



2007 Farm Bill Policy Recommendation

Protect our Agricultural Land Base

Recommendation

Establish the protection of a strategic land base as a core principle of federal farm policy.

Rationale

Almost half the private land in the United States is devoted to agriculture, and much of this land faces development pressure from an expanding population that radiates out from cities and towns across the nation. Currently, we lose an estimated 1.2 million acres of farmland to suburban uses every year. These losses add up over time and may be unsustainable, as our population grows and the demands for food, fiber, biofuels, industrial raw materials and environmental amenities increase.

Future farm policies must adequately address the threat to our strategic agricultural land resources from non-farm development and other fragmented uses. We must maintain and protect enough good agricultural land, in the right places, to supply fresh, healthy sources of food, fiber, raw industrial materials and energy to serve our domestic needs and meet export demands that are essential to maintaining a healthy balance of trade.

Description

Our recommendations double the funding for, and improve the effectiveness of, the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) in order to permanently protect more farm and ranch land; help state and local governments identify and maintain a strategic base of agricultural land; strengthen policies so that the federal government isn't contributing unnecessarily to the conversion of important farmland; provide the information necessary for our country to manage its agricultural land base to meet future demands; recognize and help farmers who commit to keeping land in agriculture; and ensure that government-based lending and foreclosure processes do not contribute to further conversion of farmland.

Mechanics

Double the funding for, and improve the effectiveness of, the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) in order to permanently protect more farm and ranch land:

Doubling the funding for FRPP will help to meet the large unmet demand for FRPP funds. Expand the statutory purpose to recognize the contribution of farmland to the agricultural economy and the ecosystem and the landscape benefits provided to the public. Re-design FRPP into a grants program to be administered by the NRCS state conservationists and target a set portion of funds within each state to qualified and established state, local and private farm and ranch land protection programs. Relax the matching requirements to allow for a higher federal match in special circumstances and to allow landowners to donate a higher percentage of the match, if they so choose. Eliminate the federal contingent right in the deeds of FRPP easements in projects involving qualified and established state, local and private farm and ranch land protection



programs. Establish a national FRPP advisory board.

Authorize and fund a federal matching grants program to help plan for the future of agriculture:

Offer matching grants to state and local governments to develop comprehensive plans for agriculture, covering land resource needs and economic development opportunities. USDA would manage the competitive grants program. State and local governments would be eligible and required to provide a one-to-one match. Grants could be used to develop plans that assess needs and identify strategies for supporting farm and ranch land protection and transition; agricultural economic development; food security and/or local and regional food processing and agricultural infrastructure. The matching grants program could catalyze local and state governments to plan for the future of their agricultural industries, farmland base and food systems.

Amend the Farmland Protection Policy Act:

Amend the Act so that the federal government stops being a catalyst for farmland conversion and instead becomes an active player in protecting land for future agricultural needs. Strengthen the FPPA to

- 1) Require a “no feasible alternatives” test for federal projects that impact permanently protected farm and ranch land;
- 2) Mandate a full evaluation of projects and actions covered by the act to be conducted by the sponsoring federal agency or department;
- 3) Require public disclosure of the results of the evaluation and actions to be taken; and 4) Allow for a public “cause of action.”

Provide timely research to federal, state and local policymakers about the impacts of current and projected land use trends on the nation’s agricultural land base:

Establish a two-year commission with eight members appointed by the U.S. president to research the importance of protecting an adequate agricultural land base. Move the National Resources Inventory (and relevant staff) from NRCS over to the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service with a directive to develop and publish statistically relevant data about land use trends in the nation’s most-threatened agricultural areas down to the county level.

Modify project ranking criteria and cost-share standards for USDA conservation programs to recognize and reward long-term commitments to keeping land in agriculture:

Change the current indices used by the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to consider the length of time committed by the applicant to keep land available for agricultural use. For example, farmers who commit to not developing their farmland for 10 years would receive additional points in an EQIP ranking system or be eligible for a higher federal cost-share percentage in their EQIP contract than farmers who did not commit to keeping their land available for farming. In this scenario, farmers with permanently protected land would receive even greater points for their EQIP ranking and/or the most favorable cost-share rates.



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 (similar to the Farm Service Agency's Debt for Nature Program but without restrictions on future agricultural use). Ensure that government-backed agricultural lending does not underwrite farmland conversion through credit subsidies or collateral loans in excess of agricultural value.