



Written Statement for the Record

Ryan W. Best

2011-12 National FFA President

National FFA Organization

Portales, New Mexico

**Leveraging Agricultural Education and FFA
To Strengthen American Agriculture
Through the 2012 Farm Bill**

**Before the United States Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry**

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman

March 14, 2012

Ryan Best
Senate Agriculture Committee Testimony
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Thank you Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Roberts and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak with you today about something very important to me – the future of American agriculture.

My name is Ryan Best. I have the privilege this year of serving as president of the National FFA Organization. I was raised on a production sheep farm in Portales, New Mexico, and I'm a junior at New Mexico State University majoring in agricultural and extension education.

As part of my FFA and agricultural education program during high school, I developed a production enterprise around sheep and diversified livestock. For me, agriculture is an occupation and a way of life. My family has been involved in production agriculture for seven generations.

Production agriculture is in my blood, and that's what brings me here today. My goal is to share with you the perspectives of the young men and women I represent as president of the FFA. Today nearly a million students in secondary agricultural education programs are preparing for careers in agriculture.

The U.S. will need the best and brightest of its young people to drive the innovation and efficiencies in agriculture that will achieve production goals and meet growing demand. We already have in place a pipeline to attract and prepare the talent needed to grow our future. These are the more than half-million student members of the FFA and agricultural education. They are students like Cole Vculek, FFA's 2011 American Star Farmer. Cole rented land from neighbors to grow two acres of red onions. He quickly added more land to raise potatoes, and in 2009 he added 200 acres for a corn and soybean rotation. Recently, Cole purchased a 640-acre farm from a neighbor. He plans to acquire more cropland and add sugar beets to his business. A fifth-generation farmer, Cole epitomizes the innovation and growth American agriculture will need to sustain in coming years.

While many people are familiar with the FFA, less is known about the agricultural education program of which FFA is an integral part. Today, there are 7,400 FFA chapters located in school systems throughout fifty states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Students are preparing for over 300 careers in the science, business and technology of agriculture, including production.

It is understandable if some believe that members of FFA—formerly known as the Future Farmers of America—come primarily from rural farming communities and small towns. But that is not accurate. Today’s FFA is as diverse as today’s agriculture. We are reaching nontraditional agricultural education students in rural, suburban and urban communities, including New York, Philadelphia, Houston and Chicago. The Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences was home to Corey Flournoy, the first African American National FFA President. Today’s agricultural education reaches students from all backgrounds.

FFA and agricultural education are helping students establish successful careers in production agriculture. Our supervised agricultural experience program provides opportunities for students to set career goals in high school and then pursue postsecondary education and training for entry into production agriculture and to become entrepreneurs. Wesley Davis from the Mason County Vocational FFA Chapter in West Virginia raises farm fresh eggs as a part of his enterprise. He says his supervised agricultural experience allowed him to see the viability of supplying consumers in his community with fresh, locally-produced eggs. Wesley plans to turn his project into a full time job.

FFA and agricultural education have a major role in ensuring we have the producers, researchers, entrepreneurs and innovators to meet the challenges we face. That’s why Secretary Vilsack invited last year’s national FFA officer team to provide him with recommendations for the farm bill. After consulting with FFA members and stakeholders, the officers delivered their report to the Secretary last December. It is attached to my comments, but it comes down to these key points:

1. USDA and other federal agencies should assist beginning farmers to start or continue in production agriculture.
2. USDA should help transition farms from older farmers to younger or beginning farmers who may not come from a farm.
3. USDA should help keep young people in rural communities and make rural communities an even more important part of our nation’s economy and society.
4. USDA should strengthen the capacity of agricultural education to produce more students who pursue production agriculture and related careers.

In closing, I want to underscore that agricultural education and FFA have been assets to American agriculture for 85 years. Given the challenges facing American and global systems of agriculture, investments for tomorrow must be made. The next farm bill provides an opportunity for Congress to demonstrate that it, like FFA members, believes in the future of agriculture “with a faith born not of words, but of deeds.”

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.



The Secretary's Challenge

Report to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture

From the

2010-2011 National FFA Officer Team

December 19, 2011

"I Believe in the Future of Agriculture..."

