

**Rep. Spanberger Remarks for House Agriculture Committee Member Day**  
**“Revitalization & Reform: Building a Long-Term Future for the Rural Economy”**  
**December 11, 2019**

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**Good morning, and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address my fellow Members of the House Agriculture Committee.**

I am proud to represent the people of Central Virginia in the U.S. House. Our district is home to more than **3,000 farms**—and **96-percent** of those farms are *family* farms. Across our rural communities, crop and livestock production remains a mainstay of our way of life—and it binds families together across generations. These producers are an extremely important part of our region’s economy, and their dedication is evident each and every day—as the saying goes, “*They work in acres, not hours.*”

**Since coming to the House of Representatives, I’ve listened firsthand to the concerns of our rural neighbors who work in acres.**

I’ve heard clearly about the need to focus on revitalizing our rural infrastructure—and I’ve heard loud and clear the need to advance long-awaited reforms. As Members of Congress and of this Committee, we have an opportunity to heed these calls and enact policies that can create an environment for farmers and rural communities to succeed. Today, I would like to use this opportunity to talk about how reliable broadband, trade, labor, and technical assistance complement one another to enable farmers and rural communities to reach their potential.

During my conversations—whether over a cup of coffee or on my two-day Farm Tour, I’ve continued to hear a similar refrain: The lack of high-speed broadband internet is not being addressed swiftly enough. Limited broadband access inhibits the ability of our farms and businesses to stay competitive in an increasingly-connected economy.

While we’ve made improvements over the past few decades in boosting high-speed internet access across rural America, we haven’t adequately addressed the need for new and expanded broadband *infrastructure*—including in portions of Central Virginia. At the present moment, roughly **one-quarter** of my district’s farms still do not have reliable access to the internet.

**Today, I’d like to thank many of my colleagues on this Committee for joining efforts I’ve led this year to increase funding for the USDA’s Reconnect Program.**

From South Dakota to South Carolina, we’ve demonstrated that there is indeed a strong, bipartisan, and cross-country consensus on the top priority of boosting rural broadband access.

**And why is that? Well, fundamentally, we all recognize that the issue of broadband connectivity is an issue of equal opportunity.**

Increased access to the internet means students can complete their homework assignments, farmers can take full advantage of precision ag tools, and seniors can access telehealth services.

Essentially, by making sure our rural schools and businesses are on the same playing field as urban and suburban areas, high-speed internet serves as a great equalizer.

**And while we're discussing the need to work together on issues that can keep our farms competitive, there are few areas where farmers, cattlemen, poultry producers, and agribusinesses agree more than on the issue of trade.**

At a time of heightened market volatility and fluctuating farm income levels, our ag producers need unwavering market access when it comes to trade with our partners in Canada and Mexico.

**Canada and Mexico are two of Virginia's largest trading partners, and throughout my first year in office, I've heard farmers describe the need to protect these critical trading relationships.**

We need to advance a USMCA that can protect these relationships, *expand* access to North American markets, and actively advance the economic interests of U.S. businesses and workers. As I've said before, *we need to get this done*.

**Just last week, I joined five of my colleagues in a bipartisan meeting with Vice President Pence to discuss the status of USMCA negotiations.**

As House negotiators, the administration, and U.S. Trade Representative Lighthizer work out the final stages of this agreement, I hope all Members of the Committee will understand that American agriculture is closely watching this situation—and that includes family farms and producers in my district. They understand the need for reforms to NAFTA, and they've been patiently waiting.

**I'd also like to use this time to discuss the need for additional reforms to our immigration system, which directly affects our country's producers.**

Today, we will vote on the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* on the floor of the House. This legislation, which I helped introduce with a bipartisan group of my colleagues, would provide necessary changes to our immigration system and the H-2A program as we look to stabilize our farm workforce.

**Right now, my district ranks first in the Commonwealth for annual greenhouse sales.**

Clearly, horticulture is a key component of our district's rural economy, and I've made a point to personally visit with our greenhouse operators and hear directly about the challenges they face.

**Among their concerns continues to be the need for labor certainty.**

Greenhouses—much like dairy farms—need year-round labor, not just extra hands during planting and harvest months.

**The *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* would enact a major reform—it would create a new, year-round guest worker program. These changes are enthusiastically supported by my district's greenhouses and dairy producers.**

**This bill is the result of bipartisan, months-long negotiations with a broad range of parties.**

It's an example of how working *across the aisle—in good faith*—can lead to actual reforms of our nation's broken immigration system and can help address the labor needs of U.S. businesses without undercutting American workers.

**In my role as the Chair of the Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee and as I visit with Central Virginian producers, I have also seen the important role that technical assistance plays in terms of improving farmers' profitability and resilience.**

Whether the guidance comes from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, conservation districts, extensions, peer farmers, or others, this engagement is invaluable and is a key reason as to why American agriculture excels and innovates at every turn.

Agriculture remains Virginia's number-one sector, and with improved infrastructure and much-needed reforms and technical assistance, we can plant the seeds to ensure its long-term success in that position.

**By making investments in rural infrastructure and providing technical assistance to farmers, our rural areas can support family farms, recruit new workers, and innovate for the future.**

And by protecting the existing workforce and expanding existing trade relationships, we can give farm workers and businesses the certainty they need.

Thank you.