

2007 Farm Bill: Investing in Agriculture's Future
By New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus

When is a hundred-acre farm surrounded by rolling hills, dense woodlands and sparse housing not considered rural?

When it's in New Jersey, where nearly all of the state is considered by the federal government to be part of either the New York or Philadelphia metropolitan areas or their adjacent counties. This makes it difficult if not impossible for farmers here to see the benefits of many of the USDA's Rural Development programs.

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

Already we have seen a welcome increase in federal emphasis on specialty crops – the varied fruits, vegetables and other high-value agricultural products that account for more than 50 percent of the nation's farm-product value. Those varied crops are equally important in forming the overall picture of our nation's agriculture.

Like the nation's, New Jersey's agricultural landscape is diverse, running the gamut from one of the world's largest high-bush blueberry farms to grape growers who produce wine to community-supported agriculture farms.

The common thread is that national farm policy can and should be relevant to all of these operations, from the maple sugar producer in New England to the shellfisheries off our nation's coasts, from the tree and shrub production regions in the Northwest to the citrus groves of the South. These are of equal importance to the corn belt and the wheat and cotton-growing regions of our country.

The next Farm Bill must recognize all sectors of the industry are important. It must acknowledge all of agriculture must grow to sustain the versatility and diversity of the industry. Farm policy must touch upon all regions and types of agriculture without falling into a one-size-fits-all approach.

In doing so, we will nurture a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship that will result in the creation of new markets, both close to home and abroad, and the development and improvement of new and existing products. This will create a stream of new ideas and actions that will help us to achieve the three goals that all states have for their agriculture – sustaining working farmland, improving farm profitability and preparing new and next-generation farmers to carry on. Ultimately, success in all these efforts will lead us to our goal of strengthening all agricultural sectors.

These types of investments have proven successful for agriculture in the past. Just look at what an emphasis on biofuels has done for the grain industry, or the success of farmers markets and how that success has helped strengthen the connection between farms and the people who depend on them for healthy, nutritious foods. These investments also must focus on retaining agricultural and rural youth in next-generation businesses, attracting new, non-traditional residents to farming, pursuing new capital, and meeting the demand for fresh products that support healthy diets.

In short, agriculture faces the same challenge that any industry faces, the need to continue to reinvent itself, adapt to new market opportunities, capitalize on emerging trends, all while remaining relevant to its core customers.

Elements that we believe must be a part of a renewed agricultural strategy are:

- **Strengthen Profitability** -- Establish a Farm and Ranch Profitability Grants Program as recommended by the American Farmland Trust, funded up to \$1 billion annually and administered by the state Departments of Agriculture. This program would fund projects aimed at enhancing profitability through innovative marketing and business strategies, product promotion, consumer education, and on-farm improvements and diversification.
- **Spur Innovation** -- Fund grant and/or loan programs for innovative projects that would catalyze investment in larger operations that span more than one farm. This would be supported through the research and development arms of our academic institutions, lending the expertise of leading researchers and planners to these efforts.
- **Invest in People** -- Provide assistance to state programs that emphasize additional and advanced training for all levels of farm employment, from the producer and manager to the year-round and seasonal employee. This will create a better-prepared workforce and stronger management level that will in turn allow farming to thrive.

Secretary Johanns and his staff at USDA have so far been on the right track when it comes to fashioning a Farm Bill that recognizes one size does not fit all in federal agricultural policy.

All of our states' Congressional delegations must encourage them to go even further in creating a Farm Bill that spurs agriculture in all its sectors and settings to be innovative and forward-thinking while enhancing those traits that have traditionally served the industry well. This more flexible Farm Bill ideally would allow farms in more urbanized settings to see the benefits of USDA programs just as their more-rural counterparts do.

In the end, we will have a national agriculture policy that lifts small farms and large, those near population centers and those in more rural settings. The strength of America's agriculture is in the diversity of its farmers, people and communities, and the Farm Bill should be a reflection of that reality. In that way, all of agriculture can benefit from a diverse and robust national farm policy.