I. The Challenge

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack spoke at the National FFA Foundation Sponsors' Board meeting in Washington, D.C., Jan. 20, 2011. We, the 2010-2011 National FFA Officers, were privileged to be in attendance. During his remarks, Secretary Vilsack issued a challenge to the national officers and, by extension, to the National FFA Organization. Speaking directly to the officers, Secretary Vilsack said:

"I would like you to work with your fellow students and the adult leadership of the organization to develop a series of recommendations around the upcoming Farm Bill that will encourage more young people to pursue careers in farming. Over the next few years we will need 100,000 new farmers, and I am looking to you for ideas, guidance and suggestions to help make that happen. If you do this in a serious, thoughtful manner (which I know you will do) I will make myself and all of my Undersecretaries available to hear this report. So that we can utilize this information to guide our input to Congress, I would like to have your report to me one year from today."

Clearly, this was an invitation and opportunity to which FFA had to respond. Never before had the organization been asked to submit direct input to the Secretary of Agriculture. Never before had FFA members been asked to consider ideas, suggestions and policies within the Farm Bill that could enhance the ability of agricultural education and the FFA to help students succeed and strengthen American agriculture. In the weeks following the meeting with the Secretary, the national officers sought ideas and input from FFA members, business and industry partners and leaders from the agricultural education community.

II. Our Approach

To meet this challenge, we worked with the National FFA Organization to educate our members, ask questions and solicit ideas. The work had to be executed in a relatively short period of time, with limited financial resources, and on top of an already full program of work.

We searched for opportunities and groups within the organization that could provide natural venues to begin this discussion.

First, we had to define the questions. Working with the national FFA staff, we identified twenty key questions; and while all of the questions were relevant, it soon became apparent they were probably beyond the capacity of the organization to thoroughly pursue. To ensure participation from students and teachers, we pared down that list of questions to six to collect as much information as we could. The six questions we agreed upon were used consistently throughout the process. They are:

1. How can USDA help strengthen the capacity of agricultural education to produce more students with an interest in pursuing production agriculture (farming) and other agriculturally related careers?
2. What authority, responsibility or support should USDA provide for school-based agricultural education and FFA?
3. What role should USDA play (funding, programming, actively supporting) to increase the public's knowledge of agricultural literacy?
4. What assistance can be provided to help keep young people in rural communities and make rural communities an even more important part of our nation's economy and society?
5. What incentives or assistance can or should agencies and departments such as USDA provide to young and beginning farmers that will encourage them to start or continue in production agriculture?
6. What assistance or role could USDA provide in helping the transition of farms from older related and non-related farmers to younger or beginning farmers who may not come from a farm themselves?

Two immediately available opportunities identified were the National FFA New Century Farmer Program (NCF) and the National FFA State Presidents' Conference (SPC). The New Century Farmer Program engages college-age FFA members who have made a substantial commitment to pursue careers in farming. Through an application process, forty outstanding students are selected and brought together for a week-long enrichment conference. Topics include working with their parents and others on succession and business plans, utilizing leadership skills learned in FFA, becoming involved in agricultural organizations and understanding agricultural policy. One of the outcomes is to equip them with knowledge, skills and abilities to address many of the challenges and hurdles they face in their pursuits. As part of the 2011 conference, the students were provided an overview of the current Farm Bill and given an opportunity in

small group discussions to provide feedback to various questions. That feedback was one of the sources of ideas used to generate our report.

At the same time the New Century Farmer group was meeting in Iowa, our National FFA Officer team, along with 100 state FFA student leaders, met in Washington, D.C., for the annual National FFA State Presidents' Conference. A full day of the four-day conference was devoted to the Secretary's Challenge. We began that day with a briefing that provided an overview and context of the current Farm Bill. We then brought those student leaders to USDA to meet with Secretary Vilsack. We met in small groups with senior advisers to the Secretary to discuss ideas, explore options and consider alternatives. Upon returning to our hotel, we met again in small groups to further discuss and synthesize our ideas. Those ideas and recommendations are also a part of this report.

We wanted to do more. While the NCF and SPC participants provided a number of good ideas and feedback, it was only the first step of our journey. We recognized there was a "teachable moment" within the challenge the Secretary had given us. We realized early on that, while everyone recognized we have a Farm Bill, very few knew what was in the bill or why such a piece of legislation even existed. With support and resource assistance from the American Farm Bureau Federation, our education team at FFA assembled a web-based, self-guided tutorial program on the background, purpose and basic contents of the Farm Bill. Our information technology and education teams helped us create an online discussion board which served as the host site for posting our six questions and collecting feedback. We linked these two pieces together so that students who came to either website had the benefit of learning as well as sharing information. Through our various communications channels, we promoted this opportunity to our members, teachers, state leaders and supporters. The website went live in mid-July and was open through early November 2011.

