

16 August 2005
434 Gregory Lane
Bellefonte, PA 16823

Secretary Mike Johanns
U.S. Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington DC 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

I am writing this as a response to your invitation for the public to comment on farm policy at your "Farm Bill Forum" on 16 August 2005 at Penn State's Ag Progress Days (in Centre County, PA). I am a resident of Centre County, Pennsylvania, as well as a scientist, a college teacher, an outdoors enthusiast, and an eater (I love farm fresh food). I thank you for taking considerable time to hold these public forums and to listen to the concerns of Americans about farming, food, and farm policy.

In case I do not get the chance to speak during the open comment period at the forum, this letter states my viewpoints and desires for stronger, more sustainable farms in the United States.

Your Question #1: "How should farm policy address any unintended consequences and ensure that such consequences do not discourage new farmers and the next generation of farmers from entering production agriculture?"

I believe that unintended consequences do not result from farm policy alone, but from other inadequate policies developed by federal and state governments and the failure to comprehensively integrate farm policy with economic development, energy policy, environmental policy and foreign policy:

A. Comprehensively Integrate Federal Economic Development Policies and Federal Farm Policy:

Most farmers, it seems, want to continue farming if possible. However, farmers operating small unincorporated farms (call them family farmers, if you want) are under tremendous economic pressures which then cause younger folks to look to careers outside of farming and cause rural communities to sell their farmland to developers and industries that bring in a limited number of jobs. Not enough effort, money, and ingenuity are being put into long-term, sustainable economic development in rural communities. The kind of rural development that is needed is that which will integrate with and complement existing agricultural and rural economies, rather than replace those economies.

Possible solutions:

1. Keep farmland in agricultural production *in perpetuity*. Help farmers stay working on their farms, generation after generation, by limiting the likelihood of farmers having to sell their farms to land speculators and developers. One way to do this is to increase programs that enable farmers to sell the development rights to federal or state government through sponsored programs or to non-profit land trusts. Too little funding is going into such programs. I would be willing to pay \$10 or \$20 more in state or federal taxes if that money was going directly to such programs. Imagine the farmland we could protect if every

working American would pay just \$10 or \$20 for farmland protection – much less than one month's worth of cable TV and money much better spent.

2. Link the government's purchase of development rights (or other programs to keep farms as farms forever) to a specified amount of production of food to go directly to local markets. Farmers who receive taxpayer dollars to keep the farms as farms forever would agree to produce a certain amount of fruits, vegetables, meat, milk, cheese, and/or eggs to be sold at local farmers markets or through local cooperatives. Such a program would be a partnership between local taxpayers and local farmers – the local taxpayers contribute the money to keep farms as farms forever and get a commitment from the farmers to have local foods kept in the local food system, and the farmers get money
3. Develop more rural energy production projects that are linked with farms so that farmers can sell some power back to local utility companies if they produce more power than they use.

B. Comprehensively Integrate Federal Energy Policy and Federal Farm Policy:

In Carroll County, Missouri, farms are being bought by Associated Electric Cooperative, Inc. (AECI, headquartered in Springfield, Missouri) for possible construction and operation of a 660 megawatt coal-fired electrical generating plant and new transmission lines and facilities. The big question is "Are we so hungry for and wasteful of energy that we have to take farmland out of production to build coal-fired power plants?" Using Midwestern farmland as sites for fossil-fuel burning power plants is a failure of policy in more than one way. First, it is a failure in farm policy because we have a system that makes it more attractive for farmers and farm landlords to sell their farms for non-farming uses, such as power plants. Second, it is a result of failed farm policy and economic policy because rural communities that once had agriculture as the basis of their economies now are so desperate for jobs and money that they have to consider trading their rich heritage in farming for jobs at a coal-fired electric plant, or other such non-farm uses. Third, it is a failure of a farm policy that does not keep good farmland in farm production forever. Lastly, it is a failure of an energy policy that places more emphasis on power generation, especially by nonrenewable fossil fuels, than on energy conservation and use of renewable sources of energy.

Which federal agency is holding public scoping meetings and will be preparing the Draft environmental impact statement (EIS) regarding the proposed AECI power plant in Carroll County, Missouri? The Rural Utilities Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (see, Federal Register: August 10, 2005, Volume 70, Number 153, Page 46472-46474). I hope that the USDA does not take a position of promoting construction of fossil fuel power plants on productive farmland.

