

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

Protecting Working Farms and Ranches for Future Generations

More Efficient and Effective

Every year, more than one million acres of working farm and ranch land is lost due to development and fragmentation. Stemming the loss of our nation's valuable farm and ranch land is a critical challenge for landowners, state and local governments, and private non-profit organizations. In order for the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) to be an efficient and effective partner in protecting the nation's agricultural lands, American Farmland Trust proposes changes that will:

- Position the program to better assist in protecting the agricultural production capacity of eligible land;
- Award grants to well-established and active state, local and private farm and ranch land protection programs;
- Reduce unnecessary duplicative rules and burdensome oversight for state and local partners;
- Eliminate the backup federal power of enforcement when not needed; and,
- Reflect the outstanding demand and need to protect farm and ranch land across the country by increasing annual funding for the program to \$300 million.



Status Quo: Burdensome Rules and Oversight

Over the last two farm bills, Congress has provided increasing levels of support for the protection of agricultural land through the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. This program has provided vital financial assistance to state, local and private partners in the protection of agricultural land from future development. Unfortunately, burdensome guidelines and policies developed by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—the agency administering the program—have threatened the effectiveness of the program while thwarting the federal government's role in the protection of our nation's irreplaceable agricultural land.

A Productive Partnership

AFT's proposed changes to FRPP efficiently re-calibrate the relationship between USDA and state, local and private farm and ranch land protection partners. Established state, local and private farm and ranch land protection programs with successful track records, as acknowledged by NRCS, will assume the administrative and legal responsibilities of managing FRPP's contribution to projects.

Improvements That Will Make a Difference

- Clarifying the legislative intent to protect a wide range of agricultural lands by eliminating the "protecting topsoil" language, while still maintaining the focus on the most productive agricultural land.
- Establishing that block grants be made to qualified state and local government programs, and qualified programs operated by non-government organizations (e.g., land trusts), with grants made for programs, not individual transactions ("pending offer" language is eliminated).
- Allowing qualified farm and ranch land protection programs to determine their own purchase priorities, and to use their own procedures and legal documents (e.g., easement language). Beyond the basic restriction against non-farm development, any other land use limitations (e.g., impervious surface coverage) are left up to the discretion of state and local government programs and non-government organizations that negotiate the easements.
- Allowing all other eligible state and local government programs and non-government organizations to remain eligible for funds to be applied to individual transactions as provided for in current law.
- Eliminating the backup federal power of enforcement for qualified farm and ranch land protection programs. The federal contingent right is also eliminated for other easements where a state or local agency, or a qualified farm and ranch land protection program, serves as a backup.
- Increasing the annual fund authorization from \$100 million to \$300 million.

Programs will be considered "qualified" if they have a well-established track record of conservation easement transactions to protect farm and ranch land (at least three years of operation and at least 10 properties), the capacity to monitor and enforce such easements, and a sound financial base.

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.