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Bioenergy, safety net tools are producers' top priorities for next farm bill

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bioenergy, safety net tools are producers' top priorities for next farm bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. Sept. 13, 2006: Bioenergy and the structure of safety net programs are of high interest to farmers and ranchers as the next farm bill is debated, according to more than 15,000 farmers and ranchers in 27 states surveyed by Farm Foundation's National Public Policy Education Committee (NPPEC).

Producers ranked renewable energy, enhancing opportunities for small and beginning farmers, and assuring a safe and affordable food supply as their top three goals for the next farm bill. "All the goals presented to producers to rank were decades-old rationales for farm programs with the exception of bioenergy, an issue that has seen explosive growth in recent years," says Dr. Brad Lubben of the University of Nebraska, who chaired the task force conducting the National Agricultural, Food and Public Policy Preference Survey.

Bioenergy production incentives, followed closely by food safety programs, head the list of programs producers would target for new or reallocated funding. When asked to rank existing programs that should continue to receive funding, farmers and ranchers put disaster assistance programs at the top of the list, followed closely by other safety net tools and some conservation programs.

"This suggests that the next farm bill debate may include extensive discussion over expansion of the existing energy title, and debate over the interests and objectives of safety net programs, perhaps moving toward a single, wider safety net rather than a commodity-specific one," says Lubben.

A survey of producer preferences has been supported by Farm Foundation prior to every farm bill debate for at least 20 years. "The survey is designed to address policy alternatives and identify underlying policy goals and budget priorities," according to Farm Foundation President Walter Armbruster. "The survey offers public and private decision makers an overview of farmers' and ranchers' priorities for the next farm bill legislation."

In addition to members of Farm Foundation's National Public Policy Education Committee, faculty from Land Grant universities and staff of the state offices of the National Agricultural Statistics Service comprised the survey team. The 27 states where producers were surveyed represent 60 percent of all U.S. farms and ranches. The survey included national, as well as regional and state-specific questions.

After disaster assistance and crop insurance, the priorities for existing programs that survey respondents think should receive continued funding in the next farm bill are working land conservation programs, marketing loans, direct payments and countercyclical payments.

“While reducing risk and enhancing farm income were not the highest farm bill goals, the farm income safety net was the number one existing program area for continued support among commercial-scale agricultural producers,” Lubben reports. “The existing three-part safety net—direct payments, countercyclical payments and marketing loans—is only part of a larger five-part safety net that includes crop insurance and disaster assistance, which historically have not been part of the farm bill. We may see debate on a formal title to address this larger safety net and what seem like annual calls for disaster assistance.”

Producers with medium- to large-size operations placed a high priority on the safety net, while producers with smaller operations placed a higher priority on working land conservation programs. “Small farms likely see a larger potential benefit from conservation programs than from existing commodity programs,” says Lubben. “This difference in priorities may further the debate over program payments and recipients, as well as the creation of different programs for different types or sizes of farms.”

Support payments tied to farm income, biosecurity incentives, farm savings account incentives and traceability and certification programs also received producer support for new or reallocated funds.

Here are other key findings of the survey:

- Payment limits enjoy support among all categories of farms, but support is greater among small farms than large farms.
- Producers surveyed in seven states favor a fruit and vegetable support program but not necessarily one modeled on traditional commodity programs. Instead they prioritize disaster assistance, crop insurance and block grants for state programs.
- Respondents support technical and financial assistance to address conservation goals, particularly water quality and soil erosion control measures. Producers value continued support for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Conservation Security Program (CSP).
- Respondents support free trade negotiations and expanded trade opportunities. However, they also favor comprehensive negotiations that include food safety, labor and conservation issues. They favor negotiations that focus on domestic policy goals ahead of trade policy goals.
- Producers favor country of origin labeling and prefer mandatory labeling over voluntary labeling. Producers support mandatory animal identification programs. They also favor BSE testing, with preference for voluntary guidelines for testing by industry rather than government-mandated programs.
- When asked about the expected future transition of their farm or ranch, more than 50 percent expected the transition would be to a family member.
- Producers surveyed in three states supported agricultural credit programs, putting the highest priority on beginning farmer programs.

Producers were surveyed in the following states: Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia,

Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Farm Foundation also sponsors a parallel project to make educational materials available on alternatives for addressing the entire range of topics covered under the farm bill. Those materials will be available later this year.

A limited number of print copies of the survey report are available. The report is also posted on the Farm Foundation Web site, www.farmfoundation.org.

Farm Foundation works as a catalyst, bringing together producers, industry leaders, interest groups, government officials and academics to address economic and public policy issues facing agriculture, the food system and rural communities. Farm Foundation has a 73-year history of objectivity. The Foundation does not lobby or advocate positions.

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