



American Farmland Trust

Mid-Atlantic Farm Policy Leadership Forum Harrisburg, Pennsylvania June 09, 2005

Forty key agricultural leaders in the Mid-Atlantic convened June 9 to discuss the future of federal farm policy. The Mid-Atlantic Farm Policy Leadership Forum, held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, included participants from Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia, providing them the opportunity to discuss farm policy options that would better meet the needs of agriculture in the Mid-Atlantic states. The forum was sponsored by American Farmland Trust and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

Dennis Wolff, Pennsylvania secretary of agriculture, underscored the importance of the 2007 Farm Bill to Mid-Atlantic agriculture and the need to be “at the table” during policy debates. Wolff advised participants not to focus too narrowly on whether the region’s agriculture gets its fair share of federal farm programs, recommending a stronger message: Federal funds are essential to keeping farmers in the region farming and improving the environment. In addition, he stressed the need to educate the public and policymakers on the wide range of benefits agriculture provides in addition to food and scenic vistas.

Rep. Arthur Hershey, chair of the Pennsylvania House Agricultural and Rural Affairs Committee, and Kristen Ebersole (on behalf of Sen. Michael Waugh, chair of the state Senate Agricultural and Rural Affairs Committee) noted the importance of gathering farmers and farm leaders from the region together to discuss the future of agriculture policy.

Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust, detailed the case for reforming 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 other stakeholders 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.

Three farmer panelists shared perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of current federal farm policy. Several key themes emerged from the presentations and ensuing discussions, including a need for the following:

- a strong safety net for all farmers to address risk inherent in farming;
- more regional flexibility in how farm programs are developed, funded and administered;

- expanded incentives for cost sharing at the state and local level to better leverage federal funds;
- linking financial support to stewardship to provide incentives for meeting environmental goals;
- maintaining a fair return on investment to encourage young people to enter farming; and
- expanded support new and alternative markets including domestic and international.

Discussions of the pros and cons of current farm policy identified 17 positives and 21 areas in need of change, with increased funding for conservation incentive programs, especially the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) ranking as the highest priority to maintain, followed by the expansion of the value-added grants program. Other elements in current farm policy to keep or expand include the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC), renewable energy programs, leveraging of state and local dollars with federal funds, the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), the farmer's market nutrition program, the new Conservation Security Program (CSP), crop insurance and the Loan Deficiency Payment (LDP) program.

The fact that current farm policy has led to the vilification of “corporate” agriculture, resulting in a public misconception of the role of corporations in agriculture, was named by participants as their biggest concern. Many stated that they or other family farmers they know are part of a “corporation,” and that this business structure makes the most sense for their operation. Also, despite that many of the conservation and marketing programs are considered good things, the group believes strongly that funding for these programs is not sufficient and needs to be increased—in particular, EQIP and funding for value-added and alternative agriculture. Concerns about the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the agricultural land that program is taking out of production were highlighted, along with the lack of attention given to innovative energy projects on the farm, the inequitable way EQIP funds are allocated to different regions and the lack of funding for CSP.

Small group brainstorming sessions on how to fix current farm policy generated the following recommendations:

- programs (including risk management) for specialty or non-commodity crops;
- regional/state flexibility in administering programs and allocating funds;
- increased funding for conservation, energy and value-added programs;
- a safety net for all types of agriculture (including current commodities); and
- greater education about agriculture to the non-farming public.

In addition to this farm policy forum for the Mid-Atlantic region, 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.