

Agriculture: The New Front on Global Terrorism

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Florida's 16th Congressional District is a gerrymandered masterpiece. Although Republican state legislators were trying to draw a safe seat for Republicans, they ended up building a district that reflects the hopes and concerns of all Floridians. From the bustling and vibrant economies of Charlotte County on the Gulf to Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties on the Atlantic, to the rural heartland that spans between I-95 and I-75, our district is a cross section of both the assets and the challenges found throughout the state.

Our rural heartland is one of America's most important agriculture regions, as it produces sweet corn, sugar, oranges, beef, milk, tomatoes and other crops. I am proud of Florida's agricultural heritage and its important contributions to our economy. I am also proud to be the only member of Florida's congressional delegation to sit on the House Agriculture Committee.

Today roughly 6 million farmers feed the other 294 million Americans. Just this week, I sat in on a hearing looking into how poison was introduced into the food supply of our pets. As we now know, the poison came from two factories in China where it was purposefully put into pet food to make their product appear to be higher in protein. Based on the testimony given by the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture at the hearing, the conclusion I came away with is that the only way we know there is a problem is when people get sick or they die.

In Florida we have one new foreign insect species being introduced every month. We also are fighting plant diseases that are brought into our country from uninspected produce entering our ports. One such disease, "greening," is so deadly to citrus that no country whose citrus industry has been contaminated by it has survived. It is spreading like wildfire throughout Florida and time is running out on Florida orange juice.

At the same time, the estate tax has ensnared more and more crop-producing family farmers and ranchers, whose skyrocketing land values make them appear wealthy, when in reality, they are struggling to make ends meet. As a result, many family farmers are forced to sell off their land in order to raise the money necessary to pay the estate tax.

The winners here are the developers waiting to buy the farm so the family can pay the tax. The losers are the farm families and Floridians who continue to watch our green space and farmland disappear, not to mention our rural heritage.

Think how easy it was for overseas factories to put poison into the food purchased by unsuspecting pet owners. Think about the danger we are in if an organization like Al Qaeda decides to exploit our lack of supervision. Think about an America that becomes a net importer of food like we are with oil. Think about our farmers giving up their farms because they can't make money competing with foreign producers who don't have to follow minimum wage, labor, and environmental laws but have easy access to American markets.

I am alarmed and I am working to address these issues in Congress. To date I have co-sponsored legislation that would eliminate the estate tax on family farms that stay in agriculture. I have proposed more money for research to fight new insects and plant diseases, and I will soon be introducing legislation to make it easier for farmers to be good stewards of the land. I am working to give back to the Department of Agriculture from the Department of Homeland Security the responsibility for inspection. Finally, I am working to spur investment in research to use Florida's rich environment to create a new generation of bio-fuels so we can eliminate our dependence on hostile foreign oil producers and keep our fuel profits right here at home.

Florida agriculture is not only important to our culture and economy, but a staple in protecting our nation's security. In today's world, military strength is not enough to protect America. Energy independence and agricultural sufficiency must be important components in our national security policy.

Congressman Tim Mahoney

Florida's 16th Congressional District