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FOR SUBMISSION
TO THE FARM BILL FORUM
HOSTED BY AGRICULTURE SECRETARY MIKE JOHANNIS
AUGUST 12, 2005
FRESNO COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS
FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

Submitted By
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I am Vern F. Highley, Director of Public Affairs for the National Watermelon Association (NWA) whose office is here in Fresno, California. The NWA's national office is located at Plant City, Florida. Our Executive Director is Robert Morrissey and NWA officers are as follows: Raymon J. (Jody) Land of Branford, FL, Chairman; Brent Jackson of Autryville, NC, President; Bradley O'Neal of Fairfax, SC, First Vice-President; and Nowell Borders of Hargill, TX, Second Vice-President.

The NWA is one of the oldest farm service associations in the U.S., organized in 1914. It represents producers, handlers, marketers and shippers in 30 states and Canada with chapters in North and South Carolina, Maryland-Delaware, Georgia, Alabama, Missouri, Florida, Texas-Oklahoma, California, Arizona, Indiana, and Illinois.

The U.S. produces around 4-billion pounds of seeded and seedless watermelon annually for a farm gate value of several hundred million dollars.

NWA Supported By National Promotion Order

Our watermelon industry is also supported by the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB) that seeks to increase consumer demand for watermelon through promotion, research and educational programs. Organized by a referendum in 1989, the NWPB engages in high profile publicity on television, radio, in newspapers and magazines, showcasing watermelon as a healthy, refreshing, versatile fruit. The NWPB's 31-member Board decides how to invest its \$1.6 million in board programs annually through crop assessments paid growers, shippers and importers.

Public Affairs Office Facilitates Competitiveness And Representation In Federal Matters

Fifteen years ago, the NWA designated its Public Affairs Office to engage in coalitions and other organizations to elevate the association's role in federal matters to help facilitate the competitiveness of watermelons and to give it a voice in national agricultural affairs. We have worked closely with numerous agricultural coalitions dealing with minor crops, methyl bromide, and the manner in which the EPA has administered the Food Quality Protection Act. Additionally we have visited often in the USDA and offered the NWA's resources to advance the Department's objectives for production agriculture, especially the sector of fruits and vegetables.

NWA Now A Key Player In United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association Agenda

The NWA is a key player in the United Fruit and Vegetable Association's federal affairs agenda. For example, the NWA's Public Affairs Office is a member of United's Government Relations Council formed early in 2005 with the goal of creating a more transparent and deliberative process in setting Association priorities and policies. A key responsibility is to strengthen United's voice for its members in the public policy arena, building grassroots support, political involvement and frequent interaction with national leaders.

Also, the NWA's Public Affairs Office is a member of United's Farm Bill Policy Development Committee. This group is developing a set of policy priorities reflecting the needs of United's membership that can be advanced both within the produce industry and before Congressional and Administration officials in Washington, DC, with respect to the 2007 Farm Bill.

I do not speak on behalf of United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Assn. at this Farm Bill Listening Forum; however, I do wish to state the National Watermelon Assn.'s support for United to be considered an integral part of the 2007 Farm Bill's development of policy priorities both on Capitol Hill and within the Administration.

United is currently working with leaders of the U.S. produce industry on three major areas regarding Farm Bill priorities:

- (1) Agriculture Policy Committee involving the commodity title, conservation, research, risk management, invasive pests and disease. The committee recommendations to date include maintaining current planting flexibility provisions and securing mandatory funding for state block grants; obtaining better access to conservation programs including the EQIP and CSP; establishing a comprehensive, competitive research grant program that focuses on fruit and vegetable industry priorities; and permanently establishing the Fruit and Vegetable Advisory Committee's charter.
- (2) Nutrition and Health Committee focused on several primary federal nutrition programs, including Food Stamps, commodity procurement, and the Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program. The committee recommendations to date seek for Food Stamps to have a strong emphasis on fruit and vegetable utilization; commodity purchases to match the federal dietary guidelines; requesting Congress to consider reforming the process for purchasing commodities; and the Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program to be expanded to all 50 states.
- (3) International Trade Committee has reviewed current, successful trade programs as well as new policies or programs that would enhance market access for fruits and vegetables. The committee has recommended to date full support for the MAP, increased funding and possible policy revisions for the TASC, permanent funding for the FAS MRL Database, and a comprehensive study exploring major trade opportunities and challenges with China, Brazil and India.