Most people recognize the national FFA convention as a major event that is also the largest annual student convention in the United States. In 2011, it was attended by more than 53,000 students, teachers, parents and guests. We were honored to have Secretary Vilsack present inspiring remarks at our American FFA Degree and Stars Recognition Ceremony. Earlier in the week, with the assistance of one of our sponsors, Ice Miller, we had an opportunity to collect additional ideas and feedback. Beth Bechdol, vice president and director of agribusiness strategies with Ice Miller, conducted two student workshops on Agricultural Law and Policy. A portion of each of those workshops included education about the Farm Bill and an opportunity for students to work in small groups to address at least one of our six questions. The synthesis of those ideas is also contained within our report.

In addition, we had numerous opportunities throughout our year of travel and service to FFA to speak with students, teachers, parents and industry sponsors. We also met with leaders of the agricultural education community to ask for their input, especially as it related to strengthening the capacity of agricultural education to serve students. Many of those discussions provided ideas and guidance that are incorporated into our report.

We share this background and process to provide a sense of the seriousness with which we took Secretary Vilsack's challenge. It also indicates the commitment of the National FFA Organization to engage its members, advisors and leadership to provide ideas, suggestions and recommendations that will build a brighter future for the next generation of agricultural producers, scientists, teachers and leaders.

III. Our Recommendations

Listed below is a summary of the ideas and recommendations we gathered. They are organized around four primary themes and include the six questions posed to our stakeholders. Included are specific requests of USDA that can be addressed through the Farm Bill or in other actions by the department.

Theme 1 — Getting Started in Production Agriculture

1. What incentives or assistance can or should agencies and departments such as USDA provide to young and beginning farmers that will encourage them to start or continue in production agriculture?

Many comments from FFA members stressed the important relationship between FFA and USDA as a way for them to learn about and benefit from programs that can help them pursue a career in farming. There was much positive feedback regarding assistance provided by low interest loan programs. They also appreciated the risk management assistance available. Many stated a need for greater awareness of these programs and a more intentional integration of this assistance and information within agricultural education curriculum and resources.

For many FFA members, their supervised agricultural experience (SAE) programs were the key to their involvement in agriculture. While many of them have grown up and worked in agriculture most of their lives, it was their enrollment in agricultural education and the development of their own supervised agricultural experience programs that were their first real experiences in owning and managing an agricultural enterprise. If USDA wants to help beginning farmers, one of the best opportunities is to expand assistance to students who acquire, own, manage and grow enterprises through the experiential learning process of supervised agricultural experience. Because an increasing percentage of our students do not

come from farms, making these SAE experiences available is even more critical for their career entry into production agriculture.

Many of our members would like to see greater focus on the continuation and expansion of programs specifically tailored to new, beginning and young farmers that provide financial and technical assistance and continuing education. One of the greatest challenges facing this group is the acquisition of capital and the financing of capital expenditures, including land and machinery. FFA members cited the need to streamline and accelerate the timelines in obtaining this assistance. Likewise, they would like to see the availability of reduced or no-credit loans extended for longer periods. Many young and beginning farmers believe the existing programs do not offer a long enough time horizon for them to take full advantage of resources necessary to establish a sustainable farming business.

One challenge identified by our New Century Farmer participants is the availability and affordability of insurance, ranging from health to liability to crop loss insurance. Because the age when most FFA members want to begin their farming careers often accompanies marriage and starting a family, the availability and affordability of insurance often deters them. Many will delay a decision to enter farming, and in some cases it completely derails their career goals.

Another interesting idea was the creation of a special scholarship program for new and beginning farmers. Many students cited the lack of scholarships and financial assistance for those wanting to pursue degrees in agriculture. Because of the complexity and intensity of production agriculture, many students see a need to pursue two- and/or four-year degrees before pursuing farming careers. They would like to see special financial assistance with a loan forgiveness clause for students who forego more lucrative career opportunities to return to or start farming operations.

In addition, new and beginning young farmers need continuing education opportunities to help them keep current with advanced science, technology, marketing and financial management. This is where technology, distance learning and Internet-based study programs would be beneficial. The group also cited a need for a database of young, new and beginning farmers so that they could network face-to-face and through online communications.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Promote greater awareness of available programs and incentives that can assist beginning young farmers.

