

Agriculture is not the only component of our rural economy, but it is a major part. Americans need not look any further than the historic drought in our region to see how much uncertainty can be created by a disaster year in agriculture.

Scarce supplies of crops lead to higher costs for feed and trickle through our economy until they reach us in the form of higher prices at the grocery store. Along the way, they can hit businesses from the auto dealership to the local bank.

From our farms and ranches come our food, along with jobs, investment and all kinds of economic activity in rural communities. Agriculture is the first domino in a long chain of economic events that, good or bad, affect pretty much every family and business in America. On the good side of the balance sheet, our producers deliver. They are responsible for the world's safest, most abundant, most affordable supply of food. The American grocery bill is lower than that of any other developed nation, and agriculture is largely responsible for a narrowing trade deficit between the U.S. and the rest of the world.

But when times are tough, we run the risk of losing an increasing share of the family budget to food costs, and we risk losing family businesses in agriculture entirely. Strong agricultural policy gets rural America through the tough times, and we have to be sure it continues to guarantee the presence of these local producers in our counties and communities.

Every August, I take several days to see the latest advancements, investments and occurrences in Southern Missouri agriculture. This year,

I'm seeing a ranch for alpacas, visiting a sawmill, taking a look at the first peanut farm I've ever seen, and talking about flood protection with the Mississippi River Commission. But nearly every usual topic on the Farm Tour is going to be overshadowed by drought.

Like nothing else, the drought has highlighted the ramifications of letting ag disaster programs lapse. Frustrations abound without a clear plan to pass a Farm Bill, with some livestock disaster assistance programs allowed to expire, with a debate raging over the cost of food allowed to overshadow the costs faced by producers of food. Agriculture has always been

about good energy policy, good tax policy and good trade policy – but for the moment we have to focus on good ag policy.

As I listen to what these producers have to say about the near-term future of agriculture and their businesses, I always bear in mind how valuable these folks are to Southern Missouri. They are taking on risk, they are innovating in the field, on the ranch and at the dairy farm, and they are doing it with their own blood, sweat and – this year – some tears.

Supporting agriculture means being there when this vital industry needs us most. Today, we're presented with a perfect case study in how bad things can get on the ranch, on the farm. After this year, we have every reason to renew our commitment to keep America at the forefront of an industry that feeds us as well as the rest of the world.