

# 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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**W**hile 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,<sup>1</sup> 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

**N**obody 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.<sup>2</sup>**
- **In 2000, more than 3,000 farmers offering to restore more than 550,000 acres of wetlands were turned away.<sup>2</sup>**
- **Nine out of 10 farmers and ranchers offering to preserve open space by selling development rights are rejected due to inadequate funding.<sup>2</sup>**
- **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.<sup>2</sup>**

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.





## PUBLIC SUPPORT, CONT.

That support is not unconditional, however.

Nearly 85 percent of Americans think farmers receiving federal aid should be required to apply conservation practices, or that those who did so should receive more of the money.

Support for conservation payments is beyond theoretical. In fact, 63 percent say they would be willing to forgo part of a federal income tax rebate if the money were put toward protection of waterways, wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Similarly, nearly 60 percent say that they are willing to pay higher property or sales taxes to help farmers ensure safer drinking water; 49 percent would pay more in taxes to protect farms that grow produce in their area from development; and 40 percent would pay more taxes simply to protect particularly scenic farmlands.

A majority of Americans (53 percent) state clearly that they want to see more federal dollars spent to keep farmland from being developed.

## METHODOLOGY

American Farmland Trust commissioned Dr. J. Dixon Esseks, Northern Illinois University, to conduct a two-phase telephone survey of 2,213 registered voters nationwide. Households were contacted through random digit dialing. The interviewers asked to speak with a registered voter in each home, alternating between male and female voters. A random sample of this type is likely to yield a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.3 percentage points in 95 out of 100 cases. Responses to the survey were gathered between June 2 through July 26, 2001. The Tarrance Group, Inc., provided consulting and analytical services.

Enough calls were made to be able to extrapolate the results for seven of the eight regions. Because of funding and time constraints, we did not complete enough calls in the Central Plains region to summarize the results (includes: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota). The following regional farming profiles highlight how voters in different regions across the country see farm policy.

# T H E N O R T H E A S T

The Northeast region holds 21.8 million acres of farmland, representing about 19 percent of the region. The average farm is 157 acres and only 68,266 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$11.5 billion. Nursery, poultry, fruit, dairy and other crops dominate those sales. Key conservation concerns include water quality, the loss of northeastern forest lands which are home to many species of animals and birds, farmland protection and higher rental payments for Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$181 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of just 2 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

Every spring the families show up at Susan Butler's farm in Montgomery County, Maryland, and tell the same story.

"My mother and father used to bring me here to pick strawberries," they tell their children as they prepare to introduce them to this little bit of rural America perched on the outskirts of the nation's capital, just 25 miles outside of Washington, D.C.

That is very gratifying to Butler and her brothers, who in 1983 joined the family farm their parents founded in 1950. The siblings later took advantage of a local farmland protection program and added 200 acres to the farm. Since then, they have used the land to grow pick-your-own strawberries, blueberries, pumpkins, peas and Christmas trees.

"We know that our farm is of value to people for the fresh produce it provides, but it is more than that," Butler says. "In addition to those who come for produce, we have

walkers, photographers, art classes and educational tours—like the families who come to pick their own produce, they want the farm experience."

Providing that experience in such a fast growing community gets tougher every year, she says. If it's not a developer wanting to build homes, or a power company trying to build a substation, it's a phone company wanting to erect a cell tower.

"We work hard to maintain our atmosphere, but there is just endless pressure from developers," Butler says.

Based upon the survey by American Farmland Trust, it appears her neighbors appreciate those efforts.

Registered voters in the Northeast are the most likely in the nation (45 percent) to say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to protect scenic farmland. Similarly, those voters are the most concerned







CONNECTICUT  
 DELAWARE  
 MAINE  
 MARYLAND  
 MASSACHUSETTS  
 NEW HAMPSHIRE  
 NEW JERSEY  
 NEW YORK  
 PENNSYLVANIA  
 RHODE ISLAND  
 VERMONT

“All across America there are farmers like us. Valued and cherished by their community, they need help providing the environmental products that people want along with the strawberries, blueberries and pumpkins.”

of the seven regions surveyed when it comes to wildlife habitat, with 45 percent saying the government should spend more to protect wildlife habitat on farms.

