

Chairman Chambliss, Ranking Member Harkin, and members of the committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on private lands conservation as you prepare for the 2007 Farm Bill.

Your task is immense. Agriculture and non-industrial private forestry determine the use of more than 65% of the land in the contiguous 48 states. This is America's most productive land, productive of food and fiber and increasingly of fuel as well. It is also our most productive land from a biological and hydrological perspective. Tens of thousands of wild plant and animal species call these lands home. More than 80% of the precipitation that falls on the 48 states each year is filtered, buffered, and partitioned into surface and groundwater on these lands.

In other words, if America's land is to remain productive and healthy and if our water is to be plentiful and clean, it is because our farmers make it that way. We often overlook the fact that the "conservation commodities" produced by America's private landowners - clean water, biodiversity, wildlife, clean air, pleasing landscapes - are every bit as valuable to Americans as the more traditional food and fiber commodities that our farm policy normally focuses on.

Our public lands, forests, parks, canyons, seashores, deserts, and wilderness areas are important and we should pay attention to them. But let me cut to the chase. The 2007 Farm Bill you will be drafting over the next year defines the single most important environmental and conservation program we have in our country. Environmental health depends on America's private landowners. The technical and financial assistance to these landowners that you will be considering will make all the difference between a land we can be proud of or a nation in trouble.

We have a lot to be proud of. Over the past 70 years, since the Dust Bowl disaster of the 1930s we've made great progress. The partnerships we forged then between Federal and State governments and private landowners have protected and enhanced agricultural productivity immensely. The additional tools provided to landowners since 1985 have given hope to those who see the potential for more than food and fiber production from our private lands. The Conservation Reserve Program, The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, The Buffer Initiative, The Wetlands Reserve Program, The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, The Grazing Lands Reserve Program, and now the splendid integrator of them all, the Conservation Security Program - these are programs Congress and the many good farmers, ranchers, and researchers you work with can be justifiably proud of. Fly over America today and look down. Everywhere, you will see the positive results of these programs on the land.

I have been away from the details of our conservation efforts for a few years now and so I'll refrain from specific suggestions on how they should be improved. No doubt you won't suffer from a dearth of ideas here. But let me briefly offer a few thoughts that I still feel qualified to comment on.

1. Reward good land stewardship. From the time I began farming more that 30 years ago, I've been concerned about the fact that we are often generous in offering first aid to abused land - often abused because of misguided commodity programs - and yet we've done nothing to reward those who have practiced good stewardship. These good stewards, who through their

careful and thoughtful management practices, have delivered to the public clean water, beautiful landscapes, wildlife, biodiversity and improved soil for the next generation, often receive not even a 'thank you'. The Conservation Security Program, for all its growing pains, is a program that is finally doing this. Farmers want it. You should expand it. Ronald Reagan will always be honored for his call to Gorbachov to 'tear down this wall". You will be similarly honored if you can convince yourselves and colleagues and our President to "tear off this cap" on CSP and let the program bloom. Nothing will do more to improve private lands conservation than to support those who take good care of their land. You have the power to make this happen. Please just do it.

2. Produce more from our "land retirement programs". The bulk of our conservation efforts on private lands have consisted of what we call land retirement programs, i.e. we've told farmers "we'll support you if you don't farm". These programs, especially the granddaddy CRP, were originally established with commodity supply control in mind. It is good that they have slowly evolved into programs that recognize the value of "conservation commodities" that they can produce. We should continue to support research and experimentation in the management of these lands so that they can produce greater biological and hydrological benefits. When we enter into a "land retirement contract" with a landowner there should be a clear understanding that this is not just a retirement program for land and farmers. Clean water and Bluebirds and Big Bluestem are also commodities. In fact, they and their kin can be produced in profusion if we put our minds to it. The public will support us if we continue to shape these programs in this way.

