

Conservation and Preservation Issues Central to 2007 Farm Bill

By New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus

Agriculture's relationship with conservation has an ironic duality. Residents of states whose agriculture is close to more urbanized areas have shown a strong willingness to fund farmland and open-space preservation. These residents live close enough to farms – sometimes in housing developments right next to them – to appreciate how farming contributes to their quality of life.

However, those same states where farmers live shoulder-to-shoulder with the homes of carpenters, mail carriers and teachers could fare much better in terms of the federal dollars going to help fund their farmers' conservation practices. These include efforts to retain and sustain farmland and funding to improve water quality and soil health.

As Congress prepares to craft a new Farm Bill, it's worthwhile to have a discussion of the issues involved in agricultural conservation practices. New Jersey is committed to working with other states to help shape a national farm policy that is relevant to all types of farming operations – small and large, those near population centers and those in more rural settings.

Many states throughout the nation share New Jersey's characteristic of farming close to population centers. This juxtaposition is a benefit in that our farmers and fishermen are close to the customers they serve – whether they are end-use retail consumers or food processors buying wholesale. The shorter shipping distances save on fuel costs and ensure that the products will be fresh when purchased, a primary consideration for any agricultural product.

On the flip side, farming near developed areas creates a demand for those farmers to be more mindful of conservation practices, since the land near them already has been impacted by development. The vast majority of our farmers already are proactive in their conservation efforts, but that makes those practices no less costly.

Take, for instance, the states of the Northeast, generally defined as Maine to Delaware on the eastern seaboard. This region produces 5.4 percent of the nation's market value of agricultural products. Yet, the region received just 1.4 percent of Farm Bill conservation funding between 1995 and 2004.

Regionally the Northeast states have spent more than \$1.9 billion in local dollars on farmland preservation programs, having preserved 806,860 acres. Since 1996, Northeast states have been allocated just shy of \$183 million in federal dollars from the USDA through the program currently referred to as the Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FFRPP) to purchase permanent easements on farmland that prevent future non-agricultural uses.

In this region, thousands of applications for conservation programs and requests for conservation technical assistance each year go unfulfilled due to lack of funding.

Previous Farm Bills, in an effort to offer consistent programs nationwide, have too often assumed that one size fits all, which clearly is not the case.

This less-than-representative level of funding for conservation hits New Jersey and other urbanized states especially hard. Farmers already are hard-pressed to ensure sufficient buffers between our farming operations and the residential and business corridors nearby. Providing environmentally friendly buffers is a key to sustaining the farms we have.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns and his staff have been working hard to address these inequities from past Farm Bills. They have held “listening sessions” throughout the country, including one in New Brunswick and another in Battery Park, New York. I was privileged to have provided testimony at both of them.

In addition to ensuring enough funding for conservation and preservation, some steps that would help make a more relevant and comprehensive Farm Bill are:

- **Tie aid to market value** -- Distribute funding for technical assistance and conservation programs in proportion to the market value percentage of agricultural products a region produces
- **Give states more control** -- Allow states more freedom to address the resource concerns of local and regional importance by allotting both conservation and preservation funds for use as the states see best to use them. **Some programs have been seen in the past as overly restrictive.**
- **Streamline the application process** – Allow the farmer to apply for multiple conservation **and/or preservation** programs with one application, thereby reducing redundancy in programs to promote efficiency.
- **Incentivize donations** -- Extend a law that contains provisions to significantly expand the federal tax incentive for conservation easement donations.

These are just some of the suggestions that have been discussed at state and regional levels to help create a Farm Bill conservation title that will address these issues whether farms are located near developed areas or in more traditional rural settings.

These more efficient, locally led conservation efforts will allow our nation to benefit from the continued work to improve soil health, water quality, wildlife habitat and the agricultural working landscape, which our current and future generations can enjoy regardless of where they live.