Those voters also appear to care deeply about the treatment farmers in their region receive. Nearly 80 percent are aware of federal farm programs; 80 percent approve of payments to farmers to cover low market prices for crops, and 90 percent favor them for weather damage. More importantly, two-thirds of those voters agree that farm payments should not be limited to the currently supported commodity crops, an important distinction in a region where farmers benefit little from such programs.

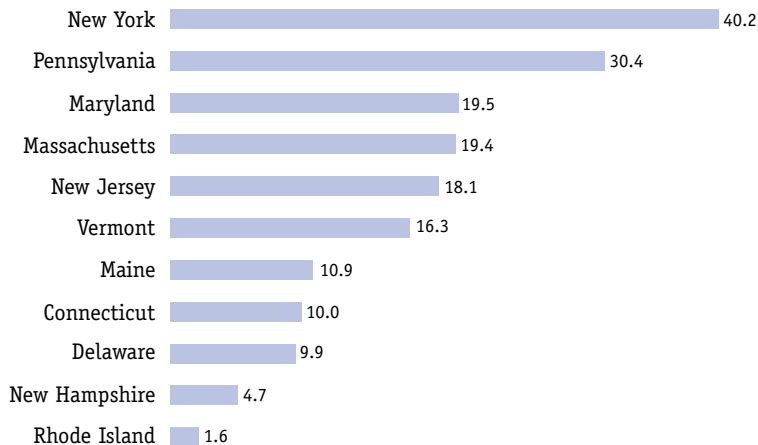
However, like voters across the country, they also feel that stewardship should be a condition of receiving such funds. More than

three-quarters (77 percent) say that farm payments should be tied to a farmer’s willingness to take steps to protect land and water. In particular, 59 percent believe that farmers should be required to take steps to protect water quality, 66 percent expect land conservation measures in return for the funding, and 57 percent want to make those funds contingent upon greater protection of wetlands.

While encouraged by such results, Butler was hardly surprised—those are the types of things her customers tell her all the time. She simply hopes Congress will listen, as well.

“All across America there are farmers like us,” she says. “Valued and cherished by their community, they need help providing the environmental benefits that people want, along with the strawberries, blueberries and pumpkins.”

**Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>**



Millions of Dollars

# T H E M I D W E S T

The Midwest region has 81 million acres of farmland, about 53 percent of the region. The average farm is 256 acres and 160,733 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$27.6 billion. Corn, dairy, soybeans, hogs and cattle make up the bulk of the sales. Conservation concerns include surface water quality, soil erosion, more technical assistance and farmland protection. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$190 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of 11 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

**B**ob and Fred Uphoff work hard at being good neighbors.

The brothers, who raise about 2,000 hogs a year on their farm just outside of Madison, Wisconsin, work practically in the shadow of strip malls and subdivisions. Consequently, they continuously strive to reduce manure odors and to ensure nearby waterways aren't contaminated.

They are happy to do these things for the benefit of their neighbors, but they would be quite pleased if those neighbors didn't creep any closer. That is why the Uphoffs helped establish, and were the first to participate in, a purchase of development rights (PDR) program in their township.

"This is our home base, and we wanted to keep it going," says Bob, noting that Uphoffs have worked the land since 1866. "We also wanted to

find a way that allowed older farmers to capitalize on the value of their property while keeping the land in farming."

That locally funded PDR program, pioneered in 1996, so far has protected about 1,500 acres of farmland in their township. That is a success by any measure, but it is only a fraction of what could be done.

"There is so much more interest than there is money," Uphoff says. "So many people would prefer to leave the land in farming than see it cut up into lots for houses, but the funding isn't there."

Voters in the Midwest favor the federal government stepping in and giving that process a boost. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of registered voters contacted in American Farmland Trust's recent poll worry that too much farmland is being developed.





ILLINOIS  
INDIANA  
MICHIGAN  
OHIO  
WISCONSIN

“There is so much more interest than there is money. So many people would prefer to leave the land in farming than see it cut up into lots for houses, but the funding isn’t there.”

Furthermore, 55 percent (more than in any other region of the country) support the idea of more federal funding to protect farmland from sprawl.

