IFB Board Action Report

In response to COVID-19 and its impact on Illinois Agriculture
August 2020
COVID-19 disrupted the world in 2020, likely altering the foundation of many industries and ways of life. At Illinois Farm Bureau, we adapted through the first few weeks of the pandemic. Quickly it became clear, as we provided resources and information to our members and advocated on their behalf, that we needed to reframe our focus. We needed to identify those elements of our industry that will look different in the future. And we needed to make and communicate a plan for our members that builds on the strengths of our organization to position us well in the future.

This Action Report is a living document that will guide board priorities as we head towards the 2020 Presidential election and into the 2021 season. The Report aims to summarize our ongoing Priority Initiatives so we can communicate with our membership, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and our other agricultural partners. We hope it can serve as a tool for our farmer leaders so they can connect and engage with members this winter.

This summer, the IFB board set out to do a deeper dive into areas of our industry that were seeing shifts from COVID-19. In many areas, trends we were monitoring were suddenly accelerated due to the pandemic. In others, trends were reversed or went in unexpected directions.

The IFB Board designated time this summer for strategic discussions, which offered opportunities to hear from experts and staff on both long-ranging plans and ideas to move us into a brighter future. Also, IFB held a virtual Future of Ag Forum around similar themes. Lastly, the Resolutions Committee was asked to review the IFB policy in specific areas and come with ideas to the November Resolutions Committee. This Action Report was written with 2019 IFB Policy in mind. Any new policy developments this fall and at Annual Meeting will be incorporated.

**Topics reviewed:**
- Centering the importance of increasing farmer profitability,
- Increasing the demand for Illinois agricultural products,
- Internalizing the federal farm policies of recent years as we plan for future farm programs,
- Utilizing research and ongoing strategic planning to imagine the “Farmer of the Future”,
- Evaluating the disruptions we saw in our food system and carrying forth farmer needs throughout the supply chain,
- Solidifying our strategy to engage on the issue of climate change, and
- Planning for the ways COVID-19 will change Farm Bureau as an organization.

We hope that you review this Action Report and provide your input. We must have participation from our membership to make this effort successful. Thank you for reading.
Illinois Farm Bureau Mission Statement

To improve the economic well-being of agriculture and enrich the quality of farm family life.
**Priorities and Strategies**

1. **Build demand for Illinois crops and products.**

   **Goal statement**
   
   Advocate for trade, market development, and research and education to build demand for Illinois agricultural products.

   **Summary**
   
   The down farm economy has been propped up by federal farm payments in recent years during weather disasters, trade negotiations, and now COVID-19. Illinois farmers want to earn their living through the market. To do that, we need to understand current market opportunities for Illinois commodities including corn, soybeans, wheat, pork, and beef. Future projections of growth and competition must be considered. We must also consider the recent shifts in trade policy by world powers and the future role of organizations like the WTO. The identification of growth opportunities for main commodities and alternative markets, including local food and value-added crops, and education and training to the same, will be instrumental to the economic well-being of Illinois agriculture in the coming years.

   **At IFB, we:**
   
   - Advocate for trade by pushing for reduced tariffs and exploring new or expanded trade agreements, including a fair playing field for agricultural trade with the European Union and completing bilateral deals with the United Kingdom and Kenya.
   - Leverage our relationships with administration officials and like-minded coalitions to push for better trade agreements,
   - Partner with commodity groups like the IL Corn Growers to evaluate high octane low carbon fuel opportunities for the corn we grow,
   - Utilize our voting delegate voice on the U.S. Grains Council and U.S. Meat Export Federation to advocate for expanded use of IL commodities,
   - Evaluate farm income and profitability, as well as exports, to better understand global market trends, including competition,
   - Explore research opportunities for a) emerging new crops and opportunities to supply products that are regionally in deficit, and b) new uses for corn/soybeans,
   - Promote alternative markets, including for local food and specialty crops,
   - Provide education and programming for members to assist with marketing for farms that provide value-added products or alternative crop/animal products, sell direct, and utilize e-commerce opportunities.
   - Will seek to expand membership opportunities with specialty growers and support their needs,
   - Highlight stories and share learnings of farm business resilience during the down farm economy and the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Support Illinois farmers and farm families through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

**Goal Statement**
To support County Farm Bureaus and farmer members with necessary training and tools to remain engaged and supported through the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the depressed farm economy.

