

STATEMENT OF SENATOR GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
“Harvest Over the Horizon: the challenge of aging in American Agriculture”
June 21, 2007

Good morning and thank you all for being here today.

There has not been too much discussion on the aging demographics of American agriculture. I look forward to a productive discussion with our panelists today.

I want to extend a personal welcome to two Oregonians: Barry Bushue of the Oregon Farm Bureau and Derek Godwin of Oregon State University – Go Beavs!

As Congress moves forward with Farm Bill proposals, it might be worth considering how many farmers will be around ten years from now – and how old will they be.

Right now, nearly a quarter of farm operators in this country are 65 years of age or older. That contrasts with only 8 percent of that age class in non-agricultural industries.

That statistic becomes even more significant when we look at the shrinking number of farms in America. In 1930 there were over six million American farms. In 2002, there was one-sixth of that number.

Clearly, farms are either consolidating or disappearing altogether. Young people are either not entering the business, not taking over the family business, or both.

This trend has something to do with how hard it is to be a farmer these days. In the west, farmers don't just have to deal with crop and fuel prices. They also have drought and wildfire and endangered species to deal with.

Why should we care?

First of all, agriculture remains a unique part of this country – a land blessed with fertile soil and good climate.

Americans once believed that “rain follows the plow.” The dry corners of my state disproved that theory, but not the interest and intransigence of the American farmer.

The U.S. Capitol is adorned with images of wheat and tobacco. “America the Beautiful” speaks of amber waves of grain and the fruited plain.

Thomas Jefferson spoke of the virtues of American agriculture:

“Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.”

The importance of American agriculture can also be described in more tangible terms. There is a national security interest of a country that can, and does, produce of its own food supply.

The U.S. produced a record amount of food in 2006. We also imported a record amount of food – with imports continuing to close in on that gap.

Recent stories of tainted food from foreign nations reminds us of why our agriculture and our health and safety standards are important.

Lastly, so many of the communities in my state are rural and based on a farm economy of one sort or another. As farms dissolve and children move away, those communities suffer.

Again, I look forward to learning more from our panelists about these issues and what options we, as a government, have to turn the current trend around.

With that, I'll turn it back to Chairman Kohl.