- b) Continue and expand programs that provide financial and technical assistance and continuing education to beginning young farmers.
- c) Ensure assistance and information available to beginning young farmers is fully integrated within the agricultural education curriculum and resources.
- d) Expand USDA assistance that helps students acquire, own, manage and grow enterprises through the experiential learning process of supervised agricultural experience (SAE) within agricultural education.
- e) Streamline and accelerate the processes available to beginning farmers to obtain financing for capital expenditures, including land and machinery.
- f) Provide more available and affordable insurance, ranging from health insurance to liability to crop loss insurance.
- g) Provide scholarships and financial assistance to students pursuing degrees in agriculture through two- and/or four-year universities, colleges and technical schools, including a loan forgiveness clause for students who forgo more lucrative career opportunities to return to or start farming operations.
- h) Promote continuing education to keep beginning farmers current with advanced science, technology, marketing and financial management.
- i) Provide a database of young, new and beginning farmers with whom beginning farmers can network through face-to-face meetings and online communications.

2. What assistance or role could USDA provide in helping the transition of farms from older related and non-related farmers to younger or beginning farmers who may not come from a farm themselves?

Many of our members support USDA taking a more active role in the transitioning of young people into production agriculture by assisting and incentivizing older farmers to help them. This transition would not only involve the transfer of assets but also the transfer of wisdom, knowledge and experience. Even though our students value the education and experience they receive through FFA programs, they welcome the opportunity to work with older, more experienced farmers, especially where an opportunity to eventually transition roles exists. Our students would like this to be a way for them to begin transitioning as early as when they start agricultural placement within their supervised agricultural experience programs. These could involve apprenticeships and continued mentorships with older farmers.

One of the larger challenges cited by our members is the availability and affordability of land to begin farming. The price of much of the land that comes available is based not around its

agricultural value but its potential for commercial or residential development. Many older farmers have few options but to take advantage of these opportunities despite the tax consequences.

Many FFA members favor the creation of programs that provide greater incentives through the tax code and other means to allow older farmers to sell or transition the ownership of their farmland to new, beginning and young farmers. Another idea identified was financial support to new and beginning farmers and perhaps favorable income treatment to older farmers who rent or provide long-term leases to keep land in production and out of development. Many cited a program that might work much like the Conservation Reserve Program in which older farmers would be financially incentivized to commit part or all of their land to a beginning farmer. The beginning farmer would have to ensure the land is actively farmed and that effective conservation practices are developed and maintained.

The general feedback from our members is that this is an area around which USDA and farm policy should focus thinking and resources. This could be the best way to bring young people into farming, decrease the average age of farmers and provide financial security to older farmers as they reach retirement age.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Incentivize older farmers to take a more active role in the transitioning of young people into production agriculture by assisting in the transfer of assets, wisdom, knowledge and experience, possibly through apprenticeships and mentorships.
- b) Provide greater incentives through the tax code and other means to allow older farmers to sell or transition ownership of their farmland to beginning young farmers.
- c) Provide financial support to beginning farmers and favorable income treatment to older farmers who rent or provide long-term leases to keep land in production and out of development.

Theme 2 – Creating Vibrant Rural Communities

3. What assistance can be provided to help keep young people in rural communities and to make rural communities an even more important part of our nation's economy and society?

The majority of agriculture students come from small rural communities and they value the lifestyle and benefits these communities provide. Many would like to return to those communities after they complete their education and begin their careers. For many of these young people, quality of life trumps high-paying job opportunities.

For this to happen, two conditions need to exist. There must be favorable economic conditions in the form of good jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. Working with students at an early age to help them develop knowledge, abilities, employability skills and entrepreneurship increases their chances of success. For many students, it is a combination of their agricultural education classes, supervised agricultural experiences and FFA leadership activities that create the life experiences and lessons that help them live and thrive in rural communities.

In many areas, however, the salary disparity between rural and urban communities makes it difficult for young people to pass up opportunities in more urbanized areas. One idea identified is a college loan forgiveness or assistance program that would incentivize students, especially in critical occupations such as agriculture teachers, large-animal veterinarians and doctors, to begin their careers in rural communities.

Rural development efforts at USDA that are part of the Farm Bill should address these opportunities. Rural communities, as with many inner cities, need assistance in building and maintaining infrastructure, attracting outside investment and creating economic opportunities that keep young people in those areas. Rural communities need incentives, educational opportunities and technical assistance for small businesses to be established and grow so that they provide employment for people in those communities. Perhaps the ideas around enterprise development zones can be expanded to include many of our struggling rural communities. There is also a need to utilize these programs to help rebuild the community infrastructure that has decayed along with the decline in rural populations over the past years.