**Summary**
The down farm economy is taking a toll on IFB members. While IFB has ramped up efforts to raise awareness around the mental health of farmers and their support systems across the industry, more will be needed. The pandemic, in many ways, made that work more difficult, further isolating farmers and their families from their community networks. To continue connecting with farmer members, IFB pivoted to more virtual events this summer and has seen increased participation and a desire from members to always have virtual opportunities to connect with the organization. Training and resources are being offered to CFBs and needs assessing in terms of internet, equipment, and education. Ideas and feedback are being collected about the best ways to have meaningful connections with all members, now during pandemic-related restrictions, and into the future.

**At IFB, we:**

- Center the importance of farm profitability throughout all our work,
- Communicate relevant and timely information and resources for farmers and rural communities,
- Communicate farmer needs to local, state, and federal officials,
- Seek federal financial assistance as part of COVID-related support for the rural economy, including the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), the Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan program, and other Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds, including $5 Million secured to support livestock farmers negatively impacted by processing delays,
- Seek regulatory relief around transportation rules during COVID-related disruptions to the supply chain,
- Support technology solutions that enhance virtual member engagement for county Farm Bureaus and can complement in-person opportunities, including more on-demand options,
- Highlight technical training and educational opportunities for rural Illinoisans,
- Offer training and support for mental health programs in rural areas and targeted for farmers specifically,
- Partner with agricultural and rural community partners, including the Farm Family Resource Initiative, to support mental health counseling needs, and
- Advocate for rural broadband access where deficient, while protecting private property rights.
3. Prepare for farm policy shifts.

**Goal Statement**
Position IFB to be a leader in the development of farm policy, reflecting the goals and needs of IFB members in both the short term and long term.

**Summary**
The Illinois farm economy, of which 77% is determined by corn and soybean sales, has seen low farm revenues over much of the past eight years. While we had largely bipartisan support for the most recent Farm Bill, the current administration has supported farmers with additional, ad-hoc assistance in response to weather disasters, trade disruptions, and now COVID-19. Some of that assistance came about with the support of Congress – some did not. Trade priorities have changed, and the success of existing deals have been threatened by the downturn in the global economy caused by the pandemic. COVID’s disruptions to the food supply chain, and its powerful impact on the job market, have left millions of Americans in need of food. USDA quickly created a food assistance program that aimed to connect farmers and their products to Americans in need, but the program has room for improvement and does not address the grain commodities we grow here. As we look to the Presidential election and the next Farm Bill, IFB policy should be reviewed to make sure it encompasses our members’ needs going forward.

**At IFB, we:**
- Advocate for free trade,
- Advocate for farmer assistance during natural and man-made disasters,
- Educate farmer members and rural communities about opportunities for food assistance programs,
- Engage our members in a robust input gathering and strategy process for developing and improving farm bill programs, including crop insurance, and conservation and food assistance programs,
- Nurture relationships with agency career staff that transcend Presidential administrations,
- Advocate for young and beginning farmer opportunities, including those that allow farm families to bring family members into the farming operation,
- Remain steadfast in our policy to protect private property rights and protect farmer data and advocate for its value,
- Identify or create areas of farm policy that support the essential service of growing and storing food in times of disasters and look for opportunities to support farmers as essential workers,
- Advocate for policies that provide open and transparent input pricing and markets for our farm production.
4. Advocate for the farmer role within the food supply chain.

**Goal Statement**

Address concentration and resiliency in the food system to avoid disruption and provide fair value market opportunities for farmers, as well as explore options for farmers to enhance profitability through specialty and value-added markets.

**Summary**

During the early phases of COVID, rapid shifts in demand drove commodity prices down for Illinois farmers. Consumers experienced higher prices and retail food shortages. This dramatic shock to the food supply has raised questions about the resiliency of the U.S. food system, over the previous markers of a successful system: efficiency, volume, and low prices for consumers. Industry concentration is under a microscope. General commodity markets are as well, especially when it comes to the economic success of farmers. How do farmers get more of the food dollar in the future? How do the food trends of recent years, some accelerated by COVID-19 and others turned on their heads, continue to shape the food system of the U.S., and the farmers’ role in it?