In addition, our current agricultural system is largely based on the use of nonrenewable fossil fuels and petrochemicals. The price of such energy sources, especially gasoline and diesel, are becoming a high cost for fossil fuel-based agriculture. A recent article by the Associated Press (see: Linda A. Johnson, Associated Press, "Solar Power Is Latest Innovation At N.J. Farms") reported on a program whereby New Jersey farmers can participate in the Power Crop Initiative. This initiative enables farmers to put solar power systems in their fields and on barn roofs to generate their own power. Where do much of the funds come from to help farmers pay for those systems? The funds come from investor funds, credits, and rebates from the state of New Jersey. We need to develop more programs like that as fast as possible to help farmers reduce their energy costs and to produce power from renewable sources of energy.

Possible solutions:

1. As stated earlier, keep farmland in agricultural production *in perpetuity*. Economic development, such as development of energy production, should complement agricultural economies rather than replace them entirely. Building fossil fuel power plants over top of

- productive farmland is poor economic, farm, and energy policies all at the same time.
2. Develop energy policies that place much more emphasis on energy conservation in rural, urban and suburban communities. This will help reduce the likelihood that more power plants will need to be built where productive farms once operated.
 3. Develop more comprehensive incentive and assistance programs to enable farmers to generate their own power for farm use via solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources (such as biodiesel).
 4. Develop more rural energy cooperatives that generate power from renewable energy sources, and develop those cooperatives at a much faster pace than the present pace.
 5. Develop ways to attract manufacturing plants of solar panels, wind turbines, and biodiesel to rural communities. Incentives for manufacturers to build such plants in rural areas helps improve rural economies. An article in the Arizona Daily Sun ("Solar Power is Hot – Too Hot", August 09, 2005, by Betsey Bruner; similar article in The New York Times) reported that worldwide production of solar panels is not able to keep up with current demand; thus a shortage is occurring. Here is an opportunity, not simply a problem – an opportunity to build some solar panel manufacturing plants in rural America, provide a boost to rural economies, and supply farmers and the rest of the country with affordable solar panels.

C. Comprehensively Integrate Federal Foreign Policy and Federal Farm Policy:

Many economists, farmers, and social scientists have been pointing to the facts that a) farm subsidies to U.S. farmers, as well as subsidies by Europe to their farmers, are higher than subsidies in most developing nations, b) such subsidies make it more likely for farmers in developed nations to overproduce and flood international markets with their crops and products, and c) this subsidy system lowers prices in international markets, causing many farmers in developing countries to be unable to fairly compete in what should be a free market system. Perfect examples are the subsidies paid to cotton farmers in the U.S. and sugar beet farmers in Europe (seems now, Europe has perhaps eliminated direct subsidies to sugar beet farmers, but still supports those farmers monetarily without calling them "subsidies"). Overall, the result of certain subsidies is that we in developed nations are causing some considerable economic stress on farmers in developing nations – nations that are trying to get out from under international economic aid and become more self-sufficient. Thus, U.S. farm policy is running counter to our foreign policy and economic policy that wants to help developing countries grow their economies and reduce their need for foreign monetary aid. We should do a much better job of integrating farm policy and foreign policy.

Your Question #4: "How can farm policy best achieve conservation and environmental goals?"

We Should Base Farm Policy on Science Rather Than Politics:

As a scientist I am appalled at the increasing frequency at which President George W. Bush and other elected officials in federal and state governments (and their political appointees) base important policy decisions on politics and ideology rather than on science. The former Soviet Union was on the brink of agricultural disaster largely because they used ideology rather than science to develop and implement agricultural policies. As a scientist and as a proud American, I hope we do not travel down that same road – the road of ignorance and darkness. Agricultural policy, environmental policy, and energy policy are all too important to every American, to our national security, and to our responsibilities to future generations to be based largely upon ideology and ideologically-driven science. Instead, we must formulate and implement policies based on science that is innovative, ingenious, and free of political and ideological influences coming from elected officials and policy makers in government. Politicians can wag their tongues all they want, but let us "let the scientific data speak for itself".