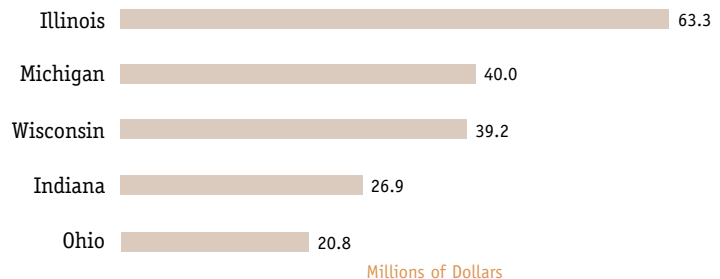
In a region where more than half of the land is in farming, perhaps it is not surprising that Midwest respondents were among the most knowledgeable in the nation when it came to farm payments. Seventy-nine percent are familiar with the payments, and the same percentage support using them to offset low market prices, while 90 percent support payments for weather damage.

However, that support comes with some strings attached. Nearly nine out of 10 Midwesterners (88 percent) say farm payments somehow should be linked to a farmer’s willingness to take proven steps to protect land and water resources.

Perhaps the biggest surprise from this region, in which currently assisted crops such as corn make up the greatest percentage of farming, was the level of support demonstrated for extending farm payments to a wider variety of farmers. Seventy-one percent of respondents favor making the payments available to growers of fruits, vegetables and other farm products largely excluded under the present farm bill. Nowhere else in the country did voters voice such strong support for that concept.

Support for more federal funding to develop biofuels (such as ethanol) was also far higher in the Midwest (74 percent) than anywhere else in the country.

#### Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>



# T H E S O U T H E A S T

The Southeast region has 57 million acres in farming, about 35 percent of the region. The average farm is 197.5 acres and 129,768 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$21.8 billion. Poultry, tobacco, hogs, cattle and cotton make up much of those sales. Top environmental challenges include water, both quality and quantity, the loss of wildlife habitat by the clear-cutting of private forestlands and urban sprawl. The decreasing production of tobacco has created more demand for conservation programs in general as an alternative use for land while alternatives to tobacco are being explored. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$258 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of 5 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

Bob Wilson had given up any hope of getting federal assistance to help make improvements on his farm.

He had applied again and again, only to be rejected.

This year would be different, he was told. This year, they said, there was plenty of money to go around. So this year, for the first time in ages, Wilson applied for assistance to help offset the cost of fencing in a spring and piping water to a dry field. Doing so would allow him to rotate his beef cattle through pastures more effectively, cutting costs while protecting the water supply.

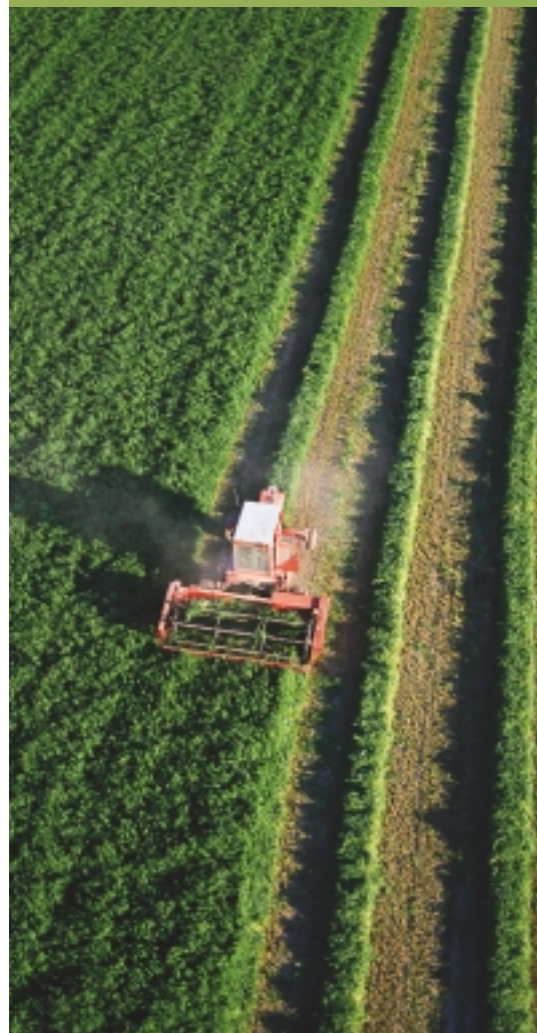
But this year, like most every year he tried in the past, he was turned down.