3. The continuous CRP sign-up programs - buffers, filter strips, etc. - are popular, effective, and should be encouraged. Add partial field enrollments for assorted small pieces of land that when farmed cause undue environmental harm, and the programs will be even more effective. As an aside, it appears to me that the continuous CRP sign-up should once again be placed under the leadership of NRCS. It's a tool that needs to be used on a daily basis and the NRCS technicians are better situated to encourage its use than the Farm Services Agency.

4. Continue to support and improve EQIP. It's an important program for our working lands. I'd like to see us go back to targeting it somewhat. Although we sometimes caused some anguish by encouraging states and conservation districts to set priorities for its use, I believe that by doing so we got a better return on our investment and at the same time encouraged more "cooperative conservation".

5. Don't slight technical assistance. The jury is still out on private contracting for technical assistance. We should keep experimenting with it. One fact is clear, however. NRCS technical assistance is essential for successful private land conservation. There are few institutions that can boast a better record than the old SCS and its NRCS offspring. Unfortunately, because of the nature of their work, i.e. working quietly to support the private landowner, you won't find them boasting. They used to be called SCS, the Secret Conservation Service. Their new name is NRCS, the National Recognized Conservation Service. Recognized or not by the general public, they deserve your support. Double their numbers and there still won't be enough of them for the work that needs to be done.

6. Let me add a few comments on our national energy crisis. Agriculture is and will be

impacted in a major way by this issue. You will be called upon to help deal with it. Here are a few suggestions:

a. Accelerate efforts for greater efficiencies. Encourage research and extension in more efficient tillage systems. Fine-tune recommendations on nutrient use. We are still grossly inefficient with both commercial fertilizers and animal waste applications.

b. Biofuels will be important as we deal with greater demand on our petroleum reserves. Although corn ethanol can help bridge to our future, I believe more sustainable cropping systems need to be developed - systems that Wes Jackson of the Land Institute in Kansas calls "perennial polycultures". Although corn ethanol will continue to be used as a fuel additive, there is no doubt in my mind that we have it in us to develop crops of mixed species of perennials that will lessen tillage and nutrients required. The sooner we get to these alternatives, the sooner our streams will run clear again and the Gulf of Mexico will once again become hypoxia-free.

c. It will take time to bring on the next generation of cropping systems for biofuels, but it should take no time for you to provide incentives for farmers to get involved in alternative renewable energy systems such as methane and wind. Encourage farmers to be innovative and they will be. Congress gave rural America the REC in the 1930s and sent power through the wires that lit up our farms and villages. If you are willing to provide technical and financial assistance and will encourage a distributive electric energy system, it won't be long before rural America uses those same wires to send power back to their city cousins.

7. There's one issue in closing that I'd like you to consider. In 1935, when the Soil Conservation Service was established, (in the middle of our nation's worst economic and environmental disasters) we had the decency and courage to share our newly developing conservation knowledge with fellow citizens around the world. We helped China develop its first soil survey in the 1930s. At the same time we assisted Latin American countries in establishing their conservation services. When Israel became a nation, one of our SCS scientists, Walter Loudermilk, led a group of our technicians to help the Israeli farmers set up their irrigation systems. For years after, it was said that Israelis were fond of telling us to "give us your Loudermilk not your powdermilk". We need to re-engage our people in overseas cooperative efforts. A great disappointment when I served as Chief of SCS/NRCS was that I could not convince our administration to re-engage in international soil and water conservation efforts. You will do a service to our country and to our world by renewing this proud effort.

I want to finish with a more poetic statement of where I began this testimony. The words come from my favorite conservationist, fellow Iowan Aldo Leopold. In a 1939 essay entitled "The Farmer as a Conservationist" he wrote "It is the individual farmer who must weave the greater part of the rug on which America stands. Shall he weave into it only the sober yarns which warm the feet or also some of the colors which warm the eye and the heart? Granted that there may be a question which returns him the most profit as an individual, can there be any question which is best for his community?"

Thanks again for the honor of being in your company today. I wish you well as your work to provide America's farmers and ranchers with the tools they need to make American agriculture

strong and our land, water, and wildlife healthy.