Additionally, rural communities need access to technology and information. Today's young people consider lack of access to high-speed technology a deterrent to their quality of life. USDA should continue its efforts and commitment around ensuring all communities, especially those in rural areas, have access to broadband and high-speed Internet. These services are becoming increasingly essential in the operation of business, providing quality educational opportunities and maintaining a desirable quality of life. They also provide a way to erase the

perceived isolation many people fear about living in rural communities. For many young people, access to the Internet, social media and cell phones are major components to their sense of community.

There is a need to build a sense of connection, ownership and responsibility around rural communities. As we look at the outward migration and economic deterioration rural communities have faced over the past several decades, it is especially important to address this today. Rural communities do offer great opportunities for young people to become involved in assessing and developing solutions that address many community concerns. However, students need education, training, experience and advisement for this purpose. This is an area in which USDA and FFA can work together to the benefit of rural communities.

Through FFA leadership development programs, and with support and funding from USDA and Congress for programs such as the Rural Youth Development grants, our FFA chapters have additional incentives to use their communities as learning laboratories for leadership and personal growth. When students have opportunities to actively address community issues and help create a better place to live, they earn a greater sense of ownership and empowerment as citizens. This is what helps build the connection and the motivation for students to return and live in those rural communities.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Help students develop agricultural knowledge, abilities, employability skills and entrepreneurship by supporting the integrated model of agricultural education, supervised agricultural experience and FFA leadership activities.
- b) Expand rural development efforts at USDA to include college loan forgiveness or assistance programs that incentivize students to begin careers in rural communities, especially in critical occupations such as agriculture teachers, large-animal veterinarians and doctors.
- c) Assist in building and maintaining infrastructure, attracting outside investment and creating economic opportunities in rural communities to help young people build careers in those areas.
- d) Provide rural communities with incentives, educational opportunities and technical assistance that help establish and grow small businesses that provide employment to retain people in those communities.
- e) Help communities gain access to technology and information, especially in rural areas, including access to broadband and high-speed Internet to facilitate operation

- of farms and businesses, provide quality educational opportunities and maintain a desirable quality of life.
- f) Expand USDA's Rural Youth Development grants and support for FFA leadership development programs to provide FFA members with incentives to use their communities as learning laboratories for leadership, service and personal growth.

Theme 3 – Who Should Care About Agriculture and Why?

4. What role should USDA play (funding, programming, actively supporting) to increase the public's knowledge of agricultural literacy?

Among the critical challenges facing agriculture is the separation and lack of understanding most Americans share regarding how food is produced and delivered to their tables three times a day, every day. While production agriculture represents a very small percentage of our U.S. workforce, and the related agricultural community is so dispersed across many economic sectors, it is difficult to communicate the size and scope of our agricultural productivity and how it contributes to the favorable quality of life most Americans enjoy.

Why should they care? Because our future and quality of life depends upon the decisions of policymakers at all levels. Our future depends upon our ability to produce increasing quality and quantities of food, fiber and fuel while at the same time safeguarding our natural resources. It is because of the productivity of our agricultural system that Americans enjoy the highest quality of living with the lowest percentage of income going to purchase food. As the agriculture industry continues to accomplish this year after year, our society becomes further removed, further detached and less understanding and appreciative of modern agriculture. Lack of knowledge and understanding often results in unintended consequences of policies that threaten our capacity to feed not only this country, but also a substantial portion of the global community.

As we look ahead to challenges facing agriculture and the growing demand for agricultural products and food, we must invest in strategies for growth. Funding must be available to conduct research to increase our capacity to grow food, mitigate environmental degradation and boost efficiency. In addition, through our teaching, education and extension programs, producers should be educated in how to adopt and adapt the best available technologies to feed our nation and add significantly to the available supply of food for other countries.

Because the largest portion of the current Farm Bill and USDA budget addresses food assistance and nutrition, USDA has an opportunity to lead the effort to connect safe, nutritious, abundant, affordable food to efficiency, productivity and safety in our agricultural system. USDA should

partner with and incentivize educational organizations to ensure agricultural literacy is educationally-based, begins at an early age and extends all the way to the consumer.