Now his attitude is once again like that of his neighbors in Jessamine

County, Kentucky. "Everybody feels pretty much the same. Why bother applying? You are just going to be rejected," he says.

It is little wonder that they feel that way. Nationally, 70 percent of farmers looking for assistance to improve water quality were turned down last year.

The recent poll sponsored by American Farmland Trust indicates that the problem concerns voters throughout the Southeast. The survey found voters there wholeheartedly support government payments to farmers to offset low market prices for their crops (78 percent) or to protect them from weather damage (88 percent). However, 82 percent of voters say farm payments somehow should be tied to a farmer's willingness to protect land and water resources. In particular, 65 percent believe such





GEORGIA  
 KENTUCKY  
 NORTH CAROLINA  
 SOUTH CAROLINA  
 TENNESSEE  
 VIRGINIA

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funding should be tied to a farmer’s willingness to apply conservation practices that prevent pollution of streams or other bodies of water. So great is their concern that more than half (54 percent) say they would pay more taxes to help farmers achieve that purpose.

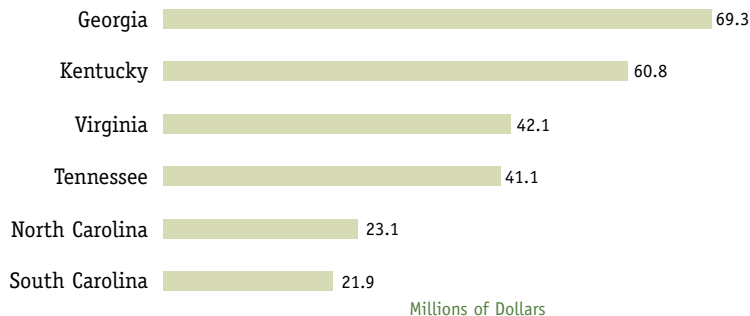
Voters in the Southeast are in agreement with others across the country that farm payments should be distributed to more than just growers of currently supported commodity crops (64 percent).

Registered voters in the Southeast are also among the most likely to be concerned about disappearing farmland. Seventy percent worry that too much of that land is being destroyed by development, and half of them favor increased federal funding to check that development.

One of the bigger challenges facing the region is finding economically viable uses for land once used for tobacco production.

Nearly 40 percent favored increased funding for creating and protecting wildlife habitat on farms. Agri-tourism—hunting, bird watching, hiking—is one of the more viable economic uses for such land while other alternatives are being explored. It might be an especially good fit for the region, as voters in the Southeast are among the most likely in the nation to value farmland for the recreational opportunities it provides (62 percent). They also are very likely (74 percent) to value farmland for its scenic beauty and to appreciate it for the wildlife habitat it provides (81 percent).

#### Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>



Millions of Dollars

# T H E S O U T H

The South region has 47 million acres in farming, about 31 percent of the region. The average farm is 269 acres and 73,548 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$18.2 billion. Poultry, fruit, cattle, other grains, cotton and vegetables make up much of those sales. Environmental challenges include the restoration of wetlands and the protection of rare species of wildlife. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$293 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of 6 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

**P**at Carlton's family has been farming and ranching in Florida for seven generations.

That's more than 150 years of droughts, floods, fires and cycles of economic boom and bust. But things may be tougher now than ever before, Carlton believes.

Citrus growers are being pressured by cut-throat competition from overseas, must contend with a long litany of regulatory burdens and are under the unrelenting pressure that comes from farming in one of the nation's fastest growing states, he says.

"When you look at the environmental pressures, the economic pressures and the social pressures, I think you have to seriously question the long-term viability of farming as a way of life in Florida," Carlton says.

After years of farming at break-even, or worse, many farmers have little alternative but to sell to developers.

To slow that process, it is almost imperative that the federal government provide farmers with viable options that will give them an incentive to stay in business.

Many farmers, he says, are about ready to quit just to shed the unfair stereotype that farmers do nothing but throw fertilizer on the land and pollute the waters. It is an unfair characterization, according to Carlton, whose family operates a showcase orchard where water released from the site is often cleaner than when it flows in.

"There are so many other farm programs out there that compensate people for growing, or not growing. It would be nice if they would reward us for all the good things we do—good for the land, good for the state, good for everybody," he says.

