Review of *The Making of the 1996 Farm Act* by Lyle P. Schertz and Otto C. Doering III

Roy Frederick  
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch

Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/503

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Schertz and Doering have produced a useful, comprehensive volume that details key actions leading to passage of the 1996 Farm Act. Although both authors are distinguished economists, the book is more about the political process—and associated policymakers—than economics. It should have lasting value, if for no other reason than that the 1996 legislation differed greatly from the twenty or so farm acts preceding it. For anyone who has wondered why the outcome was different in 1996, this book is must reading.

The authors begin, correctly, with a chapter on the 1994-95 setting for farm legislation, since farm bills are typically shaped by current realities, not prospective future conditions. Among the realities of 1994-95: Republicans had gained control of both house of Congress; budget balancing was in vogue; and questions were being raised about the appropriateness of taking land out of production. Near the end of 1995 and through the early
months of 1996, moreover, commodity prices were rising, sparked in no small part by excellent agricultural exports. If there was ever a time to make a radical change in commodity price and income supports, this appeared to be it.

Chapters 2 through 11 offer a detailed account of what happened in the development of the legislation. Perhaps more than any other person, Congressman (now Senator) Pat Roberts, Republican of Kansas and Chair of the House Committee on Agriculture, was the key figure. In the end, his main objective seems to have been to provide as much support as possible for farmers, given spending limitations imposed by the congressional budget process. He also supported increased cropping flexibility. The latter provision resulted in the legislation being dubbed “Freedom to Farm,” although its official title is the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996.

Along the way, Chairman Roberts had to overcome doubts by other members of his committee (including some fellow Republicans), gain the support of Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana and Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, and ultimately (and perhaps indirectly) persuade President Clinton not to veto the bill. The important contribution by Senator Pat Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, in bringing along enough Democratic votes to keep the measure from being filibustered in the Senate also must be acknowledged.

Although Schertz and Doering focus on the actions of those in the legislative and executive branches of government, they do not overlook the impact of lobbyists and the media. Overall, one has the sense of balance in the story they tell.

Two concluding chapters also are significant. In chapter 12, the authors look to the future, concluding, perhaps surprisingly, that farm commodity supports are likely to extend well beyond 2002 when the current legislation expires. Chapter 13 is a primer on agricultural policy prior to 1996.

Just about anyone interested in American agriculture, I believe, would find this book worthwhile reading. Leaders of agricultural organizations might find it particularly appealing. Some or all of it would also be good supplemental reading for college-level agricultural policy courses. Roy Frederick, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.