

By Johnny Chappell

RALEIGH – Congressman David Price holds a farmers breakfast every year. There's always a good crowd, but with the 2012 Farm Bill a hot topic locally and in Washington, those who make a living on the land again packed the house Tuesday.

A lot of the talk focused on the good news in farming. North Carolina's agriculture exports are up 79 percent from a decade ago. And in parts of the state, the number of farmers has also increased over the past 10 years.

"It's a different kind of farming," Price said. "It's smaller operations, specialty crops oriented toward a lot of restaurants that feature farm fresh food, a lot of farmers markets."

Those small farmers face big challenges from the rising cost of fuel to expected cuts in federal funding.

USDA Under Secretary Doug O'Brien talked about the Farm Bill, which will set the nation's course for agriculture and food over several years.

"We need to make sure that Congress focuses on a good farm safety net," O'Brien said.

He also says that includes disaster relief in cases like Hurricane Irene. The storm last August wiped out much of our state's cash crops east of I-95.

"We need a policy so that farmers know that they can deal with the inherent risks of agriculture," O'Brien said. "And that's particularly right there in eastern North Carolina."

Price says disaster assistance as it relates to agriculture is a constant struggle.

"Simply because their aren't fixed formulas there," he said. "There really is an effort required each time we have a disaster to make sure the farmers get what they need."

Those in the audience asked questions related the need for better crop insurance and conservation policies.

Nationally, farmers did very well in 2011. Last year saw records for farm income and farm exports.