Many farmers, he believes, would do more conservation work if there were more federally funded incentive-based programs to help offset the costs.





ALABAMA  
 ARKANSAS  
 FLORIDA  
 MISSISSIPPI  
 WEST VIRGINIA

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Carlton’s neighbors in the South share his desire to see change in the farm bill.

Voters in the region are very aware of federal farm payment programs (71 percent) and wholeheartedly support payments to protect farmers from low market prices (79 percent) and weather damage (88 percent). They also understand that farmers in their region currently benefit very little from such programs and 60 percent support the idea of making farm payments available to farmers beyond those growing subsidized crops.

However, like voters elsewhere, Southerners do not support those payments as mere handouts.

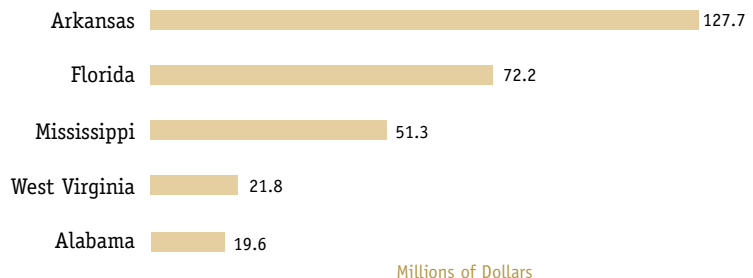
To qualify for payments, 83 percent said that farmers should be required

to implement proven methods to protect land and water resources. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) specifically believe farmers should be required to take steps that protect wetlands.

Those voters seem willing to pitch in and help such programs. Sixty-one percent said they would pay more in taxes to help farmers protect water, while 68 percent would forgo a portion of a tax refund if they were assured that the money would be diverted to programs that protect waterways, wetlands and wildlife.

Sixty-nine percent are concerned that too much farmland in the region is being lost to development, perhaps not surprising considering that most (78 percent) value farmland for its scenic beauty.

Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>



T H E

# SOUTH CENTRAL

The South Central region has 172 million acres in farming and ranching, about 61 percent of the area. The average farm size is 485 acres and 127,625 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$20 billion. Cattle, cotton, wheat, poultry, other grains and other crops make up most of those sales. The most critical conservation issue in the region is water, both quantity and quality. In addition, wildlife habitat is being degraded and fragmented by development. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$338 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of 13 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

**W**ater is a precious commodity in the Texas Panhandle.

"Historically, a lot of people have been killed over water," says Dale Artho, who farms 10,000 acres in this arid region.

Artho runs some cattle on his land, but most of it is planted in sorghum, wheat and cotton. Some years, to his regret, part of the land is used for corn.

"Corn is a thirsty crop for such dry land, but the government makes it more attractive financially to grow corn, so that's what you do—even if there is already a surplus of corn on the market," he says.

Instead, Artho wishes the government would encourage farmers in the region to grow more crops such as sorghum, which requires about half as much water. It is just one of his many frustrations with recent farm bills.

For instance, he would like to make improvements to his land that not only would increase his yields and lower his costs, but also preserve precious natural resources. He would like to install a super-efficient drip watering system that requires just a fraction of the water of a conventional system. However, despite the crying need for such things, there is a dramatic lack of federal funding to offset the cost of such stewardship programs.

"I think plenty of farmers would take advantage of conservation programs if they were available," Artho says. "And 50 years from now, we might wish we had done more of those things."

It's not just farmers who think so.

Sixty percent of voters in the South Central part of the country say they are willing to pay more in taxes to help farmers protect water. Similarly,







LOUISIANA  
OKLAHOMA  
TEXAS

“I think plenty of farmers would take advantage of conservation programs if they were available. And 50 years from now, we might wish we had done more of those things.”

65 percent say they would forgo a portion of a tax refund if the money were diverted to programs that protected waterways, wetlands and wildlife.

Voters in that area, ravaged by a variety of weather problems in recent years, are also the nation’s biggest supporters of farm payments in general—93 percent support payments for weather damage and 81 percent support payments to cover low market prices.