USDA should work much more closely with other agencies such as the Department of Labor and the Department of Education to ensure food and agricultural literacy are integral parts of instruction in all schools. Nutrition and food assistance without the accompanying nutrition, diet and health education is not a sustainable solution. Together with the Department of Education, USDA should more actively support “youth teaching younger youth” about many issues relating to food, agriculture, nutrition and diet. These activities can be done through agricultural education classes working with elementary age students around school gardens, agricultural literacy and nutrition programs.

Activities such as National Agriculture Day and National Agriculture Week provide opportunities for USDA to collaborate with agricultural organizations to educate and promote stronger connections regarding food and agriculture among our citizens. USDA should consider a grant program that would assist organizations in their promotion and educational outreach to consumers.

Because most of agriculture is ‘out of sight’, it is often ‘out of mind’ for average citizens. USDA should increase efforts around programs such as Farm to School and develop or expand Farmers Markets and School Gardens. These efforts are great ways to bring agriculture into view of most consumers and elevate their understanding of what it takes to put food on the table. They also create contextual learning opportunities that help students (and consumers) learn science and math in engaging and meaningful ways.

USDA should be actively involved in helping develop agricultural demonstrations that could be combined with high school academies such as the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences and the Walter Biddle Saul High School in Philadelphia. These are just two examples of high schools that teach urban students about careers in agriculture and heavily engage in agricultural literacy efforts in their communities. However, efforts should not be limited to urban areas. Much of this awareness building is also needed in rural and suburban communities.

Agricultural literacy is the first step in the education process. Literacy opens the door to bring a larger percentage of people into the agriculture and agriculturally-related workforce. As agriculture continues to face challenges, having a well-informed, engaged and supportive public will be important for it to serve our nation.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Partner with and incentivize educational organizations to ensure agricultural literacy is educationally-based, begins at an early age and extends to the consumer.
- b) Work more closely with agencies such as the Department of Labor and the Department of Education to ensure food and agricultural literacy are integral parts of instruction in all schools.
- c) Invest in research to increase the capacity and efficiency of agriculture. Through education, help producers adopt and adapt the best technologies.
- d) With the Department of Education, actively support “youth teaching younger youth” about issues relating to food, agriculture, nutrition and diet, including agricultural education classes working with elementary age students around school gardens, agricultural literacy and nutrition programs.
- e) Collaborate with agricultural organizations to educate and promote stronger connections regarding food and agriculture during opportunities such as National Agriculture Day and National Agriculture Week.
- f) Develop a grant program to assist organizations in their promotion and educational outreach to consumers regarding how food is grown, produced and distributed.
- g) Increase efforts around programs such as Farm to School and develop or expand Farmers Markets and School Gardens.
- h) Help develop agricultural demonstrations that can be combined with high school agriculture academies such as the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, the Walter Biddle Saul High School in Philadelphia and other schools that teach urban students about careers in agriculture and conduct agricultural literacy efforts in their communities.

Theme 4 – Planning for the Future

5. How can USDA help strengthen the capacity of agricultural education to produce more students with an interest in pursuing production agriculture (farming) and other agriculturally related careers?

Today, school-based agricultural education programs at the middle and high school levels reach nearly one million students across the United States and its territories. There are 7,487 FFA chapters with a record all-time national membership of 540,379. More students are enrolled in agricultural education programs and engaged in FFA today than at any time in our history. The fact that they receive rigorous STEM-based education (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in the context of agriculture is promising and holds great potential for the future

of American agriculture. These are students who have expressed interest in preparing for careers in agriculture or related areas. These are students who have the potential to pursue higher educational opportunities in agriculture. These are students who will, in the next 4-8 years, begin careers in production agriculture.

Here, then, is a paradox. Earlier, we shared concerns about the common lack of agricultural understanding and literacy among the general public; yet, today we have higher enrollments and interest than ever before. We are attracting more students from non-agricultural backgrounds and we are opening programs in some unlikely places. This success is due in large part to the connection of business, science and technology to agriculture. In fact, that is how we often describe our educational programs—we prepare young people for careers in the science, business and technology of agriculture.

Our local programs depend heavily upon highly qualified agricultural education instructors who hold degrees in agriculture and who have met all necessary certification requirements to teach in the public schools. Our programs involve integration of classroom/laboratory instruction, experiential learning through SAE projects and the leadership, personal development and career success opportunities provided through FFA. While FFA is often the most visible component, it is just one piece of a well-developed, integrated educational model. Students wishing to be members of FFA must be enrolled in agricultural education. In turn, agricultural education is just one part of career and technical education helping prepare students to be college and career ready.

