



**Western Ranchers Leadership Summit  
Denver, Colorado  
March 31, 2005**

On March 31, 2005, fifty-three members of the ranching community met in Denver, Colorado to discuss the future of federal farm policy at the Western Ranchers Leadership Summit. Sponsored by American Farmland Trust and the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust, the event included participants from twelve Western states and provided them with an opportunity to add the needs and concerns of ranchers to the farm policy debate.

Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust kicked off the summit by informing the participants that the 2002 Farm Bill could very well have been the high water mark for conservation. According to Grossi, in order for conservation spending to increase, the current system of farm policies must change. He noted that four primary forces are creating an environment for farm policy reform in which conservation could be a real winner.

Three panelists started the discussion by sharing their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities facing ranchers. Several key themes came out of the presentations and the conversations that followed. The themes included:

- A need to stabilize and utilize the land base effectively in order for ranching to remain economically viable;
- A need to address barriers that have limited support for conservation programs;
- A need to educate the 98 percent of the public that is not involved in agriculture about the products and services that farmers and ranchers provide;
- A need for ranchers to recognize and promote themselves as stewards of the land.

The group also discussed two areas in which ranching can provide solutions to problems facing society. The ability of grasses and shrubs to store carbon in an efficient manner below the soil provides an opportunity for ranching to play a role in carbon sequestration and efforts to address global warming. Agriculture can also help the nation address its energy problems by producing renewable fuels.

The conversation then shifted to a session in which participants identified the current issues facing ranchers. A number of individuals mentioned issues involving farm succession such as estate taxes, transition in ownership and the lack of young people entering ranching. Others were concerned about the competitiveness of ranching and focused on overseas production costs, narrow profit margins, trade agreements and an unstable agriculture economy. Members of the group also brought up a host of issues associated with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and expressed a need to develop policies that enable the ESA to work in tandem with farm bill programs on both public

and private lands. Participants also brought up concerns involving land values, conservation, monitoring and the role of the federal government.

During another facilitated session, the participants discussed what is good and bad with current farm policy. The group identified 15 things that are good with farm policy and over 30 that are bad. They then voted for what they considered the most important things on each list. The participants wanted to keep the good aspects of existing policy and improve on the things that were bad. Many of the “good” things that received the most votes involved conservation programs. Participants felt that the best thing about farm policy was a shift toward emphasizing conservation. They also liked the fact that farm bill programs are now open to ranchers and livestock operators instead of just commodity producers. This was followed closely by the small business grant programs contained in the Rural Development title that provide support for value added enterprises. Other popular “good” things included the creation of term easements, the emergence of incentive based conservation programs, the Grasslands Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

In spite of their overwhelming support for conservation programs, the group identified the cumbersome processes associated with enrolling and participating in the programs as the thing that is worst about farm policy. The lack of funds for conservation programs and technical assistance also rated high on the list. Perhaps one of the most interesting issues on the list, and one that garnered a large number of votes, involved the fact that current farm policy does not contain a vision for what agriculture should look like in the future.

The group then brainstormed about how to fix current farm policy and reacted to several alternative policy proposals. The participants put forth a number of ideas dealing with an overall vision for farm policy. They felt that farm policy must recognize the importance of “the people in agriculture,” that it must create connections between the public and farmers and ranchers, that it should have an outcome based focus and that it should work to create an agricultural sector that is more resilient. Participants were attracted to the idea of farmer retirement accounts and felt that they provided a viable alternative to insurance programs. Another interesting idea mentioned involved the need to create sunset provisions for all conservation programs to ensure that they are able to evolve and change to meet the needs of farmers and ranchers. Finally, several of the ideas focused on the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Participants felt that it was important to establish an end game for CRP, that we should move away from whole field enrollment in CRP and that we should base CRP payments on the conservation values produced rather than local rental rates.

Over the next several weeks, AFT plans to organize meetings and forums with farmers and ranchers in different regions of the country to collect their ideas on farm policy and gain an understanding of the unique challenges they face. AFT will use the feedback collected during these sessions to design a policy reform framework. AFT will analyze the framework to determine the impacts that the policies will have on agriculture and share the findings with farmers and ranchers to get their reactions and feedback.