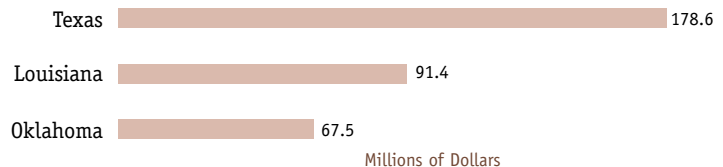
While very supportive of payments, those voters also made it clear they don’t believe farm payments should be synonymous with handouts. Among registered voters in the South Central region, 85 percent say farm payments should somehow be linked to a farmer’s willingness to protect land and water. Sixty-seven percent specifically say the payments should be tied to efforts to prevent pollution of streams and other bodies of water.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) also believe that federal income-support programs should be extended to more farmers, not just those who grow the currently assisted crops.

Voters in the South Central region are the most likely in the nation to appreciate farmland for the recreational opportunities it provides (65 percent) and are among the most likely to value farm and ranchland for its scenic vistas (76 percent) and the habitat it provides for birds and other animals (85 percent).

Finally, while the South Central portion of the nation often is regarded as an area of wide-open spaces, 64 percent say they are concerned that too much farmland is being developed. Nearly half (48 percent) of the registered voters polled say the government should spend more to halt that process.

#### Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>



# T H E M O U N T A I N S

The Mountain region has 218 million acres in farming and ranching, about 40 percent of the region. The average farm or ranch is 2,317 acres and 66,726 full-time farmers or ranchers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$15.8 billion. Vegetables, cattle, wheat, hay and dairy make up the bulk of the sales in the region. Conservation issues include preserving forests, open space and ecosystems for wildlife; controlling air pollution, noxious weeds and overgrazing; and protecting national monuments. There is also a critical need to carefully manage the quality and quantity of river water and strike a balance between generating power and preserving ecosystems. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$196 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of 7 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

The McNeil family has been running a cattle ranch in the San Luis Valley of south central Colorado for more than a century.

During most of that time, the basics of how they run their ranch changed little.

Until, that is, 1996, when they began exploring holistic management for their land. That decision-making system affects all facets of their business. One of the most important aspects involves moving cattle in dense herds, allowing them to intensely graze an area for a short period of time, and then moving them to a new patch of land. By doing so, the cattle keep weeds and grasses in check, fertilize the ground and aerate the soil, all of which makes the land healthier in the long run.

It was a leap of faith when the McNeils decided to adopt that

philosophy, but thanks to the USDA's Great Plains conservation program, they had federal assistance to offset the cost of electric fences, wells, water tanks and other improvements needed to implement the practice on a significant scale.

Today, the McNeils run 30 percent more cattle on their land and have reduced their expenses by 20 percent to 30 percent. And their pastureland, which lies in an area technically classified as desert, is thriving. It is so healthy that this year, for the first time in 104 years, the McNeils did not drive their herd onto the 50,000 acres of federal forest allotment they are allowed to graze.

Neighbors have noticed the success, and Mike and Cathy McNeil are more than happy to talk about it. Many of those neighbors would like to give it a try, but the Great Plains money is gone, and nothing of similar mag-





ARIZONA  
 COLORADO  
 IDAHO  
 MONTANA  
 NEVADA  
 NEW MEXICO  
 UTAH  
 WYOMING

Thanks to the USDA's Great Plains conservation program, today, the McNeils run 30 percent more cattle on their land and have reduced their expenses by 20 percent to 30 percent. Many of their neighbors would like to make improvements too but the Great Plains money is gone and nothing of similar magnitude has replaced it.

nitude has replaced it. Their neighbors would be hard-pressed to adopt the program without similar help.

"It seems like a lot of the federal dollars [for conservation] have dried up," Cathy says, noting that ranchers and the vegetable growers who dominate the region get little in the way of federal assistance.

That fact, apparently, is not lost upon voters in the Mountain region. In the American Farmland Trust survey, residents of that region are among the most knowledgeable when it comes to farm payments—79 percent are familiar with the programs. They are also very supportive of them, with 77 percent favoring payments that protect farmers from low market prices and 89 percent approving of payments that offset weather damage. Furthermore, two-thirds say such payments should be distributed more equitably so they aid more than just growers of the currently assisted commodity crops.