William D. Ruckelshaus, first and fifth Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, stated that:

"... we have broken down into squabbling camps on environmental issues. There is not the willingness, as I believe there was in the 1970s, to see problems as challenges that should excite or energize American ingenuity and optimism. We have lost the willingness to experiment, to get the best science and let it inform our discretion, to adjust where the facts warrant and to fail – yes, to fail, because failure is inevitable as we pursue solutions with honest, democratically backed experiments that we hope will enlighten and instruct our next effort." (Ruckelshaus, W. D. 2005, *Choosing Our Common Future: Democracy's True Test*, p. 14, Fifth Annual John H. Chafee Memorial Lecture on Science and the Environment, Washington DC: National Council for Science and the Environment).

We should apply that ideal expressed by Mr. Ruckelshaus to farming and farm policy. I believe that to have strong, healthy, and sustainable farms and farmers, then we must stop squabbling over the little differences we have over environmental and farm issues and we must put our best science forward, allow that science to experiment and to possibly fail at times – all in the spirit of our American optimism and ingenuity.

Another way to best achieve conservation and environmental goals is to increase the rewards for good stewardship of land and water. Too much of our current farm subsidies are production and commodity-based rather than stewardship-based. Surveys, such as one conducted by American Farmland Trust, show that most Americans support financial assistance to farmers if that assistance is based on environmental benefits rather than linked to production levels. Isn't it true that only 10-15% of U.S. farmers get the majority of the total farm subsidies? That represents a broken system! Most people do not want to pull the rug out from under farmers by removing all financial assistance – some risks occur in farming that require some support by the public. However, I and most other Americans want conservation of topsoil, far less runoff of nutrients and synthetic chemicals into our water, protection of rivers, streams, lakes, oceans, and underground water, and protection of wildlife and their habitats. Therefore, farm policy should stop linking subsidies to production (resulting in overproduction and environmental degradation) and increase the linking of subsidies to stewardship and to environmental benefits.

I believe methods being used by those who practice sustainable agriculture are helping to improve stewardship on the farms. What is needed is more research on sustainable agriculture and more outreach (via extension services) to farmers about proven sustainable farming methods. Universities, such as Penn State, and non-profit organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, are currently playing key roles in such research and outreach. Let's have a farm policy that strengthens such research and outreach and enables more innovation in sustainable agriculture.

In conclusion, I strongly believe we need a farm policy that:

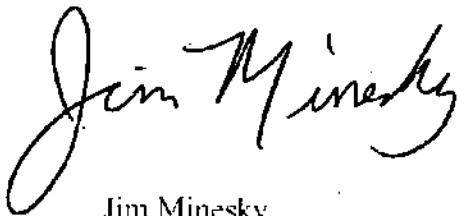
- Puts sustainable agriculture and truly sustainable farming practices, rather than high-input industrialized farming, as a priority over non-sustainable agriculture.
- Encourages and rewards, both legally and financially, farmers who manage farms by acting as good stewards and in environmentally-sound ways – ways that build soil rather than deplete it, protect our water (above and below ground) and wetlands, utilize integrated pest management rather than the outdated "spray and pray" approach, ensure a healthy and safe food supply for consumers, and enhance and protect our wildlife and their habitats.

- Puts small and unincorporated family farmers on a level playing field with large-scale farmers and corporate farms.
- Protects small and unincorporated family farmers by helping to reduce economic and environmental risks, caused by natural factors and by non-farm entities and activities, through thoughtful and non-political economic assistance.
- Is fair to both farmers and consumers.
- Helps develop greater local and regional production, distribution, and marketing of locally produced food because consumers value local farms and locally produced food.
- Is comprehensively integrated with energy policy, environmental policy, foreign policy, and national security.
- Uses science and the nation's tremendous scientific talent, rather than political ideology at either end of the political spectrum, to formulate unbiased policy.
- Helps support the effective education of future farmers and scientists, both of whom we need if we are to achieve a truly sustainable agricultural system.

The ideas I have expressed here are certainly not brand new – they are ideas that have been expressed previously by many farmers, scientists, economists, policy analysts, and ordinary citizens concerned about our farms and our food.

Thank you again for inviting Americans to provide you with their views. I trust that you will do your best to ensure that the next farm policy will benefit our nation as a whole and will lead us to truly sustainable agriculture.

Sincerely,



Jim Minesky

P.S. Growing federal budget deficits are a threat to a strong American economy. Federal debt, as it grows, only means that future generations will have to pay that debt — that will put economic stress on family farmers in the future. The current administration in the White House and Congress must stop increasing the federal debt and eliminate the federal debt as quickly as possible. Thank you, Jim.