Because they exist within the public school system, our programs must focus on academic achievement and education of students. Agricultural education provides a great context for the applied, STEM-based teaching of science, math and language arts. It also creates a strong bridge that helps students understand the relevance of what they are learning and what it means to their future. This is a critical part of getting young people headed down a career path in agriculture.

The feedback from our members identified several ways by which USDA can strengthen local agricultural education programs. Sharing resources, creating stronger linkages between local USDA offices and facilities and providing internships for students to learn firsthand the work of USDA are just a few. Also cited was a need for ways to gather and summarize the massive amount of information developed by USDA about the agriculture industry and to utilize that information in ways that help teachers keep instruction relevant and up to date with current agricultural practices and technology.

As demand for food and other agricultural products increases due to population growth, demand will also increase for well-trained, highly-qualified agricultural producers, scientists and related career professionals. USDA alone employs 110,000 people in myriad positions requiring extensive knowledge and understanding of the agriculture industry. It is anticipated that many current USDA workers are at or near retirement age. This is not unique to USDA; however, we heard this concern voiced by a majority of agricultural companies and organizations we met with this year during our business and industry visits.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Strengthen and support local STEM-based agricultural education programs by sharing resources, creating stronger linkages between local USDA offices and facilities and providing internships for students to learn first-hand the work of USDA.
- b) Gather and summarize the massive amount of information developed by USDA regarding the agriculture industry and utilize that information in ways that help teachers ensure instruction is relevant and up to date with current agricultural practices and technology.

6. What authority, responsibility or support should USDA provide for school-based agricultural education and FFA?

School-based agricultural education is not a new concept. The Smith Hughes Act of 1917 is the federal law that created school-based agricultural education. The National FFA Organization came into existence 11 years later in 1928. Over the past 80-90 years our programs have served an estimated 8-9 million students.

Since its inception, school-based agricultural education and FFA have helped develop a well-trained agricultural workforce. Our programs have expanded beyond producing future farmers to also focus on future scientists, future teachers, future economists and many other professions in agriculture. Once limited exclusively to males, today young women represent more than 40 percent of the membership in FFA.

The federal authority for agricultural education/FFA resides within the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) in the U.S. Department of Education. The National FFA Organization received a federal charter from Congress in 1950. Currently, one staff member in OVAE represents the Secretary of Education in serving as National FFA Advisor.

Even more than the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor, USDA has a vested interest in the success of workforce development and career education for those in

agriculture. The critical interdependency of agricultural productivity, efficiency and innovation directly relates to our nation's well-being and security, but it is not fully understood or appreciated. Very few of the high-skill, high demand job areas identified by the Department of Labor and the Department of Education have any relationship to the critical areas of employment in agriculture. Neither agency has data that supports a need for focused training in agriculture, primarily because the Department of Labor's analysis of employment data focuses only on farming and ranching.

We believe the Farm Bill should create an opportunity for shared authority, responsibility and support for school-based agricultural education between USDA and the Department of Education. There should be closer cooperation, communication and coordination between USDA, the Department of Labor and the Department of Education regarding how young people learn about and prepare for career opportunities in agriculture. We also believe there should be better coordination of agricultural employment and farming data to provide a more effective means of sharing this information with students, teachers and high school guidance counselors.

We believe more coordinated involvement of USDA in school-based agriculture can provide opportunities to integrate emerging science and technologies into the instructional programs. We support and encourage additional development of grant programs such as the Secondary Education, Two-Year Postsecondary Education, and Agriculture in the K-12 Classroom Challenge Grants Program (SPECA) that provide grants to local agricultural education programs to put in place innovative curriculum and implement state of the art technologies. These types of programs, while providing much needed resources, also provide ways to leverage investments by local school districts.

Because of the relationship and support USDA provides to land-grant and other universities, they are critically important partners for building stronger agricultural career pathways with seamless articulation programs between high school, college and career. School-based agricultural education depends heavily upon teachers trained in these institutions. The school-based agricultural education curriculum must continue incorporating STEM-based (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) standards and assessments. Programs must also include articulation programs that allow students to attend two-year community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions for completion of their degrees. These types of programs will allow students seeking careers in farming to develop their programs even as they complete their education.

In addition, there should be greater coordination and cooperation between school-based agricultural education and other USDA programs such as the Agriculture in the Classroom literacy program focused primarily on grades K-6. Many FFA chapters utilize Ag in the Classroom to conduct agricultural literacy outreach with younger elementary-age students. There are also opportunities to create stronger linkages with programs such as Know Your Food, Know Your Farmer, People's Garden and Farm to School that could be enhanced by the presence that school-based agricultural education programs already have within the school environment.