However, those same voters are also

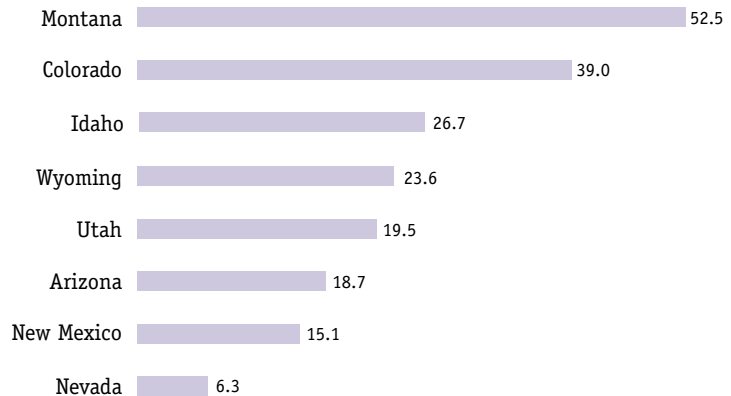
among the most likely (87 percent, second highest in the nation) to demand those payments be tied to a farmer's willingness to take steps to protect land and water resources.

Voters in the region are particularly concerned about issues related to water, with 57 percent saying they would pay higher taxes to help farmers protect water. Sixty-five percent say they would give up a portion of a tax refund if the money were diverted into programs that protect waterways, wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Voters in the Mountain states are also very concerned about urban sprawl, with 71 percent of the opinion that too much ranch and farm land is being developed.

Not surprisingly, residents of the region are among the most likely (80 percent) to value farmland for its scenic beauty, and the most likely (86 percent) to value the land for the habitat it provides to birds and other animals.

#### Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001<sup>4</sup>



Millions of Dollars

# T H E W E S T

The West region has 62.6 million acres in farming, about 32 percent of the region (excluding Alaska, where most of the land is owned by the federal government). The average farm is 656 acres and 73,738 full-time farmers remain. The total market value of agricultural products sold in the region is \$31.3 billion. Nursery, fruit, vegetables, cattle, dairy, other livestock and other crops dominate those sales. In most of the region, the key environmental challenge is water, both quantity and quality, and threats to local ecosystems and wildlife habitats. Endangered species protection (especially salmon) is also a critical issue. In 2001, there was a backlog of \$205 million for USDA conservation programs. The region's farmers received an average of just 3 cents in 1998-99 in direct federal payments for each dollar of their farm production.<sup>3</sup>

**A**t 71, Dave Zollinger has spent more than half his life growing almonds and peaches in the San Joaquin Valley of California.

During that time, he has seen things go from good, to bad, to worse.

Many crops in California are in severe straits, he says, rattling off the list.

"The raisin industry has a year-and-a-half surplus sitting in warehouses, large numbers of wine grape growers are unable to find markets for grapes currently ready for harvest. The tomato market is so bad that many growers could not find contracts before planting and didn't. Apple growers have been in deep trouble for some time; so are growers of apricots and pears. The sugar beet industry—which used to be big business—is basically nothing; the plants have been torn down and replaced with commercial development and housing tracts," Zollinger says sadly.

All of those are considered minor crops, and as such qualify for little if any of the federal supports extended to crops such as corn and wheat.

"There are no direct subsidies for those who grow almonds or peaches or a lot of those other crops; it's just bare-knuckled economics," Zollinger says.

In the American Farmland Trust national survey, registered voters in the Pacific Coast states expressed displeasure with that system, with more than two-thirds (68 percent) favoring the distribution of federal farm payments to farmers other than those who grow currently assisted crops.

However, voters in the Pacific Coast states are also the most environmentally conscious, and wanted something in return for those payments—namely better stewardship of the land.





ALASKA  
CALIFORNIA  
HAWAII  
OREGON  
WASHINGTON

Nine out of 10 surveyed voters—the highest percentage among the seven regions—say that farm payments should be tied to a farmer’s willingness to take steps to protect land and water resources. Of all voters polled, they were the most willing to demand that farm payments be tied to the application of conservation practices (83 percent), including protection of water quality, (74 percent), wildlife habitat (61 percent) and wetlands (68 percent).

