as the Chair of the Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy. This bill includes some proposals we made there.

The bipartisan *ReConnecting Rural America Act*—that would strengthen USDA's ReConnect Loan and Grant Program, and in so doing, reduce red tape and speed broadband development and deployment in rural America.

It strengthens critical rural development programs like the Rural Innovation for Strong Economy Program—REAP Zones—and Rural Development Loans and Grants. Bottom line: that helps with the financing of local businesses in our rural communities.

One of the provisions is a bipartisan bill that I've sponsored with others, the USDA's Rural Energy Savings Program. It provides no-interest loans to rural utilities. They've been a backbone for those communities to access cost-effective energy upgrades for homes and businesses. That lowers costs and accelerates sustainability. And with funds from this program, rural utilities can finance projects for household heating and cooling, increase energy efficiency, and assist in that transition to renewable energy.

Another provision that really is being taken up by many Americans is the access to heat pumps, and the provision is the *Heat pump Energy Assistance and Training Act*, which would create a program within USDA to help deploy heat pumps in rural communities across the country. I've got to tell you folks in Vermont—when they can get a heat pump and it works out on the numbers and they save money, and they stay cozy and warm in our cold winters—they like that. Let's have more of it. By the way, it helps with cooling in Texas as well.

There's only a hand – these are just a handful of the provisions in the *Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act* that are helping our rural communities. So, we want to keep working hard to support our farms and what they do to shore up and expand the nutrition programs that so many families and seniors depend on. And, by the way, you know the economy is doing better than ever in some ways. The stock market's up—but we have like 1 in 12 Americans who are food insecure, and a lot of those are folks who have jobs and are working really hard. So, we've got to maintain our commitment to the nutrition and wellbeing of our citizens, particularly our children.

Over the past 100 years, we've made a commitment to America's farmers and our farm communities. We want to keep that up. But the truth also is that for too many years, Congress has not focused as much—in my view—as it should on our family and small farms that we have in Vermont and so many other states throughout our country. We've got to make it possible for them to do the local agriculture that is so essential to the strength of local communities.

We're working to support and deliver for some of those small farmers that we have in Vermont. I'll mention a few whose farms I've visited. By the way, I don't know anyone who works harder than a farmer.

The Corse family, Leon Corse and his daughter Abbie, have the Corse Farm Dairy. And I visited there my first week as a senator. Their family's been farming in Whitingham, Vermont, for over 155 years. We want to keep them going for another century. The Choiniere Family Farm, a diversified organic dairy farm at the other end of the state, up in Highgate Center. John Wagner and Karin Bellemare, owners of Bear Roots Farm and Roots Farm Market in Middlesex in the center of our state. Justin Rich

of Burnt Rock Farm, which is an organic produce farm in Huntington. They're doing a lot for us in Vermont and for those communities.

Before I close, I want to thank Chairwoman Stabenow and her Senate Agriculture Committee staff for the work on the *Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act*. I also want to acknowledge what a joy it is for me to work with Senator Boozman who was a colleague of mine in the House and is doing a great job over here in the Senate. This bill in any year is complicated—huge—and I'm thankful for the many, many hours that staff and colleagues have invested in this bill and in our farming communities. And we're ready to put in more and more hours to make this bill better. We've got to make it pass.

Madam President, for the sake of communities from Vermont to California, we must pass this five-year farm bill and help America's farms and rural communities. Let's pass the *Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act* and keep our farmers farming, keep our families fed, and keep our rural communities strong.

Madam President, I yield back.

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