

Statement of Caren Cowan

On behalf of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association

To

The Honorable Mike Johanns

United States Secretary of Agriculture

Farm Bill Listening Forum

Friday, August 26, 2005

Las Cruces, New Mexico

On behalf of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association (NMCGA) and its' members in all 33 of New Mexico's counties, thank you for coming to our state, Secretary Johanns. My name is Caren Cowan and I am the fourth generation of a ranching family in the Southwest. However, I am a mere youngster compared to the many New Mexico families who can trace their family's ties to the land back more than 400 years.

The questions that have been posed for today's forum are complex and developing answers for any of them cannot be accomplished within two minutes, and probably not two years. There are no incentives other than a love of lifestyle for young people to enter agriculture. In fact it is quite the opposite. Young people cannot afford to stay on the farm or ranch.

Americans have lost their competitive edge in the world market, in large part due to federal mandates that make agriculture production in this country cost prohibitive, including but not limited to the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and minimum wage are just a few of the things that are exporting agricultural jobs and forcing a reliance on foreign imports that are not produced under the same standards that have in the past yielded the safest, most wholesome and least expensive food supply in the world. Telling farmers and ranchers that they must be more competitive simply is not enough any more when less than two percent of the nation is feeding the other 98 percent.

Agriculture has been the bargaining chip for trade agreements, assuming that the competitive spirit will make up the difference. When live cattle can be delivered to the US from Australian cheaper than they can be produced here in our own country, something is terribly wrong with farm policy. Producers cannot be successful with one arm and one legged tied behind their backs.

In the last Farm Bill we saw a shift from commodity programs to conservation programs. The best conservation and environmental protection is to keep ranchers and farmers on the ground. We are the owners, the stewards and the last protectors of open space. Programs that erode private property rights do nothing but drive the kids to town. Non governmental organizations are the ones profiting most from conservation programs that remove private property rights into perpetuity.

Protection of open space requires a healthy agricultural economy where producers are fairly paid for what they produce... not what they don't produce.

The cheap food policy put in place by the government decades ago served the public well at that time of crisis. Today, it has created another more pressing crisis. Americans have become accustomed to cheap and abundant healthy food. They have no idea or appreciation of what it takes for them to enjoy the rich lifestyle those in agriculture are providing for them. They have no idea who is really being subsidized by American farm policy.

Ideally a part of future farm policy will include education of the American public about where their food comes from and why it is abundant and inexpensive.

We in the Southwest greatly appreciate the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funding on federal lands we received this year and hope it continues. Our forest health has long been ignored harming both the environment and the ranchers who depend upon it. Future conservation of those forests is dependent upon keeping producers on the ground, not driving them off.

NMCGA looks forward to working with you and the Department of Agriculture over the next two years as we develop farm policy that encourages young people to stay in agriculture continues conservation through the stewardship of private property rights and provides the abundant, wholesome food supply our country has come to rely upon.

Thank you again for coming to New Mexico.

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