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Small farmers want farm bill prioritized

By Mark Oswald / Journal Staff Writer

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The government shutdown may soon be over, but small farmers and ranchers from northern New Mexico on Wednesday said they want Congress to focus on another lingering issue – a farm bill.

Leaders from several agricultural, ranching, acequia and economic development groups met at the Santa Fe Farmer's Market to rally for what they call a "full and fair" farm bill.

That means including support for small, beginner or minority farmers, not just the large-scale farming operations that get most of the appropriations from what is typically a \$500 billion bill, said Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association.

"We want to keep those gains" in support of diversity and fairness that have become part of the bill in recent years, Garcia said.

The coalition is also opposed to food-stamp cuts and other provisions in a House version of the bill, including having the nutrition assistance programs expire two years before the next farm bill.

"We strongly oppose this effort to split the political alliance between the country and the city that has sustained our national food and farm policy for decades," said Dave Sanchez of the Northern New Mexico Stockmans' Association.

Garcia said that not only does New Mexico have high rates of "food insecurity" and hunger, but the food stamp program also helps farmer-vendors who sell to assistance recipients from their stands. "There are vendors who depend on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits," she said.

The last extension of the farm bill, which is typically redone every five years, expired on Sept. 30, also the first day of the government shutdown caused by Congress' inability reach consensus on budget matters and Obamacare.

Sanchez said the extension that dates back to January "omitted 37 innovative programs for family-size and minority farmers" that were part of the 2008 farm bill, including an assistance program for disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and conservation funding set-asides.

Pati Martinson of the Taos County Economic Development Corp. said that previously “we were largely ignored” in agricultural grant programs. Terri Badhand, also with the Taos County group, said it is right to reinvest “in communities where so much has been taken out.”

Harold Trujillo of the acequia association, who has a Mora Valley ranching and farming operation, said it’s been a tough period for agriculture in New Mexico, with drought followed by floods, and then the congressional wars holding up programs that could help.

He said he has personally been affected by delays in getting help from a program for organic farmers that would help fund part of a water efficiency upgrade that includes a pond lining and a drip irrigation system.

The rally in Santa Fe was held as part of the United Nations’ World Food Day and the Global Day of Action for Food Sovereignty.