

PROTECTING OUR MOST VALUABLE RESOURCES

THE RESULTS OF A NATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION POLL

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American Farmland Trust works to stop the loss
AMERICANS VALUE FARMLAND FOR EVERYTHING FROM FOOD AND
of productive farmland and to promote farming
FIBER, TO WILDLIFE HABITAT, TO THE SCENIC VISTAS IT PROVIDES.
practices that lead to a healthy environment.



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While it has been generations since America could be described as a nation of farmers, Americans deeply value farmland, especially for the food and fiber, the wildlife habitat and the scenic vistas it provides. They also care about those who work the land.

That message came through loud and clear earlier this summer in a nationwide survey commissioned by American Farmland Trust and conducted by Northern Illinois University. Across the country, and across major demographic groups, American voters said they value farmland for everything from food and fiber, to wildlife habitat and the scenic vistas it provides.

That is good news, because despite all of the growth and industrial development of our nation over the last century, the vast majority of our land is still used for farming. Private cropland, pasture and rangelands account for about 48 percent of the land in the lower 48 states, while private forestlands make up about 22 percent.

Farmland is one of America's most important, vital and versatile resources. Farming, forestry and ranching are also critical to our nation's economic health.

Americans recognize these landscapes can provide us with more than food and fiber. Well-managed farmland also plays a crucial role in ensuring we have clean water, adequate habitat for wildlife and beautiful scenery. These lands can also help reduce the threat of climate change and serve as the front line in controlling sprawling development.

As Congress prepares to craft the next version of the farm bill, it has an opportunity to ensure that America's private farmland continues to serve all of those purposes for all Americans.

THE FARM BILL

While it is easy to think of the farm bill today almost solely in terms of price supports for farmers, one of its primary intentions has been to encourage land conservation. However, since the 1996 Farm Bill, conservation spending as a percentage of direct aid to farmers has dropped from 26 percent in 1996 and 1997 to 6 percent in 2000.

The current budget agreement, which prescribes how much money Congress can allocate for farm programs, provides \$17 billion per year for farm payments over the next 10 years. We believe Congress should put half of that money into conservation programs. Doing so would more than triple the current spending on conservation, help farmers protect the land and, as American Farmland Trust research shows, meet the demands of voters nationwide for better stewardship of our precious farmlands. Excerpting from testimony delivered to Congress,¹ the opportunity exists to:

- Provide stewardship payments to farmers and ranchers who reduce fertilizer and pesticide use, prevent soil erosion, rotate crops, adopt resource-friendly grazing systems, and manage manure more safely and effectively. Such programs should be structured both to achieve environmental benefits and to support income.
- Purchase easements to preserve farmland, rangelands and forests threatened by sprawl.
- Create incentives for farmers to enhance and preserve native grasslands, restore wetlands, stream buffers, and other sensitive lands, and improve habitat for native plant and animal species.
- Target farm payments more toward medium-sized and smaller farms and support programs for new farmers.
- Provide grants to help family farmers and ranchers to develop markets and add value for resource-conserving farm techniques and diverse farm products, to retain that value in farming communities, and to take steps to restore competition to the marketplace.
- Increase funding for research programs to develop and test new environmentally oriented farming techniques and systems, and marketing policies to assist family farmers to meet resource conservation and farm income goals.
- Increase the technical assistance needed to deliver programs and respond to farmer needs.
- Provide grants and incentives for farmers and rural communities to identify and utilize available renewable energy resources, and develop markets for real and verifiable reductions in greenhouse gasses.
- Maintain and strengthen “Sodbuster” and “Swampbuster” to assure that farm programs do not encourage plowing up highly erodible land or draining wetlands.





THE UNMET NEED

Nobody respects the land more than the American farmer. Those who work the land understand better than anyone how fragile and irreplaceable it is, and they want to do all they can to protect it.

History clearly has demonstrated that farmers will do their share to tackle conservation challenges if given adequate support. Doing so, however, can be expensive; recent versions of the farm bill have provided little assistance and the few existing programs can't keep up with demand.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, roughly three out of four farmers and ranchers who seek assistance from most conservation programs are turned away due to insufficient funds. And for every farmer who applies, two or three others either don't bother because the lines are too long or because they know the funding is inadequate. In recent years:

- **70 percent of farmers and ranchers seeking federal funds to improve water quality have been rejected.²**
- **In 2000, more than 3,000 farmers offering to restore more than 550,000 acres of wetlands were turned away.²**
- **Nine out of 10 farmers and ranchers offering to preserve open space by selling development rights are rejected due to inadequate funding.²**
- **Even getting answers to basic questions is difficult. Half of all farmers seeking basic technical advice on things such as planting filter strips or terracing crops go without help due to declines in numbers of Natural Resources Conservation Service technical assistance staff over the last decade.²**

The next farm bill provides Congress with an opportunity to dramatically improve that situation, particularly with a budget of \$17 billion per year set aside for farm payments.

If Congress puts half of that amount into conservation programs, it would triple current conservation spending and make dramatic strides toward allowing American farmers to become even better stewards of the land. Our study shows U.S. voters agree.

PUBLIC SUPPORT

This year, American Farmland Trust commissioned a study to determine how Americans feel about farms. The study also explored public knowledge of, and support for, farm support payments.

The initial phase of the telephone survey, conducted between June 2 and June 21 by the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University, was based upon a random, representative sample of 1,024 registered voters nationwide.

The findings surprised even farmland advocates. The survey found that no matter where they live, their party preference, their age, or their racial or income group, most Americans still feel a strong bond to the land.

One of the most obvious and most basic reasons, perhaps, is that 81 percent say that they want their food to come from American farms.

But food and fiber is just one reason why American voters say they value farmland, ranchland and forests. More than 80 percent say they value that land for the habitat it provides to wildlife such as pheasants, ducks and other animals. Three-quarters say it is important for the scenic vistas it

provides, while nearly 60 percent consider it an important recreational resource.

Though most Americans now live in or near cities, they still have contact with farmers on a regular basis. Among respondents, half reported they had visited a farm or ranch in the previous year, and 70 percent reported buying something directly from a farmer during that time (at a farm stand or farmers' market).

With such a deep appreciation of and connection to the land, it is not surprising most Americans want the federal government to provide support to farmers. What is surprising, however, is the number of Americans who know that the federal government already does so.

Nearly eight in 10 Americans know of the federal farm payments that some farmers receive. Furthermore, Americans support those payments. More than three-quarters of respondents (78 percent) say they approve of payments made to farmers to offset low market prices for farm products. Even more, 88 percent, support payments to farmers to help them stay in business through times of flood or drought.

