

Corporate farm bill draws praise, nays

By Randy Essex

Farmers and farm groups are split in their opinions concerning a bill that would restrict corporate ownership of farm land in Nebraska.

"Farm Power" and "I support agriculture" buttons, mixed with American Agriculture Movement jackets and caps, decorated the room Thursday, while the Legislature's Agriculture and Environment Committee heard testimony from 17 witnesses on LB190.

The bill's sponsor, Adams Sen. George Burrows, said corporations already control food prices in the grocery store, and could control the price at both ends if they get control of the land.

Burrows showed a 15-minute tape from CBS television's *60 Minutes* program regarding foreign ownership of farm land in California. The tape said land prices are forced up by corporations paying inflated prices for land, making it impossible for individual farmers to expand or for young people to buy land.

Burrows said his bill is not directed solely at foreign corporations. He argued that domestic corporations can cover up foreign ownership and it is difficult to separate the two.

Burrows' bill would allow only family-based farms or corporations.

Under LB190, a farm owner could move off the farm and still hold (family) corporate ownership for 30 years, or until a family member moved back onto the farm.

Burrows said because surrounding states—except to the west—have such laws, Nebraska is left as a target for corporate investors. He said there is not much corporate ownership in the state now, and argued that the Legislature should act before there is more.

One corporation owner, Ernest Rousek of Lincoln, said his corporate farm near O'Neill has put three former family farmers back on the farm after they went out of business. He said the farm has patronized local businesses and has made efficient use of the land.

He said he thinks the bill discriminates because his corporation would not be allowed to buy more land and enjoy corporate protection, while Burrows, whose farm is owned by a family corporation, can expand.

Rousek said he thinks it is unfair to put American corporations in the same class as foreign companies that are not subject to tax laws.

In support of the bill, Dorothy McKay, representing the Women Involved in Farm Economics, told the committee she doesn't want farmers to become sharecroppers working for a corporation.

"I've heard that corporations control everything except food, and that's only because the farmer is a pretty independent cuss," Mrs. McKay said.

On the other hand, Glenn Ladioyt, representing Nebraskans for Progressive Agriculture, said the bill would restrict the free enterprise system and undermine the state's economy.

He called the *60 Minutes* report shown by Burrows sensational, and argued that investment is a catalyst for efficiency.

Matt Barron, who works for the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture, told the committee his state is interested in watching anti-corporation laws work in Midwestern states. Barron said his state has lost its tobacco industry to corporate interests.

He said corporations do not make effective use of land. Barron also said an upstate New York dairy farm owned by Iranian interests was found to be a headquarters for an Iranian intelligence operation last summer.

Also supporting the bill were representatives of the American Agriculture Movement, the Nebraska AFL-CIO, the president of which is Omaha Sen. William Brennan, the Nebraska State Grange, Nebraska State Electrical Workers, the Nebraska Farmers' Union and the National Farmers' Organization.

The electrical workers supported the bill because of the number of farm children who are unable to stay on their family's farm and must find work elsewhere, their representative Ralph Crowl said.

Others opposing the bill were realtors, the Nebraska Stock Grower's Organization and the Nebraska Livestock Feeder's Association.

The bill has been introduced every year since 1974. It contains a grandfather clause that would allow existing corporate farms to stay in operation.

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