# SLIDE 1

I want to begin by acknowledging this moment. We are at a critical time. A period of dynamic change where we face so many unknowns—domestically and internationally. But some things are known. We know that the health of our planet depends on working lands and the wise stewardship of those lands. And we know that the farmers and ranchers who steward those lands are essential to producing the food needed for people to thrive and society to endure.

No farms, no food. It's not just alliterative. It's accurate.

This morning, I'd like to set the stage for the conversations to come over the next two days. To start with, a snapshot of America's working lands: What we have, what we've lost, and what's at stake. And then encourage us all to think more holistically about how to meet the needs of the moment, using both tried and true tools and new strategies and synergies to keep America's working lands working and farm and ranch families on the land. But first, I want to start with a short history.

# SLIDE 2

Now, any overview of 200 years of history compressed into three minutes is clearly going to be a high-level summary, so my fellow history buffs will need to cut me slack for all the detail I'm skipping.

A watershed event occurred in 1837, when John Deere invented the modern steel moldboard plow. The sod of America's great prairies was so hard and so thick that it could not be widely farmed until the new technology made it possible.

And what did we do with this great invention? We used it and used it and used it. Now, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s was spurred by multiple factors, but certainly one of them was the overuse of the plow.

During this period, some amazing men, including Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace, moved US policy in the direction of soil conservation, and that momentum may have continued were it not for new priorities. World War II and its aftermath pushed America to new levels of industrialization and pushed farming in the same direction, where the loss of topsoil and soil fertility could be made up with synthetic fertilizers and chemicals.

The devastation that followed World War II was unprecedented. The green revolution that used industrial methods to help feed the world probably saved a billion lives, but it came at an environmental cost.

Here at home, the postwar period was one of rapid development, with little regard for the farmland that seemed so abundant. The GI Bill sparked a surge in housing demand and the construction of new suburbs. And the Federal Highway Act created the interstate highway system, which facilitated long-distance commuting and made it easier for people to live further away from urban centers. Over time, some people began to get worried about the loss of farmland. Serious concerns were also raised over the heavy use of chemicals like DDT.

The 60s and 70s were a time of environmental awakening in this nation, spurring landmark legislation like the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act. Those laws targeted point sources of pollution like wastewater treatment plants and factories. And with those successes under their belt, many environmentalists then set their sights on nonpoint source pollution, including farmers.

This was a period when farmers and environmentalists were at odds. They still are in some ways, but not like they were back then.

Fortunately, not everyone bought into this "us versus them" approach. Some saw how agricultural and environmental issues were in many ways two sides of the same coin.

Conservation practices may have taken a backseat over the previous few decades, but President Carter's appointment of Norm Berg as the chief of the Soil Conservation Service brought them back into the fore. And the loss of farmland during the postwar building boom was impossible to ignore, prompting the USDA and the President's Council on Environmental Quality to undertake a national study.

Farmland loss and better farming practices were places where farmers and environmentalists could find common ground. AFT was created in 1980 to help bring these two worlds together.

Our efforts were rocketed forward by the talented people who were recruited to this cause. One of them was Norm Berg, who lost his job at the USDA when Reagan came into office. Another was Bob Gray, the man who had led the national agricultural land study, which ended in 1980. So, from the beginning, AFT had on staff the national expert on conservation practices and the national expert on farmland loss and conversion.

### SLIDE 3:

Now, this is the last slide where I will boast about AFT. I promise. But I won't apologize for doing so because understanding the role that AFT has played in this movement is essential to where we've come from, and what work is possible, at this moment, for us to collectively undertake.

AFT took its charge to heart, pulled together a coalition of those environmental groups and agricultural groups willing to work together, and began to have an outsized impact. This included passage of the farmland protection policy act as part of the 1981 Farm Bill, and far more significantly, crafting a white paper on soil health that became the intellectual fuel that drove the adoption of the conservation title in the 1985 Farm Bill. AFT later played the key role in creating the first federal farm and ranch land protection program, which has now morphed into the current Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. AFT also catalyzed many of the state farmland protection provided property tax relief to farmers and ranchers across the country. Forty-five years ago, only a handful of states had these programs; now every state does.

AFT was an early supporter of smart growth and helped numerous communities plan for both farmland protection and development. Nearly 200 studies of the cost of community service have shown that retaining agricultural land made sense fiscally.

