By Keith Olsen

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It has been said to the point of being trite that the 2012 farm bill “won’t be your father’s farm bill.” Many more organizations than in the past are giving their input to the farm bill process and describing their competing visions for the future of agriculture programs and for the social service programs the farm bill also contains.

At the same time, the federal budget deficit means there is less money to fund farm programs than in the past. There is a growing consensus that the farm bill’s chief role is to provide a safety net for agriculture, and how best to do that is the key question. Our Farm Bureau delegates will weigh in on that tough issue through our policy development process, which is already underway in a number of our Nebraska County Farm Bureaus.

Many government officials have highlighted the need for the new farm bill to assist young and beginning farmers. This need is crucial: far more farmers are at or past typical retirement age than are entering the profession.

My colleague Craig Lang, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau, noted recently that the age of farmers is reflected in the shift away from livestock and into crop production in his state.

“To have livestock, you have to have young bodies, people who are willing to work hard,” he said. “I have to admit it has been some years since we’ve had livestock at the Olsen farm.”

Here’s one thing the farm bill can do to help: Current farm bill programs directed to young farmers focus too much on helping them buy land or other assets–but our young farmers are renting land rather than trying to buy it as their way to enter the very capital-intensive business of farming.

The young need programs that will help them increase their assets, rather than make big purchases and take on debt they're not ready for.

Creating opportunities for young people to be successful in agriculture has been my personal focus during my years as Nebraska Farm Bureau president.

I will be happy for programs in the farm bill that will help the next generation of farmers and ranchers. But our elected leaders need to recognize that initiatives that benefit ALL farmers and ranchers are also extremely important to the financial success of the young.

Free Trade Agreements.

The U.S. has pending FTAs with Colombia, Panama and South Korea and the opportunity to increase trade with Cuba. Adoption of these trade agreements will create huge new markets for agricultural products while also helping us retain our current market share.

A few years ago, the U.S. had 90 percent of the market for corn in Colombia. Now it's down to just over 30 percent, because of the lack of a free trade agreement. Foreign nations want our products. America's farmers and ranchers want to sell to them. What is the U.S. waiting for?

Nebraska U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith is sponsoring the "Veterinarian Services Investment Act" which would help address the critical shortage of food animal veterinarians in rural America.

Congress should adopt it without delay. Livestock farmers, old and young, need large animal vets to help them guard the health of their animals and be successful producers.

The Federal Estate Tax

Congress needs to act before the end of 2010 to prevent the automatic implementation of a federal estate tax rate of 55 percent with only a $1 million exemption.

Many younger farmers and ranchers who inherit farm property after their parents die have had to sell land or other assets to pay the high estate taxes. This will happen again if Congress doesn’t act.

Certainly the 2012 farm bill should have a focus on helping young farmers. But we shouldn’t wait to help them when we have “shovel-ready” legislation pending that can help them right now.