The administration of agricultural education and FFA programs in the U.S. engages local school systems, teachers, university teacher educators, state departments of agriculture and education, agriculture business and industry, parents, philanthropic organizations and other government agencies. Comparatively speaking, the investment of federal resources is small, consisting primarily of staff resources in the Department of Education and in several cooperative programs and grants made available through the Department of Agriculture. Yet there is a significant need that can be addressed in the current Farm Bill. If USDA seeks to leverage the ability of agricultural education and FFA to help prepare a workforce for American agriculture, it can do so by developing the capacity of the National Council for Agricultural Education (The Council).

The Council unites key stakeholder groups in agricultural education. It includes the Department of Education, agricultural education student organizations, classroom teachers, university teacher-educators, state supervisors of agricultural education, postsecondary and adult agricultural educators, the Association for Career and Technical Education, alumni groups and business and industry. The Council sets the national agenda for agricultural education and works to align that agenda with national priorities for preparing the next generation of leaders and workforce for agriculture. While The Council's membership is comprehensive, it lacks funding resources that can provide continuity in leadership, program management and advocacy on behalf of agricultural education. USDA can, through the Farm Bill, make a strategic investment by providing funding that strengthens The Council's structure and expands its capacity to provide leadership for the nation's agricultural education programs.

Recommendations in summary:

- a) Create an opportunity for shared authority, responsibility and support for school-based agricultural education between USDA and the Department of Education resulting in closer cooperation, communication and coordination regarding how young people learn about and prepare for career opportunities in agriculture.

- b) Improve coordination of agricultural employment and farming data to more effectively share this information with the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, students, teachers and high school guidance counselors.
- c) Encourage additional development of grant programs such as the Secondary Education, Two-Year Postsecondary Education, and Agriculture in the K-12 Classroom Challenge Grants Program (SPECA) that provide grants to local agricultural education programs to put in place innovative curriculum and implement state of the art technologies.
- d) Encourage development of articulation programs that allow students to attend two-year community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions for completion of their degrees.
- e) Increase coordination and cooperation with other USDA programs such as the Agriculture in the Classroom literacy program.
- f) Create stronger linkages with programs such as Know Your Food, Know Your Farmer, People's Garden and Farm to School that can be enhanced by the presence that school-based agricultural education programs have within the school environment.
- g) Provide funding through the Farm Bill to strengthen The National Council for Agricultural Education and expand its capacity to provide leadership for the nation's agricultural education programs.

IV. Conclusion

Our National FFA Officer Team would like to express deep appreciation to Secretary Vilsack for inviting the voices of FFA members to be heard at the highest levels as we consider the next Farm Bill. We are proud he shares our traditions of the "Blue and Gold", and we are especially grateful for his leadership and commitment to present and future generations of American agriculturalists.

We are also grateful for the support provided to us by our fellow students and FFA members, our teachers and advisors, our supporters in business and industry and members of our communities who contribute countless hours of service helping young people succeed and grow through agricultural education and the FFA.

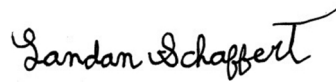
We believe it is in the best interest of the nation for the Department of Agriculture to affirm its commitment to develop strong, experienced leadership for agricultural education. The National FFA Organization is prepared to assist in every way possible toward this end. Given the magnitude and impact of the national agricultural education enterprise, and given the significant challenges facing American and global systems of agriculture, an investment must be made. Future generations are

counting on continuing sources of safe, affordable, nutritious and abundant food and renewable energy produced sustainably and in harmony with our highest national interests. The next Farm Bill provides an opportunity for the department to demonstrate it believes in the future of agriculture "...with a faith born not of words, but of deeds."

Respectfully submitted by the 2010-2011 National FFA Officer Team



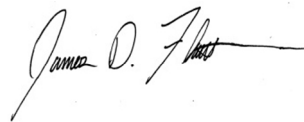
Riley Pagett
President
Oklahoma



Landan Schaffert
Secretary
Colorado



Tiffany Rogers
Eastern Region Vice President
Michigan



James Flatt
Southern Region Vice President
Tennessee



Wyatt DeJong
Central Region Vice President
South Dakota



Shannon Norris
Western Region Vice President
New Mexico