



NO TIME FOR DELAY: A SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AGENDA FOR THE 2007 FARM BILL

- Executive Summary -

As a nation we can do so much better than the current farm bill. We can do far better than retreat to short-term status quo survival options that keep agriculture limping along but provide no real solutions to the farm and rural problems we face. There is no time for delay -- the time is now to embrace reform and construct policies and programs that truly support our small and mid-sized family farms, protect and conserve our valuable natural resources and environment, and breathe new life into our distressed rural communities. It is with a vision for a sustainable food and farming system that promotes economic opportunity, environmental stewardship, and rural prosperity that we offer a set of specific policy options for the 2007 Farm Bill.

Member organizations of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition for the past two years have held listening sessions and workshops all across the country with farmers and ranchers, conservationists, and rural and urban citizens with keen interest in food and farming. We found strong support for some of the innovative programs launched by earlier farm bills, programs such as the Conservation Security Program, the Value-Added Producer Grants program, and the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems research program. We heard pleas to consolidate support for these innovations and to back funding strategies to help them meet their full potential. Practitioners in the field spoke to the need for new programs to encourage new farms, new markets, and new rural businesses. We also heard strong appeals to remove program barriers to a more sustainable farm and food systems.

Our proposed policy options span all the major sections of the farm bill. In our view, all sections of the farm bill hold significant opportunities for crafting cost-effective, high-impact policies that can increase farm profitability and improve the health of individuals, communities, and the environment. Our goals are to increase farming opportunities, revitalize family farming, restore competition, reward stewardship, stimulate new markets, promote rural entrepreneurship, and spur innovation.

To ensure **farming opportunities and fair competition**, the farm bill should encourage and support a new generation of farmers and ranchers; reform commodity, credit and crop insurance programs to support family farms and the environment; and create and maintain fair and competitive agricultural markets. Some of our proposed policy options for the reform of current policies and new initiatives include:

- Reauthorize and fully fund the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and create a new Individual Development Account pilot program of matched savings funds for new farmers.
- Strengthen the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Down Payment Loan Program and continue all existing farm loan fund preferences and incentives for beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Close the numerous commodity program payment cap loopholes to stop abuse and return to the idea of moderate, targeted farm support rather than unlimited payments that subsidize farm consolidation.
- Enact a “sodsaver” provision to stop subsidizing the conversion of native prairie and prime grasslands to cropping.
- Create within crop insurance an accessible and affordable nationwide whole farm revenue insurance option that rewards diversification, and eliminate discriminatory crop insurance measures pertaining to organic farmers.
- Amend the Agricultural Fair Practices Act to prohibit any firm from refusing to deal with a producer for belonging to or attempting to organize an association of producers or cooperative, and amend the Packers and Stockyards Act to eliminate unreasonable price preferences that discriminate against small and mid-sized livestock operations.

In the area of **conservation and the environment**, the farm bill should help integrate successful revitalization of family farms and rural communities with environmental and natural resource conservation. This is central to our sustainable future. We need to continue to incorporate environmental objectives into agriculture policy, making sure environmental protection and resource conservation become priorities in our production systems. The following are some of our suggested reforms and new proposals:



- Retain, streamline and fully fund the Conservation Security Program (CSP) as the primary agriculture stewardship incentive program, available to producers nationwide.
- Coordinate the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with the CSP to improve local conservation delivery and restore EQIP provisions that help ensure a net positive effect on the environment.
- Expand the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative to support special projects for multiple producers to address specific area-wide resource and environmental concerns and community development opportunities.
- Increase the Conservation Reserve Program's emphasis on high impact conservation buffer enrollments while instituting a new permanent easement option for marginal lands with high importance as wildlife habitat.
- Establish sustainability criteria to guide all conservation and energy title programs that are designed to develop and promote the use of agriculturally-based renewable energy.

The **marketing and rural development** sections of the farm bill should spur rural revitalization by fostering new farm and non-farm enterprises. Existing and potential entrepreneurs need new tools to access the emerging niche and value-added markets. There must also be adequate support to local and regional organizations offering the technical assistance, education, and training necessary for the creation of successful local businesses and strong rural communities. Our proposals in this area of include:

- Reauthorize the Value-Added Producers Grant program with mandatory funding of at least \$50 million annually, prioritizing projects that strengthen the profitability of small and medium-sized farms and ranches and adding a new grant component to develop value chains with clear and transparent social, environmental, fair labor and fair trade standards.
- Increase funding to \$25 million for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program, and create a new National Organic Transition Support Program designed to provide technical and financial assistance for the adoption of organic farming-based conservation practices and systems.
- Expand the Farmers Market Promotion Program with mandatory funding of \$20 million annually.
- Improve and expand community-based healthy food and nutrition programs and initiatives including the Farmers Market Nutrition Programs, Farm to Cafeteria Program, and Community Food Projects Program.
- Create a \$50 million a year Rural Entrepreneurs and Micro-Enterprise Program to provide grants to develop training, services, and micro-credit for rural Micro-Enterprise programs that support new rural entrepreneurs.
- Establish a \$75 million a year Community Entrepreneurial Development Program to offer grants to collaborating communities to create regional initiatives for entrepreneurial development.

Agricultural research and extension are key investments in the future of our food and farming system and the vitality of rural America. The 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity to provide resources to re-focus research and extension programs to support sustainable agriculture systems, innovative marketing efforts and vibrant rural communities. Our proposed research policy options for the next farm bill include:

- Create a Farm, Food, and Rural Transitions Competitive Grants program to provide mandatory funding for integrated, outcome-based research, education and extension on critical issues (*replacing IFAFS*).
- Fund organic research programs at a level that represents a fair share of USDA resources, including at least \$15 million annually for Integrated Organic Program competitive grants and no less than \$25 million annually for a new National Program for Organic Research within USDA's Agricultural Research Service.
- Establish a new regionally administered competitive grants program for Rural Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Facilitation with at least \$20 million in annual funding.
- Provide \$25 million annually in mandatory funding for the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Competitive Grants Program.

Federal policies and programs play an important role in our farm and food system. The next iteration of the farm bill will help determine whether we move toward or away from sustainability. By enacting these proposals, we can begin to attain a vibrant food and agriculture system and strong rural economy that will serve us all for many generations to come.