**At IFB, we:**

- Highlight the unique farmer role as end user of inputs and originator of food crops and advocate for needs,
- Advocate for agriculture as an essential business and farmers as essential workers,
- Lift up pricing concerns to ensure farmers are receiving fair market value for their products and build momentum with elected officials for change, including by providing input to the AFBF beef/pork pricing task force and monitoring cases of price manipulation through the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) and USDA. Also, monitor and provide support to ongoing discussions regarding milk pricing.
- Identify bottlenecks in the supply chain and advocate with food businesses and industry partners for the farmer capacity to supply and fairness in production and pricing,
- Continue to strengthen our partnerships throughout the food supply chain, from food companies to non-profits and university experts,
- Identify and advocate for regulatory relief opportunities for livestock and food crop producers, and for small and very small meat processors in Illinois,
- Identify federal grants or low-interest loan opportunities through USDA Rural Development for small and very small food processors in rural communities,
- Partner with the IL and American Assoc. of Meat Processors, IL university meat science departments/programs, and the IL Crop Improvement Assoc./American Seed Trade Assoc. to connect farmers to processors and products to retail and consumers,
- Provide tools and support to county Farm Bureaus to help them counter animal activist activity,
- Support the growing local food movement by highlighting Illinois farms and making it easier for county Farm Bureaus to promote their members,
- Support agritourism businesses by pushing for liability relief and developing emergency protocols and season contingency plans, recognizing the important role they play in connecting consumers to farm life and food,
- Promote to the public and elected officials the ability of farmers to grow and provide food during a major pandemic and other times of national need.
5. Identify climate and conservation programs that benefit all Illinois farmers.

Goal Statement
To position farmers and rural Illinois to be fairly compensated in the climate change debate.

Summary
IFB updated the Global Climate Change policy in 2019 to reflect ongoing discussions about the future direction of climate programs. IFB continues to explore ideas related to carbon storage in the soil through soil health improvement practices, carbon trading, and payments for ecosystem services. Numerous efforts are ongoing to explore ideas and build infrastructure for potential programs once the political environment is favorable. For Illinois farmers, there are state considerations, in addition to federal and private opportunities, as Illinois is a signatory to the U.S. Climate Alliance, which thus far has focused on renewable energy. IFB is closely watching the movements towards environmental justice initiatives as they are included in future climate policies.
At IFB, we:

- Convey to policymakers and partners that for climate policies to be successful, farmers must be involved in their development through a seat at the table, and they must see the benefits and be compensated for their efforts,
- Proactively share our policy and our feedback to proposed climate policy ideas,
- Examine conservation and climate programs to reduce regulatory burdens on farmers, including:
  - the burden of additionality (where farmers must start new practices and disregard existing beneficial practices),
  - the cost of implementation, including infrastructure needs,
  - the verification requirements or programs, including manpower on the ground and trust with partners,
  - ensuring that early adopters are rewarded and not penalized for future opportunities,
- Provide information and education to members on the economic costs and benefits of the evolving industry of private carbon markets and sustainability initiatives and connect members with opportunities,
- Research and communicate to members the economic benefits of conservation practices and the economic value of carbon as the discussion matures,
- Monitor Illinois’ actions towards meeting U.S. Climate Alliance goals and crafting a new State Water Plan, and articulate farmer needs and concerns regarding agriculture and rural life,
- Continue building industry relationships and nurturing our network, recognizing the pressure industry is feeling from consumers to be socially responsible, and engaging industry in the carbon markets discussion,
- Work with USDA, NASA scientists, and state experts to explore remaining scientific questions about climate-related impacts to agriculture and farming,
- Support on-farm research and real-world learning with university scientists who examine best practices for management and mitigation,
- Examine the scientific validity and efficacy of proposed solutions,
- Build relationships with regulatory agency staff to educate them about farming and monitor the direction of their work,
- Explore regional and national climate-related coalitions and serve on advisory committees for new initiatives,
- Identify climate data sources that speak to Illinois agriculture and communicate about new and emerging data and technological advances that can help farmers on the farm,
- Share positive stories with elected officials of the ways farmers steward Illinois’ natural resources, conserve resources by increasing efficiencies in production, and produce and use renewable energy,
- Communicate this multi-faceted work to IFB members and provide them with talking points so they can carry the message that we are positioned well to represent our members in future opportunities in this space,
- Be a resource for unbiased information regarding climate and weather for our members.