

**Talking Points For
House Agriculture Committee Field hearings
On The 2012 Farm Bill
prepared by the
National Sustainable agriculture coalition**

1. Enact a robust and well funded Conservation Title to support working lands conservation programs, conservation easement programs, and sustainable and organic transition assistance.

Farms and ranches make up more than half of the land mass of the lower 48 states. Farm policies driving the industrialization of agriculture have created a system of agriculture on these lands that is productive in the short term, but polluting, energy gulping and unsustainable over the long term.

Agriculture is the largest source of pollution of rivers and streams, affecting roughly half of total stream miles. Over 100 million acres of cropland continue to erode at levels that are unsustainable despite decades of soil conservation efforts stemming back to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Nearly two-thirds of threatened and endangered species are listed due in some part to agriculture and agro-chemicals. Human health, ecosystem health, food security and even our long term economic well being are all tied to how well farmers and ranchers steward these resources.

We urge Congress and the Administration to enact a Conservation Title of the 2012 farm bill that provides the technical assistance, cost share, and financial incentives necessary to ensure the long term productivity and stewardship of agricultural lands.

Long term sustainable food production will require an increasing emphasis on the adoption of conservation practices on lands in active agricultural production. We must defend, strengthen, and extend conservation compliance, which requires that farmers receiving federal farm program payments adopt conservation plans. Conservation compliance must apply to federal subsidies for crop insurance as well as any new revenue insurance program that may be adopted. In addition, the survival of prime grasslands depends on the adoption of strong uniform sodsaver protections.

Working lands conservation programs must actively assist farmers to transition to sustainable and organic farming systems by providing the necessary technical and financial assistance. A shift to organic production and sustainable and grass-based livestock systems will yield environmental, economic, and public health benefits.

As we move closer to enacting comprehensive energy and climate change legislation, policy makers must recognize that the best structure available for shaping agriculture's response to climate change is the Conservation Title of the next farm bill. Whether to help farmers cope with climate change or to reduce green house gas emissions attributable to agriculture the basic tools to accomplish climate change mitigation and farmer adaptation are already in place.

Agriculture can make a substantial contribution to a shift toward renewable energy. That shift, however, must emphasize production of a new generation of cellulosic fuel stocks, strong sustainability criteria, and local and farmer ownership of production facilities.

Wetland, grassland, and farmland easement programs do much to protect America's fragile soils and critical ecosystems. These programs also offer opportunities for climate change mitigation, ecosystem regeneration, and refuge for wildlife. They need to be extended and strengthened in the next farm bill. The Conservation Reserve Program should include an easement option so that land that should be permanently retired from production has the appropriate conservation tool available. As other Conservation Reserve Program contracts expire it is essential that those lands come back into production under sustainable systems, which in most cases will be grass-based production.

2. Refocus federal farm program payments upon farming systems and practices that produce environmental benefits and promote long-term food security.

Since the Great Depression, USDA has administered commodity programs for corn, wheat, rice, other grains, and cotton. For most of that time, the programs focused on reducing production and managing supplies to keep prices relatively constant. However, in the modern era, our federal farm programs have been transformed into pure production subsidies, encouraging overproduction of grain and cotton at tremendous cost to the environment and the family farmers they were intended to help.

The next farm bill may make some changes to the commodity programs. One simple-to-craft reform could be a re-allocation of a portion of current production subsidies to farmer conservation and farmer value-added business development. One obvious place for increased funding is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

The CSP pays farmers for producing healthier soil, cleaner water, fewer greenhouse gases and greater biodiversity. It is the only program in the USDA tool kit that rewards sustainable farmers for the multiple and ongoing environmental benefits delivered by their farming practices.

This program can point the way forward for US farm policy by providing a model for what the next generation of farm programs should look like. CSP rewards farmers for how they farm, not for what or how much they produce. CSP advances conservation practices on crop, pasture, range, and forested land and includes options that work for sustainable and organic operations, specialty crop farms, grazing operations, and diversified crop-livestock farms.

Feeding ourselves and future generations will demand the expansion of sustainable production

practices on working agricultural lands. Programs that reward our best stewards and encourage other farmers to make the transition to more sustainable farming practices are crucial to our food security.

CSP is on track to sign up 25.6 million acres for 2009 and 2010, or over 50 million acres during this current farm bill cycle, and 115 million acres by 2017. We urge Congress and the Administration to significantly expand its commitment to this program by providing the funding necessary to reach a total enrollment of 230 million acres by the end of the next farm bill cycle in 2017.

3. Encourage and support the next generation of farmers and ranchers

The future health and vitality of agriculture, the food system, and rural communities depends on the successful launch of a new generation of farmers and ranchers. Across the country, there is a groundswell of interest in agriculture among young people, farm raised or not who want to take up farming as a profession. Many new immigrants, women, and farm workers also aspire to becoming farmers.

Over the next two decades an estimated 400 million acres of U.S. agricultural land will be passed on to heirs or sold as farmers 65 and older retire (currently one-third of all farmland owners are retirement age). Transitions present opportunities for economic and social mobility. Given the opportunity, these new entrepreneurs can bring hope and capital to rural economies desperate for renewal.

Changes in farming practices also happen at the transition. This new generation of farmers has enthusiastically embraced sustainable and organic agriculture. These farming systems offer new market opportunities and oftentimes lower start up costs. And not incidentally, these systems produce more economic multipliers for their communities than raw commodities sold into the conventional market. Public policy needs to encourage and reward this generation's embrace of environmentally sound farming practices.

We urge Congress and the Administration to make a greater investment in beginning farmers and ranchers. The 2012 farm bill must ensure this new generation of farmers has the technical assistance, capital, access to markets and land it needs to succeed. Federal assistance to beginning farmers should prioritize those establishing sustainable and organic farming operations.

4. Increase resources for research that fosters sustainable agriculture systems

Agricultural research is a powerful and fundamental force that shapes our food and farming system. Publicly supported agricultural research has too often, and for far too long, produced technologies and tools that best serve industrial agriculture. This research fosters systems that strive for increased production at the expense of other important public values. The \$2.5 billion USDA spends each year on food and agricultural research has produced a U.S. food system that is increasingly concentrated and focused on a narrowing base of crop and livestock breeds.

We urge Congress and the Administration to enact a Research Title that truly serves the interests of rural communities and our collective long-term food security. Our research, education and extension programs must focus on the full and diverse set of practical, economic and social challenges facing America. Environmental degradation, depopulation, the loss of midsized family farmers, the loss of biodiversity, and climate change all demand an expanded federal commitment to research that fosters sustainable and organic farming systems.

Publically supported research should be aimed squarely at technologies and systems that support small and midsized farmers. It should examine food systems, sustainable renewable energy production and public health issues. Most importantly, the only competitive grants program in the entire USDA portfolio to involve farmers and ranchers directly in research, the Sustainable Agriculture, Research and Education (SARE) program must finally be funded at a level that begins to meet the demand.

A renewed public commitment to classical plant and animal breeding is critical to conserving our dwindling genetic diversity. Increased genetic diversity will be vital in addressing global climate change, increasing pest pressure and our own food security. Sustainable and organic agricultural systems can contribute to the development of a new generation of seeds and breeds that are well adapted to local conditions and changing environmental conditions.

5. Reinvigorate regional agricultural economies and local food systems

The surge in consumer demand for organically-produced food and agricultural products from local and regional markets offers a significant new opportunity for diversified rural development but we need to provide producers and their communities with the necessary tools to serve these new markets. Rising demand for these foods is an important incentive for farmers and ranchers, but many communities lack the processing and distribution infrastructure necessary for economically robust, sustainable food systems.

We urge Congress and the Administration to provide the capital and technical assistance necessary to rebuild the local and regional food infrastructure.

We applaud this Administration's commitment to the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Initiative. The grant and loan programs publicized through Know Your Farmer can provide the capital and technical assistance necessary for small and midsized farmers to respond to new market demand.

Midsized farms in particular are often too small to thrive in the international commodities markets but are well positioned to sell local and regional, organic and value added farm products directly to wholesale and institutional purchasers. Fostering these markets can help preserve those farms "in the middle," the farm size category that is shrinking the fastest, yet which is essential for the vitality of rural communities. Further, cultivating the growth of regional food systems can create jobs, retain more food dollars in rural economies and spark development opportunities.

Connecting food producers and consumers directly through existing USDA programs -- when farmers sell directly to schools or when SNAP participants use their benefits to buy fresh, nutritious food at farmers markets -- makes economic sense and ensures that the Nation's nutrition safety net is doing its job while also strengthening the bottom line for America's family farmers.

6. Ensure fair and competitive agricultural markets

Large segments of the nation's food supply are dominated by a handful of corporations. Family farmers and ranchers are facing markets for the sale of their products that are increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer firms. This is especially true in the livestock and poultry sectors. In an attempt to gain market access, farmers and ranchers enter into production or marketing contracts with corporations that have far greater bargaining and market power.

We urge Congress and the Administration to ensure more market channels, greater bargaining power, and strong rules that ensure fair contracts for producers. Fair contracts and competition will allow producers to provide consumers with a greater diversity of higher quality and fairly priced goods.

7. Fully recognize the inherent value of sustainable and organic farming systems in addressing climate change

Conventional agriculture is a ravenous consumer of fossil fuels and producer of greenhouse gases. Yet, our federal farm and energy policies continue to reward intensive row-cropping, corn ethanol production and large-scale confined livestock production systems. These systems are all heavily dependent on mechanization, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. These systems are specialized, brittle and susceptible to collapse under the weight of climate change.

To best address climate change, federal farm policy must emphasize farming systems that can best help farmers cope with climate change and reduce the overall level of green house gas emissions attributable to agriculture.

Research confirms that sustainable and organic farming methods when compared to conventional agriculture can result in the reduction of nitrogen use and pollution. Studies also show that over the long term, organic crop rotations show increased yield and steadily improved soil quality over conventional systems. These systems are diverse, resilient and best suited to coping with the variability of weather and pest pressures resulting from climate change. They consume less fossil fuel and sequester more carbon than conventional agriculture. They also offer the most sustainable means of producing on farm renewable energy.

8. Reform commodity payment programs

Commodity programs offer farmers production subsidies for commodity crops like corn, rice, cotton, and soybeans. While some payments are made when commodity prices are low, a majority of payments are made regardless of whether prices are high or low, and can be made

even when a crop is not grown. A disproportionate share of benefits goes to the largest farms, with the largest one percent of farms receiving about a quarter of total benefits. The result is farm consolidation as farm subsidies are used to buy more land. The subsidy allows large farms to bid up land prices well above market levels while mid-sized family farms disappear and farming opportunities diminish for a new generation of farmers.

Furthermore, commodity programs, as currently administered, encourage the intensive production of one or two commodities on the same fields year after year, resulting in polluted runoff, soil depletion and loss of biodiversity. Taxpayers, consumers, farmers and rural communities deserve better. We urge Congress and the Administration to enact farm subsidy reforms that serve a broader set of interests including public health, rural economic development, resource conservation, and economic opportunity and entry.

One starting place for reform would be to enact effective payment limitation reform to reduce program incentives to farm consolidation. In addition, farmers should be allowed to plant fruits and vegetables on at least a portion of their farm program acreage provided their payment is reduced accordingly. Re-invigorating the conservation compliance system is also overdue. If Congress takes the step of adding a more comprehensive revenue insurance option to the commodity program mix, it too should have effective payment limitations, full planting flexibility, and strong conservation requirements.

9. Reform Crop Insurance

Farming is inherently a risky business. Weather, pests, variable costs for inputs, and wild fluctuations in market prices for farm products create a volatile business environment and can cause farm income to vary significantly from year to year. A healthy farm and food system depends on public policies that help farmers manage risk effectively.

Traditionally, farmers managed risk by growing multiple crops and raising a variety of livestock. If one crop failed or prices for cattle or hogs were low, then sales of other products would make up the difference. By contrast, current crop insurance policies are skewed in favor of less diverse crop production systems that are not only more vulnerable to markets, weather, and pests, but that also have serious environmental impacts.

We urge Congress and the Administration to reform Crop insurance to ensure that it is structured in a manner that significantly rewards diversification in recognition of its high environmental and risk management value.

This farm bill should begin a transition toward an effective whole farm revenue insurance option. Unjustified surcharges on insurance premiums for organic producers should be removed and insurance options implemented that take organic product price premiums into consideration. New insurance provisions should also be adopted to allow farmers who are engaged in direct and value-added markets to insure their production based on their higher value markets.