Believing that farmland protection would benefit from more organizations working at the state and local level, AFT spurred the creation of other ag land trusts in Georgia, Maine, Colorado, and many other states, including right here in Texas.

For 45 years, we've provided services to the land trust community and state and local agriculture officials, institutionalized today through the national agricultural land network and the Farmland Information Center, a partnership with NRCS.

We stay grounded by providing direct services to farmers, ranchers, and other ag professionals. Last year, we directly served over 40,000 individuals.

A lot of people know us for our research, which is expansive. But today, I'm going to focus on some of our research on land use.

## SLIDE 4

Over five years, we published a series of reports under the label Farms Under Threat. Today, I'll provide select information from a few of those reports.

### SLIDE 5

This map shows two things. First, it shows the results of AFT's groundbreaking efforts to assess America's farmland according to its productivity, versatility, and resilience. Soil type by itself doesn't tell us enough. Second, the map shows, in the red, the irreplaceable farmland that has been converted to non-agricultural use in the period from 2001 to 2016. During this time, we lost 11 million acres, which translates into 2,000 acres a day.

### SLIDE 6

Everyone in this room appreciates why the loss of agricultural land is so harmful, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded.

First and perhaps foremost, our agricultural land provides food, and adequate food is important for the world and important to our own national security and the health of our communities.

Second, we can't forget the contribution of agriculture to our nation's economy. It's huge, valued at over 1.5 trillion annually. But let's not forget the impact closer to home, in thousands of small communities across this nation that would completely lose their vibrancy without farms and ranches.

But farms do so much more than grow our food and fiber and support our economy, as important as those are. Farms provide a wide range of ecosystem services, ranging from flood control to water recharge to wildlife habitat to carbon sequestration.

Finally, I think we know the cultural value that farms and ranchers bring to our communities. Much of rural America is defined by agriculture and the farmers and ranchers who not only steward that land but also contribute so much locally. In many communities, it's a farmer or rancher who serves on the school board or volunteer fire department, or who loans a tractor to build a playground or ballfield.

If farms and ranches are so important, then we should be doing all we can to help them thrive. Right? Well, America's track record is mixed. We've had some successes, but we also face some significant challenges. I'll start with successes.

Farmland conversion. Remember that the national agricultural land study was done in the late 1970s. It documented a rate of conversion that is far greater than the rate today. We have made progress through current use taxation, smarter growth, and better land-use planning.

And we've made major progress in land conservation. Just shy of 8 million acres of American agricultural land have been protected with conservation easements in the last 45 years. Now, that's less than 1% of all the farmland in America. Nonetheless, it's still significant. It has made a real difference for tens of thousands of farm and ranch families and to their communities.

We've also made progress with productivity. Yields of many crops are much higher today than 50 years ago. Some of those gains are due to heavier use of inputs, but others have resulted from better breeding or better practices.

In particular, we've made real progress adopting various *conservation* practices. Reduced tillage has become the norm on many farms. And use of cover crops has increased (though adoption is still low nationally at about 6%)

Finally, I want to point out a real success: an ever-increasing number of consumers care about food and farm issues. It's no longer something that only farmers and some farm state politicians think about. This trend is interwoven with the local food movement, with more consumers buying from and talking with farmers. Now, as we all know, in some cases, this increased public awareness is not helpful. Some people have read one book or seen one movie and think they have all the answers. But on balance, having consumers who are more informed and more engaged is a good thing.

# SLIDE 8

Now let's talk about some challenges and what's at stake.

The viability of many of our farms and ranches is threatened. Last year, over half of the farms in America lost money. And 10% of U.S. farms went out of business between 2017 and 2022. The only sector that grew was the very largest farms.

And rural communities are suffering. Struggling farms mean struggling farm communities. As farms and ranches go under, and others get bigger, and we have fewer operators per acre, the population in some parts of rural America has plummeted, pulling life from the community.

### SLIDE 9

You can see the impact of farm consolidation in this slide. The largest farms now command more than 60% of the value of production and operate around 40% of the land. But the small and midsized farms that still manage the majority of our farmland and ranchland are struggling to stay on their land.

SLIDE 10

And this slide shows how much land is now rented, which is another way consolidation occurs. The typical corn and soy farmer has likely grown larger in their own holdings, but has also grown larger by leasing land that was once owner-operated.

# SLIDE 11

Let's go to another challenge, the next generation. The high cost of land and the small amount that transfers on the open market make it extremely difficult for people to enter the field. AFT's research shows that over 300 million acres of farmland will transition in the next 15 years, due to the age of farmland owners. This is a demographic freight train that will run us over unless we can find pathways for new farmers and ranchers.

