



California Agriculture Leadership Forum

Davis, CA

May 13, 2005

Fifty key agriculture and conservation leaders convened in Davis, California, May 13 to discuss the future of federal farm policy. The California Agriculture Leadership Forum provided the opportunity to examine the needs and concerns specific to the state's agriculture in the debate over U.S. farm policy. Michael Dimock, president of Ag Innovations and chairman of Slow Food U.S.A., facilitated the meeting, which was sponsored by American Farmland Trust.

Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust, kicked off the forum by detailing the case for changing U.S. farm policy and the factors initiating change: globalization, budget deficits, transparency of farm programs and the increased demands on farmers to provide conservation and other public benefits. He outlined AFT's four-part strategy: to work with farmers, ranchers and others to develop and analyze alternative policies; to build an alliance of groups supporting change; to cultivate congressional champions; and to communicate the potential benefits of a new U.S. farm policy for farmers, taxpayers and consumers. AFT believes the campaign to reform the 2007 Farm Bill is the best vehicle to achieve its 25-year mission to strengthen American agriculture by protecting the most productive farmland and promoting farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

As backdrop to the discussion on farm policy, California Under Secretary of Agriculture A.J. Yates presented his views on California agriculture's main challenges—water availability, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. He called on participants to work together for solutions to these challenges, noting the importance of developing programs that help farmers address these issues while ensuring economically sustainable farming operations.

Yates indicated that farmers and ranchers are willing to address clean air, clean water and wildlife habitat issues but noted that the solutions must be based on sound scientific research and accompanied with technical assistance so farmers can implement the best practices. Further, he said, the agricultural community also needs assurances that should they commit to undertaking potentially costly new practices on their land, the regulations would not then change. He identified the successful experience of the California dairy quality assurance program in helping farmers address the Clean Water Act.

Dimock noted that although the farm bill was not specifically designed with California producers in mind, the state has significant air and water issues to face and current farm policy is not helping Californians to address those issues effectively.

A brainstorming session about what all of agriculture shares in common evolved into a broader discussion of needs specific to California agriculture. Participants identified the positive features of current farm policy as well as the aspects holding California agriculture back. They want to retain elements in current farm policy that increase funding for conservation programs and for research and technical assistance and that allocate funding toward new partnerships and

innovations to help farmers to add value to their products. Increased funding for farmland protection and better methods for risk management and crop insurance, especially in the underserved agricultural community, also ranked high as priorities.

In terms of “bad” agricultural policies, most in need of change is the allocation formula for research dollars that favors Midwest commodity agriculture and rewards past production. Also needed are increased funds for farm and ranch land protection, as well as funds to encourage innovation and new markets. Additionally, real performance measures must be implemented: Much of current policy is driven by politics and not by the needs of all farmers or consumers; therefore, larger operations fare better, leading to increased concentration.

Participants then identified strategies that would maintain the good farm policies and improve the bad ones. Several themes and interesting ideas emerged, including the following:

- building a coalition with all agriculture interests that would lead to more funding to address the many different needs identified;
- linking up with urban interests through nutrition and farmland protection initiatives;
- developing common messages for all groups to use that tie proposals to public benefits, such as food security, energy independence, healthy food and viable farms;
- de-funding (or “sunsetting”) all programs in the farm bill and starting all policies anew;
- providing block grants for states or communities in place of a nationwide farm bill;
- reducing conflict with commodity groups, including rice growers;
- shifting toward rewarding stewardship through an expanded Conservation Security Program (CSP);
- providing block grants to cities to encourage farming at the urban edge—with farmer’s markets and value-added processing;
- building public education programs to reconnect consumers with food and farmers.

In addition to this farm policy forum for California, over the past five months AFT has held seven other forums with farmers and ranchers nationwide to collect ideas on farm policy and gain a better understanding of the challenges they face. AFT will use the information from these sessions to design a draft policy reform framework, determine the impacts that these policies would have across the country and then share the findings with farmers and ranchers to get their reaction and feedback.