

As I work to represent our rural congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives, I encounter policy issues from time to time that I find my colleagues from urban areas are less familiar with than I. For instance, a couple of years ago, I found myself explaining the silliness of federal regulations that penalized American farmers for the "greenhouse gas effect" of placing an acre of U.S. farmland in conservation status by charging them for an imaginary acre of deforestation in the Brazilian rainforest. Some of my colleagues from urban areas just didn't grasp the issue and others didn't care because the rule didn't directly affect the cities they represent. That's just one example of many.

I try my best to educate my colleagues on the importance of, say, sound energy policy for rural America, where our economy simply uses more energy for agriculture, transportation and manufacturing than the economy in places such as San Francisco or New York City. And I usually find that there is quite a lot that people from urban areas don't understand about rural issues, and some representatives from those places have never been to a real working farm or visited a county with fewer than 8,000 people living in it.

I have long wondered about the origins of those misconceptions. Usually, it is just a straightforward lack of familiarity with rural communities or rural economies or rural health care. That's understandable, and many of my colleagues in Congress really try hard to expand their understanding.

But there is also a prejudice against rural America in the media, I have found, that perpetuate myths about places like Southern Missouri. A blogger for The Washington Post, Ezra Klein, gave yet another voice to that prejudice last week in a post he titled: "Why we still need cities," (as though our cities are going anywhere).

Mr. Klein writes about the book he is reviewing: "...cities make us smarter, more productive and more innovative. To put it plainly, they make us richer. And the evidence in favor of this point is very, very strong." And later, to make sure no one misses his point about how he thinks the safety net for American agriculture is a waste of money, Mr. Klein says in a dialog with Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack: "My understanding of why I pay 6 or 7 percent of my paycheck for food and people in other countries pay more is that I'm richer than people in other countries, my paycheck is bigger."

There's more, but the salient points are these: that Mr. Klein has no clue about the innovations in energy, science and agriculture which take place in rural areas and at research universities in rural states. He doesn't understand our entrepreneurialism, and he has no grasp of the economic importance of the fact that rural America is the only part of our country in which we run a trade surplus.

Most striking is the fact that Mr. Klein has no idea how rich life is in rural America. He doesn't understand the relationships between our families and our small communities, where every person counts and everyone contributes. The traditions of small towns may not be much different from the traditions in big cities: our Fourth of July parades, our church picnics, and our active community organizations. Cities have these things, too. But there is a great difference in the fact that we know our neighbors' names, we know how their kids are doing, and we step in to help them out when a member of their family suffers an illness or gets deployed far from home in the military.

There is a lot to love about rural America, a lot to fight for, and a lot that some folks in cities just don't know they are missing.