Climate change is threatening farm operations in multiple ways, including extreme weather events that destroy crops, saltwater intrusion in coastal areas, warm nights that lower yields of Midwestern corn crops, and much more.

And there are new threats to our farmland, including some that were barely on the horizon just a few years ago. There's been an explosion in warehouse development and increasing pressure to build data centers, which are large users of both land and energy. There's also a national housing crisis, putting pressure on easily developable working lands. We need housing, AND we need farmland. The solution is not to pit one against the other, but to serve both goals simultaneously, putting the right things in the right places, that's what smart growth is all about.

And then there's solar development.

# SLIDE 12

This slide shows how solar development is expected to consume 10 million acres by 2050, and left to its own devices, as much as 90% of that could be on farmland. AFT is on top of this issue. We've developed a whole body of work around a concept we call smart solar, which you will hear about later in this conference.

# SLIDE 13

Finally, one of our challenges is the rate of conversion. You will recall that I listed this earlier as a success because the rate has slowed. Nonetheless, it is still way too high. And the stakes get higher with each passing year.

# SLIDE 14

This is AFT's national land cover map, showing expected loss of farmland between now and 2040. Focus on the salmon-colored land—that's land that will be consumed by development. Note also the blue in places like Maryland, Florida, and Louisiana, that's land that will be underwater. AFT's 2022 farms under threat report noted that farmland loss is not inevitable. The chart on the left shows how our actions can make a difference. If things continue as "business as usual," we project we will lose 18 million acres of farmland by 2040. But if we back off on efforts to curb sprawl, that number could grow to 24 million acres—and this figure does not include some of the emerging new threats I just mentioned from data centers and solar development.

But there is also a third path, one that embraces smart growth and does more to protect farmland, that would reduce the loss to 11 million acres.

Now, I suspect that these numbers trouble you. Especially the numbers at the high-end. But maybe even the idea of losing 11 million acres. After all, that's more than the amount we've permanently protected in the last 45 years through significant activity and investment. It should be concerning.

Yet we encounter people who aren't concerned—smart, even environmentally conscious smart people who view farmland loss in a developed nation like the US as somehow inevitable and not that bad.

# SLIDE 15

Here are some of the arguments I hear... I wonder if some of you hear these things too. How, for instance, would we have plenty of land if, say, we just didn't eat meat?

There is a solid response to each of these arguments. I don't have time to get into them now, but you can talk to me about any of them later if you wish. More usefully, AFT is preparing a handout with good responses to these spurious arguments.

### SLIDE 16

Now, Texas tops the charts for farmland loss. Other states are not too far behind. And if we were looking at the percentage of farmland that is at threat, rather than the overall acreage, Texas wouldn't even be in the top 12. This is a problem everywhere.

### SLIDE 17

Let's dive deeper and see what these projections mean for Texas. Our research suggests the loss of 2.2 million acres, 12,000 farms and ranchers, and half a billion in economic impact. {explain slide]

### SLIDE 18

But that's the middle course. If we act wisely, it could be better. We could save almost 1.4 million acres, saving over 7000 farms and ranches and almost one-third of a billion dollars in annual agricultural output. But it could also go the other way—and that seems to be what's happening.

### SLIDE 19

Here's Dallas, where we're losing farmland 49% faster than the middle scenario. That's faster than the runaway sprawl scenario. And this isn't happening in just Texas. In nearly every region where AFT has looked at emerging data, the pattern is repeated. We have a problem.

### SLIDE 20

What can states do? Our Farms Under Threat: State of the States report identified six policy responses that some states had pursued and charted against the threat to farmland. Here is the resulting matrix. For instance, you can see Texas down in the bottom right, with high threats to farmland and minimal policy response. Many other states are no better off.

### SLIDE 21

One of the most effective policy responses is state programs that purchase agricultural conservation easements, so-called PACE programs. This map shows the breadth and depth of these programs.

### SLIDE 22:

We think of pace programs as being principally about preventing nonagricultural development, but they are really about much more.

First, they are a critical tool in advancing farm viability. Farmers who are compensated for easements invariably reinvest in their farm operations or pay down debt. And as this audience understands, easements ensure that farmland will change hands at its farmland value, rather than its development value, so these efforts are essential to making land affordable for the incoming generation.

