The agricultural community will have a powerful ally in its corner as it gears up for the next Farm Bill debate: the general public. The results of a national survey of 1,000 registered voters, conducted in April, demonstrated overwhelming support for farmers, U.S. farm policy and crop insurance.

This poll asked many of the same questions posed during a similar 2014 study, which provided a good benchmark to gauge public opinion during the current Farm Bill. What struck me about both polls was the continued bipartisan nature of agriculture’s support.

Voters are increasingly unhappy with the direction of the country and have been inundated with polarizing political rhetoric in recent years. That usually creates a clear line of division from a political perspective, but not with agriculture.

Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike all hold favorable views of farmers. In fact, farmers’ 86 percent favorable ranking is on par with numbers usually reserved for universally liked professions, such as teachers and soldiers.

Figure 1 show that farmers’ favorable rating is up slightly from 84 percent in 2014, demonstrating that attempts by agriculture’s critics to sully the image of producers may not be having the desired effect. In fact, when you look at levels of support, you see that 66 percent of Americans today hold “very favorable” opinions of farmers, which is eight points higher than the survey conducted two years earlier.

This bipartisan support likewise extends to farm policy. After hearing a list of various components of the federal budget, 92 percent of respondents agreed that helping America’s farmers was an important use of taxpayer dollars. That figure is five points higher than the last poll, and it puts agriculture in the same rarified air as federal spending on the military and education.

What’s more, there was a three-point jump in the number of people saying federal
spending on farmers was “very important” when compared to polling work done two years ago.

Of course, it’s not that surprising since the survey also unveiled that eight in 10 Americans believe that a strong, thriving farming industry is a critical component of the country’s security. (See Figure 2.)

This support is not just limited to the abstract of “helping farmers” because it is a sympathetic group. When given a description of the current crop insurance program, 79 percent of respondents support it. Support remains high even when tested against a common argument used by crop insurance opponents.

After hearing the accusation that “our nation’s food is grown by farming corporations that can easily afford crop insurance premiums without taxpayer money” or “special treatment,” crop insurance still came out on top by a two-to-one margin.

That same choice was presented during the 2014 poll, too, and it had a similar split in favor of crop insurance.

Not every question asked this year was a repeat from past work. For example, the 2016 survey also shed valuable light on the design of crop insurance:

- Voters think farmers and taxpayers are better served by insurance delivered by the private sector, rather than the federal government, by a more than 20-point margin; and,

- More than two-thirds think it is a good idea to have farmers contribute their own money to help fund the farm safety net.

Again, this is positive news since private-sector delivery and cost sharing are at the heart of the crop insurance system, where farmers pay a portion of their insurance premiums and shoulder, on average, 25 percent of crop losses through deductibles.

Those polled were impressed, and the vast majority agreed that the current premium (Figure 3) and deductible amounts (Figure 4) absorbed by farmers were appropriate.

Bottom line: Agriculture appears to be one of the rare highlights where Congress found a solution that voters are overwhelmingly happy with, which should bode well for rural America as lawmakers begin charting a policy course for agriculture’s future.

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