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Georgia peanut farmer Morris testifies at Farm Bill Hearing in Georgia

TIFTON, Ga.—Peanut farmers support the marketing loan program but the current program prices are set too low to be a true safety net for producers, says Armond Morris, chairman of the Georgia Peanut Commission, in testimony before Members of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. Morris testified recently before the House Agriculture Committee Farm Bill Hearing at the National Archives Southeast Region in Morrow, Ga.

The members of Congress in attendance were on hand to hear from Georgia farmers and to take suggestions on the next farm bill, which will come before Congress in 2012. The Georgia members of Congress in attendance include David Scott, D-Ga.; Jim Marshall, D-Ga.; and Sanford Bishop, D-Ga.

“The number one goal for our producer organization is to obtain a legitimate safety net for our growers,” Morris says. “We do not believe the current \$355 per ton marketing loan is sufficient to be a real safety net for producers.”

According to data, presented by Morris, from the University of Georgia’s National Center for Peanut Competitiveness, the peanut variable costs have increased 52 percent per acre since 2002. U.S. farmers are also competing with other countries like Argentina, China and India where environmental costs, other regulations and labor rates are much less than U.S. input costs, Morris explains.

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Morris continues by stating, the loan repayment rate for peanuts has not functioned appropriately since the 2002 Farm Bill and the committee included language in the 2008 Farm Bill that has not been adhered to. When setting the loan repayment rate, USDA has not taken into account the world market prices, Morris says. Thus, the USDA posted price for peanuts set every Tuesday afternoon is too high.

Morris praised Congress for establishing the Conservation Stewardship Program included in the current farm bill which includes provisions for a crop rotation program. The program will enhance the environment and help improve crop yields. The Georgia Peanut Commission is currently working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to increase grower sign-ups and hopes the committee will continue the program in the 2012 Farm Bill.

Another important aspect of the farm bill includes feeding programs at USDA. Peanut butter is a long-time participant in the school lunch program. According to Morris, the peanut industry does not have the resources to reach even a small percentage of these nutrition programs illustrating the nutritional value, low cost and long shelf life of peanut butter.

“We need USDA to partner with our industry in outreach programs to school nutritionists and assist in working with international relief agencies,” Morris says. “Our congressional delegation and industry leaders struggled to get the attention of those preparing food assistance for Haiti relief. Even though the peanut industry provided 3 million servings of peanut butter to the relief effort, we were not successful in reaching decision-makers involved in establishing food assistance lists for U.S. and international aid.”

According to Morris, USDA has the experience and resources to help facilitate communications between the peanut industry and major relief organizations. In conclusion, Morris testified that production agriculture is part of our national security. He says production agriculture should be at the top of the list of roles for USDA.

Morris' testimony is available on the Georgia Peanut Commission website at www.gapeanuts.com.