

STATEMENT OF DANNY SELLS, ASSOCIATE CHIEF,
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY, CONSERVATION, AND RURAL
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the important issue of farmland protection. I am Danny Sells, Associate Chief for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I would like to begin by recognizing the efforts and leadership of Members of this Subcommittee, including Senator Santorum, for introducing S. 598 and co-sponsoring, S.333, that would the increase the funding authorization of the program and make a few changes to the authorizing legislation. S. 333 would provide \$55 million annually for the program.

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 open space, and preserves a quality of life threatened by urbanization.

Preserving valuable and highly productive farmland for future generations is an important priority for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Every day dozens of news stories point out the impacts of urban sprawl on the livability of our communities and we see farmers making difficult and painful decisions as they see the opportunity to sell their land to developers for soaring prices when many are suffering from low farm prices.

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 irreversibly 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 could affect the nation's food supply, and also means lower standards of water and air quality, and lack of open space.

Rural roads and occasional farmsteads in so many parts of the country are giving way to subdivisions, parking lots, and malls. Today counties influenced by urban development account for more than 85 percent of the domestic fruit and vegetables grown and 79 percent of the dairy production. The Office of Management and Budget defines these as counties," within and adjacent to a Metropolitan Statistical Area".

The interdependency between consumers and farmers require us to look at ways to share responsibility for farmland protection. This responsibility starts at the local level. There are many bold and creative efforts throughout the nation to combat the increasing loss of our nation's most important farmland. They include some of the local and state programs this committee will hear about today.

The federal efforts include several new initiatives. The President's FY 2001 budget requests a total of \$65 million for the Farmland Protection Program (FPP), of which the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 provided \$10 million for FY 2001. The President's FY 2001 budget proposes a \$1.3 billion increase for conservation programs including the FPP that help family farmers take steps to protect water quality and the environment and to preserve farmland pressured by sprawl. Within this proposal are several initiatives including the Conservation Security Program, that provides support for those farmers that are investing in private land conservation. This conservation package is part of a larger Administration budget proposal to strengthen the farm safety net. The FPP is also a part of the Administration's Livable Communities Program, an effort to support locally driven efforts to build more livable communities. Its aim is to provide communities with tools, information, and resources that they can use to enhance their residents' quality of life, ensure their community's economic competitiveness, and build a stronger sense of community. In addition, the FPP is part of the Administration's Land Legacy initiative and included in the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA) that is before the Senate. CARA, as passed by the House, provides \$100 million

annually for farmland protection and related activities carried out by NRCS and the Forest Service.

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 total authority 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.

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 to ensure passage of this legislation. The Administration strongly supports both of these bills. Protecting farmland and preserving rural areas facing development will help family farms continue their long and honorable tradition of sustainably providing food and fiber, open space, and a healthier and more livable environment.

I thank the Chairman and would be happy to answer any questions that members might have.