Beyond this, strategic investment in farmland protection can retain a critical mass of farming activity in an area, which is essential to maintaining vibrant agricultural communities.

And finally, farmland protection, whether achieved through purchased easements or donated easements, promotes the adoption of conservation practices, as documented by AFT's research. Now, it makes sense that the owners of protected land would care more about soil health, because they know their land will always be available for agriculture. And we also know that incoming farmers are frequently more open to innovative practices. And as I just mentioned, PACE programs create opportunities for new farmers.

The bottom line here is that farmland protection has far broader impacts than some might think.

At AFT, we frequently talk about the three-legged stool. How this work is about the land itself, but also about the practices utilized on that land, while serving the farmers and ranchers who steward that land.

Land, practices, and people. It's a system with many interconnections.

I've been talking a lot about the land itself. Let me dive a little deeper into practices and then into farmers and ranchers.

# SLIDE 24

There's been a lot of talk about farming practices in the last few years, and for good reasons, since practices that build soil health—whether you refer to them as conservation practices, or regenerative practices, or climate smart practices, can increase a farm's resilience, productivity, and ultimately its profitability.

NRCS recognizes over 40 soil health practices. Here are some of the most common and widespread practices with row crops, including reduced tillage, cover crops, and crop rotations. With livestock operations, we're often talking about intensive rotational grazing. In other parts of the country, other practices work, such as silvopasture. And the real value comes from stacking multiple practices.

# SLIDE 25:

How great it is that, by following regenerative practices, we can simultaneously produce agricultural products and enhance the environment.

But it's important to understand that we can't *maximize* both ag production and ecosystems simultaneously. For instance, if we want to utilize a parcel of land to absolutely maximize food production, we will likely not use techniques that have the same environmental benefit. And likewise, if our only goal is to maximize environmental benefits, we likely won't be producing as much food. At the extreme, we might be re-wilding land and taking it out of production.

Simply put, a farmer or rancher can *optimize* those two variables in a way that makes the best sense for a given piece of land, but can't *maximize* both simultaneously.

# SLIDE 26

Now, let me connect regenerative practices to farmland loss.

Clearly, if we lose farmland, we lose land that could be farmed using practices that provide environmental benefits.

But it's more than that. With each acre of lost farmland, we put more pressure on the remaining land to be farmed more intensely for food production, because the demand for food is not going down.

Yet it's even more than that. Because frequently the land that we are losing out of production is some of our very best land, and that often means we are trying to extract even more food out of marginal land, which often requires even greater inputs and results in fewer net environmental benefits.

So the loss of farmland creates what, in system dynamics, we refer to as a negative feedback loop. The more land we lose that could provide environmental benefits, the harder it is for the remaining land to provide environmental benefits. It's a vicious downward spiral.

### SLIDE 27

Now let's touch on the other critical component of the system, the producers. We can say that farmland *could* be worked with regenerative practices that provide our food and help heal the planet. But doing so requires farmers and ranchers who are committed to those practices, have the knowledge and skills to follow them, and can make a living doing so. Existing farmers need to be able to stay in business, and new farmers need to be in a position to afford to enter the field. This is all about the viability of farming and ranching. And for the vast majority of farmers and ranchers, their economic viability is increasingly at risk.

### SLIDE 28

So, what are the takeaways? First, we need farmland for more than producing food, feed, fiber, and fuel. We also need it to provide a range of ecosystem services to produce environmental benefits.

### SLIDE 29

Second, we need to appreciate the connection between farmland loss and practices. As great as it is that regenerative practices bring environmental benefits, we won't see the overall level of environmental benefits we want or need if we don't retain an adequate farmland base on which to employ those practices.

### SLIDE 30

And finally, and most importantly, we can't forget about the producers, the farmers and ranchers who steward the land. They need to make a living. And we will never attract enough next-generation producers without viable economic opportunities and vibrant rural communities in which to live.

### SLIDE 31

The bottom line:

• We must retain our working lands and manage them using the right practices.

 We can't retain our working lands and manage them wisely without a next generation of farmers and ranchers who are able to access land, innovate with new regenerative practices, and build sustainable businesses.

## SLIDE 32

What are some of the tools that will help us get there?

**Expanding permanent farmland protection.** We need more PACE programs and more funding for them. We also need to use them more strategically. We need to pursue farmland protection as a farm viability strategy, a land access strategy, and a better conservation practices strategy. We've now developed some great tools that move us in this comprehensive direction, but we clearly need more innovation here.

