

Protect Our Important Agricultural Land

Stemming the Loss of America's Farm and Ranch Land

An Effective Partnership for Success

Approximately half of the two billion acres of land in America is working agricultural land—farm and ranch land that provides healthy food, clean water, open space and wildlife habitat. But we are losing more than one million acres of this finite resource every year to development and fragmentation. Stemming the loss of valuable farm and ranch land from conversion to non-agricultural development is a critical challenge. To help meet this challenge, American Farmland Trust has crafted proposals that will:

- Allow the federal government to better respond to state, local and private farm and ranch land protection program needs;
- Create more effective federal partnership tools for state, local and private efforts to protect irreplaceable farm and ranch land resources;
- Minimize the negative impacts of federal projects and activities on farm and ranch land;
- Ensure that federal government-based lending and foreclosure processes do not contribute to the conversion of farm and ranch land;
- Provide timely federal research to policymakers on current and projected land use trends; and,
- Reward landowners who have made long-term commitments to keep land available for agricultural uses.

Much of the country's prime agricultural land is close to urban centers, with favorable climates for agricultural production and producing vegetables, fruits, meat and milk for local markets. In the global marketplace, this land is an increasingly important competitive edge for our agricultural producers.

Status Quo: Broken and at Cross-Purposes

Despite good intentions, two signature federal programs designed to help stem the loss of farm and ranch land to nonagricultural development—the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) and the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA)—have not lived up to expectations.

FRPP has enjoyed the support of Congress in the last two farm bills. But burdensome guidelines and policies developed by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service have crippled the program and even cast doubt among landowners on the value of state, local and private efforts to protect farm and ranch land. The Farmland Protection Policy Act was intended to reduce the influence of federal policies, spending and permitting on the direct loss of agricultural land, but unfortunately, the rules implementing FPPA provide little or no teeth to compel federal departments and agencies to comply with the law.

As a result, the federal government has contributed to the loss of valuable agricultural land either through its own direct actions or through the financing or permitting of projects by others.



The Federal Government Can Make a Difference in Farm and Ranch Land Protection

The following recommendations from AFT will substantially enhance the federal government's role as a partner with state, local and private efforts to protect farm and ranch land and plan for the future of local agriculture:

- **Triple the funding for the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP).** Increased funding will help meet the large unmet demand for this program (over \$100 million in 2005).
- **Improve the effectiveness of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.** Re-design FRPP into a grants program targeting qualified, established state and local government, and private farm and ranch land protection programs.
- **Create a federal matching grants program to plan for the future of agriculture.** USDA would offer competitive grants to state and local governments to develop comprehensive land resource and economic development plans for the future of agriculture.
- **Amend the Farmland Protection Policy Act.** Changes would reduce the likelihood of federal actions resulting in the conversion of farm and ranch land.
- **Provide timely research and statistics on the impact of current and projected land use trends on the nation's agricultural land base.** Establish a two-year Presidential Commission to research the importance of protecting an adequate agricultural land base. Improve the National Resources Inventory to consistently provide statistically relevant land use data in the nation's most-threatened agricultural areas down to an appropriate local level.
- **Reward landowners willing to make long-term commitments to keeping land in agricultural use.** Change the current criteria used by USDA conservation cost-share programs to consider the length of time committed by the applicant to keep land available for agricultural use. Provide federal tax incentives to promote the long-term protection of agricultural land.
- **Ensure that government-based lending and foreclosure processes do not contribute to further conversion of farmland.** Authorize debt forgiveness in exchange for agricultural conservation easements. Ensure that government-backed agricultural lending does not underwrite farmland conversion through credit subsidies or collateral loans in excess of agricultural value.



For more information about this or any of the policies recommended in *Agenda 2007*, please visit AFT's Web site at www.farmland.org or send an email to info@farmland.org.

February 2007

AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST