

From: "mhooper@dol.net%inter2" <mhooper@dol.net>
Subject: Farm Bill 2007 Official Comments - 12/19/2005 12:40 PM CST
Date Sent: 12/19/2005 12:40:13 CST
Date Received: 12/19/2005 12:40:51 CST

Email: mhooper@dol.net
FirstName: Mark
LastName: Hooper
Address1: 40 Clearview Ave
Address2: P.O. Box 430
City: Charlestown
State: Maryland
zipcode: 21914

Question1: It is vital that sustainable agriculture be profitable and environmentally sound. Just as important is the necessity for agricultural land to remain designated as agricultural. Agricultural and conservation easements will help ensure this goal. Furthermore, farms and farm families need to be protected from estate taxation which forces next generations to sell farms rather than continue to farm. Without a strong family based farm system, the knowledge base for farming and the associated farming expertise in the form of skilled farm labor will dwindle over time. It is critical that we provide every avenue possible to make certain the family farm institution remain viable.

Question2: Farm policy should be designed and concentrate on best conservation practices. Production should be encouraged only on the best farmland, thus maximizing yield and profit per acre farmed. Poorly drained farmland should be restored back to natural wetlands and riparian areas must be protected. Overgrazed rangeland, and in particular our public grazing lands, should be better managed through reduced stocking and artificial watering sources where feasible. 10 to 15 percent of the rangeland should be retired annually and allowed to recover for at least three years before re-grazing. Many sensitive and at-risk wildlife species depend on our native grasslands. Sound management now can prevent unwanted mandatory management in the future. Quality forage for reasonably stocked ranges results in faster animal growth thus getting the stock to the market sooner.

Question3: Use a tiered approach similar to income tax brackets based on farmed acreage, conservation acreage, and stewardship.

Question4: Keep CRP! In fact, more acres should be eligible for enrollment in CRP, CREP, WRP. Nutrient reduction, pesticide filtration, and soil erosion are key benefits of these programs, but wildlife habitat stands to gain just as much, depending on how we address the other goals. State wildlife Departments should have more influence on the what habitat types would be best suited.

I think we should look at establishing a RRP (Rangeland Reserve Program). We could start by renting back the grazing leases on our public lands. Based on the rates the Government receives for these leases, this would be the most economical approach.

The conservation accomplishments of the Farm Bill over the past 20 years can not be overstated or considered finished. We can not let the conservation gains to date be lost to the future. Keep a strong Farm Bill in tact. The key to achieving conservation and environmental goals should be leadership, stewardship and planning at the state and local level and working with non-governmental conservation organizations. Each state should develop a conservation priority plan to identify critical conservation needs based on local environmental problems. Then develop programs suited to address those targeted priorities.

Question5: Care should be taken when considering the terms "infrastructure" and "technology". Looking at the past can provide insight how these terms and applications can be perceived to be positive agricultural improvements with devastating results. Past agricultural innovations such draining wetlands, tiling, ditching, and conversion of natural riparian and other protective habitats to agricultural production has proven in many instances to be an economic failure to farmers, the environment, wildlife and ultimately, rural economies. Infrastructure and technology that enhances conservation and reduces pollution are win/win enhancements. The greatest potential for rural economies to both remain agricultural and rural is through sustainable local agriculture combined with sustained conservation improvements in wildlife habitat and clean water. Rural economies are enhanced and sustained not just by agricultural operations, but heavily depend on recreation based tourism. Hunting, fishing, birdwatching, and other nature based outdoor recreation are vital to sustaining rural economies. Farmers, as well as most local businesses benefit from the annual recreation dollars spent on lodging, food, gear and other necessities required for not just the visiting tourists, but from local residents as well. The continuance of these annual influxes of revenue largely depend upon the agricultural community and how land is managed. Sustained agriculture with abundant wildlife habitat equal sustained and enhanced rural economies. The continuation of a strong Farm Bill including CRP, WRP, CREP, GRP and other habitat and soil conservation programs not only provide the base for farmers to maximize dollars per acre farmed, but significantly influence the overall health of rural economies. The loss or even reduction of habitat conservation programs will have a negative impact on rural economies.

Question6: Ongoing research into this area is necessary to ensure opportunities are maximized on existing agricultural land. Care should be taken to make certain new markets are sustainable and economically and environmentally feasible. Also, we must be certain any new crop development not turn into a management nightmare such is often the case with exotic species. Recent case in point-Caucasian Bluestem.