Those voters were also the most likely to put their “money where their mouth is” on such issues. Sixty-two percent say they would pay more taxes to help farmers protect water, and 69 percent say that they would forgo a portion of a

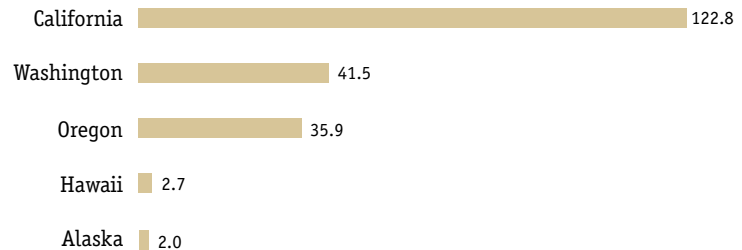
tax refund if the money were instead put toward protecting waterways, wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Voters in the West were also the most concerned in the nation when it came to farmland being lost to development. Seventy-four percent worried about that issue, and more than half (52 percent) believe the federal government should spend more to prevent urban sprawl.

“It is a serious concern,” says Zollinger, who has watched miles and miles of irreplaceable farmland devoured by cities and suburbs. “Development is taking more and more of the best land every year. But with things as they are, some folks have little choice but to sell out.”

Zollinger has watched miles and miles of irreplaceable farmland eaten up by cities and suburbs. “Development is taking more and more of the best land every year. But with things as they are, some folks have little choice but to sell out.”

#### Unfunded Conservation Requests FY 2001\*



Millions of Dollars

L E T T E R F R O M

# RALPH GROSSI

Over the next year, Congress will be working on a new farm bill that will reauthorize the federal government's support for farmers all across America. The national poll results included in this report show overwhelming support among voters across the nation for America's farmers at a time when their future may very well rest in the hands of 535 elected representatives in the nation's capital. American Farmland Trust is pleased to contribute solid research to this critical debate.

Especially enlightening in this statistically valid survey of more than 2,200 voters nationwide is the very strong support among Americans for continued federal financial support for family farmers under stress, and, for linking those payments to improved conservation practices.

This information comes at a crucial time when the opportunity to dramatically increase conservation support has never been greater. Congress is now in the process of deciding how \$170 billion in funds will be allocated through a new farm bill over the next 10 years. The time has come to re-orient farm policy in a way that truly benefits all Americans by making conservation the basis for public support for farmers.

The concept behind this effort is simple: provide financial support to those farmers who are maintaining and improving stewardship of the land through both existing programs such as the farmland protection program, and a new "stewardship incentive" program that would provide income support. The farmer gets financial support in proportion to his/her contribution to conserving and enhancing our great natural resources.

And to our delight, Americans overwhelmingly agree. If we are successful in this effort, it would mark the beginning of a new era in farm policy and it would make a giant leap toward restructuring the relationship between the public and private land owners.



President, American Farmland Trust  
September 3, 2001





## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The survey was designed and directed by Dr. J. Dixon Esseks, Northern Illinois University and Dr. Steven E. Kraft, Southern Illinois University in collaboration with the Tarrance Group, Inc. of Alexandria, Virginia.

Telephone interviews were conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory of Northern Illinois University.

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## S O U R C E S & F O O T N O T E S

<sup>1</sup>Taken from testimony of Ralph Grossi, president, American Farmland Trust, before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research. June 6, 2001. On behalf of American Farmland Trust, American Rivers, Center for Rural Affairs, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Defenders of Wildlife, Environmental Defense, Environmental Working Group, Institute for Environment and Agriculture, Land Trust Alliance, Minnesota Project, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club and Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

<sup>2</sup>*Losing Ground: A State-by-State Analysis of America's Growing Conservation Backlog* by American Farmland Trust, Environmental Defense, Environmental Working Group and Trust for Public Land. The report is available at <http://www.environmentaldefense.org/programs/Ecosystems/losingground.html>

### <sup>3</sup>**Regional Agricultural Profiles**

Agricultural statistics taken from State Summary Highlights, 1997 US Census of Agriculture-State Data, USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2001 conservation program backlog figures taken from USDA. Government payments per marketing dollar taken from Environmental Defense, based on USDA 1999 and 2000 Agriculture Marketing reports.

### <sup>4</sup>**Unfunded Conservation Requests Graphs**

Dollar amounts represent the combined FY 2001 backlog for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wetland Reserve Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and the Farmland Protection Program.

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