

**Statement of Richard Rominger, Deputy Secretary  
Unites States Department of Agriculture  
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry  
July 21, 1999**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the important issue of farmland protection. I would like to begin by recognizing the efforts and leadership of Members of this Committee, including Senator Leahy, for introducing S. 333, which would extend the authority of the program and make a few changes to the authorizing legislation. The bill would provide \$55 million annually for the program. I would like to recognize Senator Santorum for his legislation, S. 598.

Preserving valuable and highly productive farmland for future generations has been a priority for me as Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. When I travel back home to California from time to time, I need not look much further than my mailbox to see some of the richest and most productive soils that our planet has to offer. And from the soils of Yolo County California, we produce some of the most valuable and special crops that one can find anywhere in the United States. Almonds, pistachio nuts, pears, prunes, and tomatoes, to name a few, are bountiful in the many acres of farmland separated by a few roads and an occasional farmstead.

We all know that as a nation, the United States is blessed with some of the most productive soils and most temperate climate found anywhere in the world. Our predecessors recognized this, and it is quite apparent that most populated centers of the developing United States were

located directly on or near the most productive farmland. Consequently, our nation has benefited from great prosperity and abundance from everything the land has produced. But members of this committee know all too well that the rural roads and occasional farmsteads in so many parts of the country are giving way to subdivisions, parking lots, and malls. Today more than 85 percent of domestic fruit and vegetables are grown in counties influenced by urban development. Approximately 79% of dairy production takes place in urban influenced counties. The Office of Management and Budget defines these as counties within a Metropolitan Statistical Area, and adjacent counties. Population in counties with the highest agricultural productivity is more than twice the national average. Conversion of farmland could jeopardize future production capacity for the nation and dramatically affect the quality of life for many Americans.

In his State of the Union Address, the President referenced the issues of urban sprawl and the troubling trend of conversion of agricultural lands for development. The President's FY 2000 budget requests a total of \$77.5 million for the Farmland Protection Program in two components: \$50 million in new discretionary funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to support the President's Land Legacy Initiative and \$27.5 million in CCC funding under proposed legislation. As part of the Livability Agenda, Vice President Gore has stressed the need to protect farmland and has challenged us to ensure that our children see horses, cows, and farms outside, not just in books and movies.

There is an important national interest in the protection of farmland threatened by structural development and conversion to non-agricultural uses. Its preservation prevents irreversible damage to vital ecosystems, provides openspace, and preserves a quality of life threatened by urbanization.

Farmers on the edge of urban development face many challenges. As development ensues, these lands are taxed at a rate that reflects their potential for residential development. As family farms are unable to meet this increasing tax burden, farmland is irreversible converted to non-agriculture uses. We estimate that since 1967, an average of 1.5 million acres of farmland have been converted to other uses each year. Even more troubling, I would note that in most states, prime farmland is being converted at 2 to 4 times the rate of less productive land. Conversion of farmland threatens the future of the nation's food supply, and also means lower standards of water and air quality, and lack of openspace.

The public has responded to these troubling trends. I would note that last November, 148 measures aimed to protect open space appeared on ballots. The voters approved eighty-four percent of those ballot initiatives. Most notably, New Jersey passed a referendum for a \$1.4 billion land preservation program, which will aim to preserve half of the state's remaining two million acres of undeveloped land. This historic step is an indication of the local demands for farmland protection and preservation of openspace. It also demonstrates how our initiatives at the federal level have spurred and contributed toward state and local action.

## THE FARMLAND PROTECTION PROGRAM (FPP)

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the Farmland Protection Program (FPP), authorized by the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (1996 Act) protects prime or unique farmland from conversion to nonagricultural uses. It provides matching funds to leverage funds from States, Tribes, or local government entities that have farmland protection programs. The FPP establishes partnerships with State, Tribes and local government entities to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land. It protects farmland from urbanization and helps maintain a healthy environment and sustainable rural economy.

The program was originally funded in the 1996 Act at a level of \$35 million. All of these funds were committed by Fiscal Year 1998, and the easement acquisition process is underway. With these funds, up to 460 farms, representing 127,000 acres of farmland in 19 states will be permanently protected from conversion to nonagricultural uses. In addition, the federal investment in FPP will spur about \$190 million in state and local contributions for this activity. This is an impressive return on a relatively small federal investment. As of June, 168 farms, consisting of 33,543 acres have had easements recorded. These represent a federal contribution of \$15 million with a state/local contribution of \$60 million. I am including for the record a table showing data for each state.

What the data does not show, however, is the impact that the program has had on the ground. For example, in York County, Pennsylvania, George and Naomi Phillips have protected 620

acres of their farmland with a conservation easement. The land has been in agricultural production since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and serves as an integral part of the local economy. In Delaware, Richard Morgan has protected 176 acres of his farmland, rich with sweet corn, field corn and soybeans. Not only will Sussex County Delaware be ensured the long-term viability of the farming operation, but it will also benefit from sound management practices and environmental stewardship of the Morgan farm. Mr. Morgan is one of six farmers in Delaware's history to receive the "State of Delaware Governor's Award" for protecting water quality.

The Farmland Protection Program is making significant progress in protecting farmland, utilizing a relatively small federal resource. But the needs are great and more resources are needed. I commit to working with you Mr. Chairman, and Members of this Committee to continue funding and support for FPP so that we can maximize the benefits of the local initiatives, which have started or have been enhanced by the FPP. As farmers or as public servants, one of the lasting marks that we will leave upon the land will be the health of our natural resources. Along with that, ensuring an abundance of productive farmland, clean water, and air will be the true measure of what we have accomplished.

I look forward to working with you on this issue. Not only do we need to extend the authority for F.P.P., but we need additional resources to make it work. Therefore, I ask your support for \$50 million in new discretionary funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to support F.P.P. and full funding from the C.C.C. so that we can ensure food and fiber

for our children, and a more healthy and livable environment. I thank the Chairman and would be happy to answer any questions that members might have.