

United States Senate Committee on
**AGRICULTURE
NUTRITION
& FORESTRY**

Opening Statement of Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich)

Drought, Fire and Freeze: The Economics of Disasters for America's Agricultural Producers

February 14, 2013

As prepared for delivery

It is my pleasure to call to order the first meeting of the 113th Congress of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

As Senator Roberts becomes Ranking Member of the Rules Committee, I want to welcome our new Ranking Member, Senator Cochran, who has sat in this Chair, and whose painting is on the wall. I appreciate your many years of experience and your insight, and I'm looking forward to working together.

I also want to welcome our three new members, Senator Donnelly, Senator Heitkamp, and Senator Cowan. It is great to have you here with us!

Nobody feels the effect of weather disasters more deeply than our nation's farmers and ranchers whose livelihoods' depend on getting just the right amount of rain at just the right time.

All too frequently, an entire season's crop can be lost or an entire herd must be sent to slaughter due to lack of feed. 2012 was a year of unprecedented destruction from drought, freeze, wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes – including the tornadoes that hit Mississippi and other parts of the South last weekend, and my heart goes out to all the survivors of those devastating storms.

Our country experienced two of the most destructive hurricanes on record last year: Isaac and Sandy.

We experienced the warmest year on record in the contiguous U.S., which coupled with the historic drought, produced conditions that rival the Dust Bowl.

Wildfires raged in the west.

In the upper Midwest and Northeast, warm weather in February and March caused trees to bloom early, resulting in total fruit destruction when temperatures dropped down to the 20s again in April.

California and Arizona experienced a freeze just last month, threatening citrus, strawberries, lettuce and avocados.

We learned last week that our cattle herd inventories are the lowest in over six decades, which has had broad ranging impacts including job losses in rural communities as processing facilities and feedlots idle.

The drought has left many of our waterways with dangerously low water levels. Lake Michigan and Lake Huron have hit their all-time lowest water levels.

And barge traffic on the Mississippi, our most vital waterway, has nearly ground to a halt. We have seen major disruptions and increased transportation costs for commodities and fertilizer.

Today, we will hear from officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Department of Agriculture about the disasters we faced last year. We will also directly from those affected by these disasters.

Thanks to our successful crop insurance program, many farmers will be able to recover from their losses.

For those farmers who didn't have access to crop insurance, or the risk management tools that would have been included in our Farm Bill, the future is less certain.

Unfortunately, instead of a Farm Bill that gave those farmers certainty, we ended up with a partial extension that creates the haves and have-nots. Row crop producers that participate in the crop insurance program will not only get assistance from crop insurance, but some will continue to receive direct payments as well -- regardless if they had a loss.

Meanwhile, many livestock producers and specialty crop growers who suffered substantial losses won't receive any assistance.

We all know that farming is the riskiest business in the world. Mother Nature certainly made sure we didn't forget that last year.

We need to give producers the tools to manage the risk from those weather events. And we need to give them certainty so they can make plans for their businesses. That's why it is critical that we pass a 5-year Farm Bill into law.

And this Committee didn't shrink from its responsibility.

We did our work -- we came together in a bipartisan way to pass a 5-year Farm Bill that gives certainty to Rural America while reducing our deficit.

We passed a bill that gave farmers the risk management tools they need to protect against disasters.

I want to thank my colleagues on this Committee for the work we did last year. Working together, I am confident we can once again put together a Farm Bill that gives long-term certainty to rural America.