More funding for conservation practices. We are increasingly asking farmers and ranchers to take steps that serve broader societal and environmental goals. They can only do that if they can afford to do that. Some soil health practices can help defray the costs of adoption, but many other practices don't. The conservation title of the farm bill has provided critical cost share for implementing better practices, but those programs are oversubscribed and inadequately funded. There was a major increase in funding during the Biden administration, using IRA funds, but the future of that funding is in doubt. Meanwhile, an increasing number of states are stepping up with their own programs. That's great to see, but we are not yet seeing enough of it. It's critical that states step up to do more.

But the full answer does not lie with public programs. There are many opportunities also for marketbased solutions, ranging from food companies that pay producers to adopt better practices to emerging markets that pay for various ecosystem services.

**Increased attention to farm viability**. A number of northeastern states have pioneered farm viability programs to bring business planning assistance to farmers. These programs have shown good returns on investment, but are very limited. Extension offers business planning and assistance. More recently, the USDA began to support business technical assistance for small and mid-sized operations, although this funding is now in jeopardy. This is all positive, but again, not nearly enough.

Additional tools to facilitate farm transfer, succession, and access. Retiring farmers need help exploring their options, and would-be farmers desperately need help entering the field. Compensated easements are part of the answer for both groups. But we need more, including new tax incentives, more mentoring, and a wider range of support services to farmers and ranchers to make it all work.

**Planning for Agriculture.** Simply put, we will never curtail farmland loss at the level we need to without good planning. Nor will we ever have the vibrant rural communities on which agriculture relies, the kind of communities that will attract and retain the next generation of farmers and ranchers, unless we begin to far more actively plan FOR agriculture, ensuring that there is adequate land and infrastructure. There is such power in this approach, and yet it has not been utilized to the degree it must. There are several sessions on planning at this conference, and I urge you to engage.

**Smart Solar.** Solar development is here and will only increase. We are at a watershed moment. By applying the principles of smart solar, we can turn an issue that is currently a major threat to farmland and farming communities into something positive, where soil health is protected and some farmers can simultaneously benefit from solar development and keep farming.

I want to finish this slide by pointing out that everything I have just talked about here is interconnected. The first four bullets all go hand-in-hand. I previously pointed out the links between land protection and farm viability, conservation practices, and what that means for both existing and incoming farmers. Planning for ag is the umbrella through which all of this can be viewed and pursued, including housing and smart solar.

It's a system!

# SLIDE 33

Granted, there is much that needs to happen. And it can be easy at times to be discouraged. We are in unprecedented times, and the future of NRCS and many USDA programs is unclear. I don't want to minimize the challenges, but I want to end today by pointing out some of the reasons why I am hopeful.

First, I want to say that we are not starting from square one. This movement has been building now for decades. We've developed and refined some tools that really work. That doesn't mean that more innovation isn't needed. But as I look out at this room full of talented and dedicated people, I am confident you will keep innovating and advancing the work.

Second, we increasingly have new partners and supporters. True, we have not yet convinced everyone of the importance of farmland farming and farmers, but we are moving in the right direction.

Third, increasing public awareness and support has led to new investments. Major food companies like General Mills and Land O Lakes have embraced regenerative practices. State governments that once deferred almost exclusively to the USDA on issues of soil health and better practices are upping their game. And many states that have never before provided funding for farmland protection are beginning to do so. Just last week, as one example, the Tennessee legislature created a \$25 million program—a significant start. And more and more communities are planning for agriculture, sometimes as a standalone and often as part of a land use, sustainability, or food systems plan.

# SLIDE 34

The stage is set. By and large, we know what we need to do, we just need to do it faster and bring it to a greater scale.

The work of everyone in this room is so important. You are all practitioners playing a role in that complex system I keep referring to. Small steps at a community level are not really small.

Getting a single farmer to consider an easement on his property inspires neighboring farmers to do the same. These steps create opportunities for new farmers, who will, in turn, adopt better

practices. Perhaps they will sell locally in ways that bring great attention and benefit to the local community.

Meanwhile, local policies can lead to state policies, and the best state policies can ultimately influence federal policy. The federal easement program (ACEP-ALE) owes its very existence to state PACE programs that demonstrated their value.

There is so much that needs to be done, and so much that can be done.

AFT is here to help in any way that we can. We are grateful to you for being here and inspired by the great work you are doing. I look forward to learning and moving forward together.