



## 2007 Farm Bill Policy Recommendation

### **Expand and Improve Technical Assistance**

#### **Recommendation**

Increase funding and improve producer access to technical assistance programs, and direct USDA to produce and implement a coordinated investment plan to construct a technical services infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also amend the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) charter act to exempt technical assistance from the Section-11 spending cap.

#### **Rationale**

As we shift agricultural spending to stewardship and sound land management practices, delivering high quality technical advice to farmers, consistently and within a short period of time, is critical. Farmers will need a lot of help to continue to grow a mix of crops and livestock while simultaneously producing environmental benefits and amenities for the public. Unfortunately, conflicting interpretations of Congressional intent concerning the funding of technical assistance continue to hamper efforts to improve the system. Although the Technical Service Provider (TSPs) initiative is helping to augment the delivery of technical assistance to producers, the geographic distribution of TSPs is uneven and most TSPs qualify in just a few practice categories, almost entirely limited to cropland.

#### **Mechanics**

Increase funding and improve producer access to technical assistance programs:

With a lack of planning assistance and no access to TSPs, many small producers and specialty crop producers miss out on conservation programs like EQIP. It will take time for NRCS to develop an integrated plan. In the meantime, we should simplify practice components and improve training opportunities. We recommend establishing and funding a program at all four regional IPM Centers to work with universities and NRCS in their regions. They would train individuals from the private sector and other agencies who already know how to assess farm operations to identify existing resource concerns, discuss potential practices and help farmers develop a conservation plan (and/or a whole farm plan). The IPM Centers can tailor curriculum training to the region's crop and resource needs.

We have also added a section titled "Enhance Emergency Preparedness and Surveillance" at the end of *Agenda 2007's* "Foundation" section. The farmers and ranchers advising us are acutely aware of the threat posed by invasive plants, animals and diseases. Losses to invasive pests and disease costs agriculture more than \$120 billion annually. Because of this, they singled out the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) for special attention. Until 2002, APHIS was solely responsible for inspecting incoming passengers and cargo at U.S. ports of entry for prohibited plant and animal materials. User fees along with supplemental annual appropriations covered the costs of inspection. In 2002, over 2,600 APHIS inspectors were transferred to the



## American Farmland Trust

Department of Homeland Security's Border and Transportation Security mission area. Many think this has been ineffective because the operational methods between former APHIS employees and Homeland Security staff are so different.

Direct USDA to produce and implement a coordinated investment plan to construct a technical services infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

We recommend that USDA produce and implement a coordinated investment plan that couples CCC funds for technical assistance with strategic increases in discretionary spending for research, education and the conservation technical assistance program. The budget would allocate resources to federal, state, and local governmental agencies; nongovernmental organizations; and the private sector based on a realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each sector to meet the site-specific needs of local communities. The investment plan would prioritize research and development to produce a new generation of integrated conservation planning tools; train general conservation practitioners to provide comprehensive planning services to help producers qualify for higher tier levels of green payments; integrate advice from many specialists including TSPs into systems that improve the overall environmental performance of farms and ranches; provide the technical tools, training and capacity to deliver management-intensive conservation systems; strengthen scientific and technical support by creating interdisciplinary teams to serve field staff in multiple counties; contract directly with TSPs to fill critical gaps in technical capacity at local levels; and reward TSPs who reach out to socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers and ranchers.

Amend the Commodity Credit Corporation charter act to exempt technical assistance from the Section-11 spending cap:

The 2002 Farm Bill included provisions mandating the Secretary to use a portion of the CCC funds provided for conservation programs to pay for technical assistance to implement those programs. However, differing legal interpretations of conference committee proceedings have resulted in confusion that continues to short-change taxpayers, producers and the environment. This could be resolved by amending the CCC charter act to exempt technical assistance from the Section-11 spending cap.