The policy objectives cited above are to show the initial efforts of United to utilize its broad membership resources within the U.S. produce industry to progressively develop a major involvement of specialty crops in the 2007 Farm Bill. Several work sessions have already been held among the United leadership, committee assignments have been made in key priority areas, and committee chairs are drafting recommendations for consideration by the Steering Committee. A key get-together of United Farm Bill Working Group will be conducted in mid-September in Washington, DC, during the Association's annual Washington Public Policy Conference. Washington Public Policy Conference.

While the NWA supports United's efforts to seek major involvement in the 2007 Farm Bill for specialty crops, our Association has an additional specific agenda that it seeks to accomplish in the 2007 Farm Bill if it becomes necessary and no relief has been found prior to that time.

Watermelon Producers Become Victims Of Persistent Disease Problems

As Brent Jackson of Jackson Farming Co., Autryville, NC, who is President of the NWA, stated in testimony submitted to the House Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations earlier this year, an upsurge of disease incidence is confronting the watermelon industry causing economic hardship particularly for producers. Although some critical research is being carried out on several watermelon production disciplines, the critical mass that is needed to deal with the raft of existing disease problems coupled with the many emerging exotic diseases may be falling behind the curve of the state, extension and federal research resources.

Phytophthora is among the diseases plaguing numerous crops in the cucurbit family; a disease with no known cure. In recent years an equally vicious disease known as Vine Decline has spread in Florida and is showing up in Georgia and other states. Researchers have not been able to identify the source of this vexatious disease that strikes watermelon fields without warning and, like Phytophthora, has no known cure. Other soil-borne and seed-borne diseases continue to beset the watermelon industry: Gummy Stem Blight, Fusarium and Verticillium Wilt, Anthracnose, Bacterial Fruit Blotch, Root Knot Nematode, Phythium Root Rot, Downy and Powdery Mildew and Rind Necrosis.

While some efforts are underway to secure plant pathology research on some of these scourges, a critical mass needs to be devoted to them.

Agricultural Labor Reform

The NWA supports the National Council of Agricultural Employer's (NCAE) efforts to provide short and long-term solutions to the existing unworkable farm labor system. We continue to support the AgJobs bill. The H-2A worker component would streamline the process for applying for and using guest workers, convert from a regulatory "adverse effect" wage rate to a wage structure more reflective of the market place, and provide other necessary reforms.

Coercive Lumping Practices

There is a nagging, cost-escalating problem called "lumping" that must be confronted in the produce handling industry. Motor carriers, including owner-operators, are coerced into paying to have trucks loaded and unloaded.

In some cases, regardless of whether the trucker is willing to perform the services, payments for labor assistance is still charged. If the assistance is refused, the trucker may be forced to wait hours before being allowed to advance to the loading dock, which in some cases could result in damages to perishable goods.

There is some legislative history in P.L. 96-296 that legislators might consult in dealing with today's problem that affects many in the produce industry.

Include Watermelons In Federal Feeding Programs

Watermelons should be included in Federal feeding programs. Watermelon is fat-free, nutritionally low in calories and an ideal diet food while being high in energy.

Watermelon can help deal with obesity, diabetes and other nutrition-related chronic diseases that are at epidemic proportions in the U.S.

The NWA also believes that greater flexibility in procuring foodstuff for the National School Lunch and other Federal feeding programs should be more decentralized by placement in the hands of local and regional school officials, who can utilize the freshness of specialty crops and save tremendous sums of storage and transportation costs.

Flex Acres

Flex acre provisions (the allowance of Farm Program participants who receive price support and/or diversion acreage payments to also grow fruits and vegetables while participating in the program) has been strongly opposed for many years by about all of the fresh produce industry. Economic studies show that it would not take a large percentage of Farm Program acreage shifted into fresh produce in order to significantly cause the downward pricing of this produce.

The NWA continues to join with the many other fresh produce organizations in strongly opposing the allowance of Farm Program participants to grow fruits and vegetables on any program acreage.

Advancing The Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act

The Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act that passed in the 108th Congress is of landmark significance for the U.S. specialty crop industry. Though final funding was far reduced from the original objective, the \$54 million allocated for five years as block grants to the state departments of agriculture will nonetheless help enhance the global competitiveness of specialty crops.

Importantly, none of the money will be distributed as a subsidy to specialty crop agriculture. Funds will strengthen the industry through research, enhancements of food inspection, improved training and other tools to improve the competitiveness of each state's fresh produce commodities.

The NWA believes that Congress should continue to build upon this Act as a means to further ensure a reliable and safe food supply for boosting the nation's health and nutrition.

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