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"Preserving the Family Farm", Montana Farmers Union

Max S. Baucus

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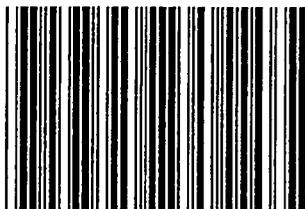
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(2) Subject* **Preserving the Family Farm**

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BAUCUS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

"Preserving the Family Farm"

Senator Max Baucus
Montana Farmers Union
Great Falls, Montana

October 28, 1995

Good morning, friends. It's great to see all of you again.

I have always taken special pride in my work with Montana's agricultural producers over the years. People like Norm and Alice Sullivan. George Paul. Bud Daniels. In fact, all of you who have devoted your lives to production agriculture.

That's because, growing up as a boy on a ranch, I know the dedication, faith and hard work that make a farm succeed. Years of getting up at 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. taught me that no job is tougher or more demanding than agriculture. No calling is finer than providing food and fiber for the world. And no sense of pride and achievement is quite like that which comes from living, working and providing for your family on your own land.

I know the Farmers Union are doing something special today. You are recognizing and commending the producers who have kept their farms in the family for the past hundred years. And I want to join you 100%. I applaud every one of the forty-five families who will receive their plaques today.

Family farming is a special way of life. It is part of what makes our country great. 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 1995 "FARM BILL"

That brings me to the budget that passed the Senate yesterday.

I think most people in Montana know about the Medicare cuts in this budget, and the threats they present to rural hospitals and health care for seniors. Quite a few heard that a few days ago, the House speaker Newt Gingrich called this budget "round one" in a long-term plan to kill Medicare.

But very few people know that this year, the budget was also the farm bill. It will

reauthorize all the commodity programs and the Conservation Reserve Program. It will eliminate several more. For the next seven years, it sets out national agriculture policy.

Farm policy is supposed to keep rural economies stable. And it should guarantee consumers a safe and dependable food supply at a reasonable price. This package does nothing of the sort.

The Farmers Union has done a great job. The Farmers Union is the only national organization to come up with a comprehensive, reform-oriented ag policy proposal. That proposal contributed a great deal to Minority Leader Daschle's farm bill, and I was proud to cosponsor it and support it.

But, unfortunately, we found ourselves a bit outnumbered. The majority unanimously voted against Tom's bill. And they came up with another plan that, in my opinion, is not farmer-friendly. And because of the opposition it faced in the country, they tucked it away into the budget and hoped nobody would notice.

WRITTEN IN SECRET

Now, why is this such a bad plan?

First, it is partisan. It is a hard-line, ideological approach to agricultural policy, not an effort to bring people together and take the best from everyone.

Second, it is secretive. It was written behind closed doors. You could get locked up for that in Montana. It was purposely hidden in the budget. And even today, very, very few Americans know it has already passed the Senate.

Listen to this. The 1995 farm bill got a grand total of forty-five minutes for debate. It's a scandal, but it's not a surprise. Because if this were my bill, I wouldn't want to say much about it either.

That brings me to the third problem. It is just an extreme, bad, damaging bill for agriculture.

SEVEN LEAN YEARS TO COME

If you have read Genesis, Chapter 41, you know the story of Joseph's dream. He compared the seven years to come with:

"seven kine ... poor and very ill favoured and lean-fleshed, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness."

These seven ill-favoured cattle ate up the good cattle. And after that, seven ears of

corn, "withered, thin and blasted with the east wind," ate up seven good ears of corn.

So Joseph knew the future would bring seven years of trouble. Seven lean years, in which "all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt."

Well, we may not be as wise as Joseph. And the days of inspired prophecy may be gone. But on the other hand, we have a lot more than a dream to go on. We have hard facts and numbers. And these facts and numbers tell us our farmers have seven pretty lean years ahead.

This bill makes dramatic cuts in farm supports, which have already been cut 60% in the past decade. By the year 2002, we will be funding just half of today's Conservation Reserve Program. Bad for farmers, bad for hunters, bad for recreation.

The Emergency Livestock Feed Assistance Program will end. Our deficiency payments -- the safety net our producers need in tough times -- will be capped. In the very worst years, when our producers need help most, it won't be there.

Then look at nutrition. School lunch, daycare meals, and meals for senior citizens are all cut.

These cuts affect more than farmers. They affect all of rural America. Schools, grocers, bankers, fuel dealers, equipment and automobile dealerships, and even our local and county governments will all feel the pinch.

And we are doing all this at a time when our competitors in Europe are not giving up a thing. They already give their farmers over ten times the export assistance we provide.

KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE OFF THE LAND

Finally, what is for me maybe the most painful item of all. That is the apparent exclusion of beginning farmers from all these services. This spring I went to a lot of high school graduations in rural Montana. Places not too far from here, like Geyser, Hobson, Stanford. And along the Hi-Line at Harlem, Dodson and Opheim.

We have some great kids in these communities. They are looking forward to a career in agriculture like their parents. And the budget shuts them out and puts them at a competitive disadvantage. Combine that with the trouble young farmers have in obtaining credit, and the message they get from this budget is clear. There is no place for you in production agriculture. There is no place for the small family farm in America.

THE BAUCUS AMENDMENT: A SECOND CHANCE

Well, we can do better. And I had an amendment that would have allowed us to do better.

What I wanted to do was just go back to the drawing board. Take it from the top, look at plans like the one the Farmers Union put forward, and start working together.

Probably agriculture will have to make some sacrifices as we balance the budget. But we can do that, and at the same time restore some sense and moderation to agricultural policy, nutrition and our rural economic approach as a whole.

Essentially, I was still thinking of the story of Joseph. He saw the seven lean years coming. He told Pharaoh about his dream. And Pharaoh listened to Joseph. He changed his agriculture policy, promoted production and stockpiled corn. And therefore Egypt got through the seven lean years.

Well, Pharaoh hasn't got the message yet this time around. But we're still in there fighting. If the Administration sticks with its veto threat, the budget will go back to the drawing board. And when that happens, we have another chance for a sound farm policy that is good for everyone. So we'll keep at it, and I'm counting on your help and advice as we move ahead.

CONCLUSION: PACKER CONCENTRATION AND ETHANOL

Well, I'm going to end on an optimistic note. I know that pretty much everyone who raises cattle in Montana is concerned about the low prices we're getting, and the fact that four companies do just about all the meat packing in America. And we're responding with a bill that will set up a Commission on packer concentration, and make some recommendations to Congress that will solve the problem.

We're also holding our own in sustaining the ethanol tax credit. That's good for producers, good for the air and good for jobs in Great Falls. We still have a few skeptics around here, but we're converting the ones we can and pretty successfully fighting back the rest of them.

So I'll end it there, because I want to listen to your opinions and get your views on how we proceed. And if you've got questions, I'll take those too.