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"No Finer Calling", WIFE (Women Involved in Farm Economics) Convention

Max S. Baucus

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Greetings and congratulations on your 1995 Convention of the Montana Women Involved in Farm Economics. I want to give special thanks and congratulations to Wanda Zuroff for another successful year.

I have always taken special pride in my work with Montana's agricultural producers over the years. Growing up as a boy on a ranch, I know the kind of personal dedication, long hours and faith in the future that it takes to make a farm work.

Years of getting up at 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. on my family ranch taught me that there is no job tougher or more demanding than agriculture. There is no finer calling than providing food and fiber for the world. And there is no sense of pride and achievement quite like that which comes from living, working and providing for your family on your own land.

My father was a rancher and a leader in agricultural organizations like the Wool Growers Association. He read constantly. I am sure he could have been whatever he wanted to be, but -- like all of you -- he loved the outdoors and thrived on the ranching lifestyle. My brother John has followed in his footsteps. He is a lucky man -- and all of you in family farming are lucky people too.

Family farming is a special way of life. But it is always a way of life that entails risks. Physical risks -- agriculture is now one of our most dangerous occupations -- and more often financial risks.

We can't do much about the weather. But unfortunately, this year's biggest threat to the farmer is not a drought, but policy decisions coming out of Washington.

The agriculture package has really been a disappointment. Ever since I first came to Washington, people representing farmers have stuck together. Whatever the debates over transportation, foreign policy and the like, the Farm Bill has always been the picture of bipartisan cooperation.

Well, not this year. The majority on the Ag Committee started out by trying to write the agriculture portion of the reconciliation in closed door sessions. When they are all done, their work will provide the framework for seven years of agriculture policy. And I expect it
will not be farmer-friendly.

For starters, their package will cut $13.4 billion in farm program spending over the next seven years. That's a hard figure to get a grasp of. But as a percentage, it means that farm program spending will fall by about 20 percent. One dollar in 5 currently spent on farm programs will disappear. To put it another way, support per farm will fall by about $2,000 per year.

A study by the Agricultural and Food Policy Center, at Texas A&M, tells us that under the Gingrich Congress, net worth for average farms will fall from 53% to 68%. That's right. The value of a farm will decline by anywhere from a half to two thirds.

And the annual income of a family farmer will fall by anywhere from 1.2% to 11%. That is to say, farmers could see their income fall by a ninth.

The experts there also studied a number of farms in particular, as well as looking at the more general outlook. One of these farms was a neighbor of ours -- a 1600-acre wheat farm in North Dakota. And the university people predicted that it would lose 100% of its value. That's right. It would go absolutely bust.

If this is right, and they have a pretty good track record, there will be probably two happy people in the country. That is the New York academics who, a couple of years back, proposed turning everyone out of farming in the Great Plains. They wanted to convert the whole area into a "Buffalo Commons," so tourists could drive around gawking at us.

There is still hope for some moderation and sanity. The folks over in the House Agriculture Committee have rebelled against this Buffalo Commons plan. They have shot it down by 27-22. And Speaker Gingrich is twisting arms pretty hard to turn it around again.

But that shows that a lot of people, Republicans and Democrats alike, know what's going on and don't like it. Together with the Administration, the Congress can arrive at a package which will be fair to farmers. There is no question that the budget has to be balanced, and that agriculture will take a share of the burden. But we can craft a package which cuts less -- perhaps the $4.2 billion recommended in the Administration's proposal and the Democratic reconciliation package -- and keep our farms healthy.

Make no mistake about it, that package would still mean cuts -- a smaller governmental role in agriculture. But the cuts would be more manageable.

Well, I'm going to end on an optimistic note. On Thursday, the Senate Ag Committee will hold a hearing on Ethanol. And there I know we will hear about the benefits of the ethanol tax credit -- under assault in both the House and the Senate. And we will hear about the potential benefits -- both environmental and economic -- that ethanol can bring.
But to me that will just confirm what we all already know. My ethanol IQ was established years ago. I remember way back in 1977 how the Montana WIFE members drove all the way to Washington using Gasohol and we held a parade. And it’s been constantly expanded by one of your own -- Shirley Ball. And I know that no state has an ethanol advocate as dedicated as she is.

So while I’m back here fighting for ethanol in Washington, I know you will be there doing the same.

We also have a good, bipartisan effort to ease the burden so many farm families face in the estate tax. This would exempt all operations under $600,000 from the estate tax completely, and cut it in half for everybody else. That is going to do about as much as anything to make sure families can pass their farms on to their kids.

And right there we’ve got about all the news I’ve got for you today. But I also want to tell you to enjoy your stay in Jordan, because it is a beautiful, friendly town. When you visit Jordan, you can practically hear America’s heart beating.

I hope you have a great convention and I look forward to seeing your red jackets very soon. And if I’m still stuck in Washington and you happen to be in town, make sure you come in to see me -- and also make a spot on your Wednesday morning schedule for coffee and doughnuts, every week, with all the Montanans in town.