



National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

Comments on America's Great Outdoors Initiative by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

“And when we see America’s land, we understand what an incredible bounty that we have been given. And it’s our obligation to make sure that the next generation enjoys that same bounty.”

President Obama, April 16, 2010

We are pleased to learn about the President’s America’s Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO). From our perspective as a coalition of forty grassroots-based farm, food, rural, and conservation organizations, we want to share our thoughts on how agriculture can help support your AGO effort, and what must be done to harmonize the goals and implementation of AGO and agricultural programs. The member organizations of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) gathered together for our annual summer meeting, held this year in Amherst, Massachusetts on August 11-13, and developed and adopted the following comments at that time.

The AGO Initiative is an opportunity to expand public appreciation for our bountiful supplies of food, energy, and water; as well as America’s wildlife and scenic beauty. We believe the Administration’s “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative is an important component of America’s Great Outdoors Initiative because it incorporates the importance of working lands and working people for reconnecting Americans to our natural resources. The AGO Initiative also relates very directly to the Secretary’s emphasis on improving rural community development and increasing rural jobs. While public lands provide great recreation and education opportunities, America’s working lands are often closest to where Americans live and work. Therefore, we believe USDA and its working land conservation programs should be front and center within the AGO Initiative.

Many private landowners have a rich tradition of offering free hunting, fishing or other recreational and educational opportunities to those who ask. This is a good start, but the goals of AGO must also engage individuals and the private sector in soil and water conservation, carbon sequestration, renewable energy alternatives, and protection of wildlife and natural areas. NSAC believes that ultimately USDA has the greatest capacity and potential for the federal government to reconnect people to the land.

Conservation leaders know that people protect what they love, and people must first get to know the natural world before they can love and protect it. Local food systems are a key component of this learning experience. It may be a direct-marketing livestock grazing operation, an urban garden, or a local produce farmer that gives hands-on experience to young people about soil, water, farm animals, and sustainable food systems. The tremendous growth in farmers markets and local food production shows more people are interested in the environment, health, and sustainable food systems.

These days many urban youth are reconnecting to the outdoors, developing an appreciation for nature and getting exercise at the same time by becoming involved in urban gardening and farming programs. NSAC witnesses a great desire among rural and urban youth to become local food producers who want to interact with their customers. We urge the Obama administration to embrace beginning farmer, socially disadvantaged farmers, and the various sustainable agriculture

programs at USDA as a fundamental building block for taking America's Great Outdoors to the places where people live.

Challenges: While NSAC appreciates the Administration's strong support for sustainable agriculture, we are deeply troubled by the large budget cuts to the voluntary farm bill conservation programs for the next fiscal year proposed by the Administration. We are also quite concerned that staff levels to administer and deliver those programs have not at all kept up with the pace of farm bill funding increases over the past two farm bills.

The AGO report to the President must emphasize the importance of maintaining conservation and sustainable agriculture budgets, including increased levels of technical assistance. Given the Administration's priority to address climate change, it behooves the Administration to note the strong link between farm bill conservation funding and agricultural practices and conservation systems that provide important climate benefits. The AGO report is also an important vehicle to recommend further re-orientation of the conservation programs themselves to support for farming systems working in concert with nature and the environment, including a significant increase in support for sustainable and organic farming systems.

The history of Congress and the Administration taking mandatory Conservation Title programs funds to pay for other USDA programs proves conservation has not always been the priority it should be. The AGO Initiative should support USDA conservation funding and should stop the practice of proposing annual cuts.

President Obama's desire to meet the new environmental challenges of our times, including climate change, most likely will require the political courage to set and enforce real payment limits on commodity and crop insurance subsidies, to require basic conservation compliance in return for participation in both of those programs, and to reduce the production and insurance subsidies that negatively distort the way America's land and water resources are used. All rhetoric aside, it is the agriculture budget that tells us the real priorities of our nation's leaders toward our great outdoors.

What works: NSAC supports and recommends targeting of a portion of USDA conservation spending to focus on planned public benefits in priority locations. USDA already has the discretion to target conservation funds through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program, Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and other provisions of farm policy. Geographical targeting to implement specific conservation corridor or landscape plans will greatly advance AGO goals, including reconnecting Americans to the great outdoors.

We can no longer afford to simply cost share the practices farmers want based on random acts of conservation or mitigation strategies. Instead we need to invest in comprehensive conservation planning and sustainable production systems. We can no longer afford to make CRP contracts or conservation easement purchases that simply bail out farmers who have made bad land use decisions in planting wetlands, flood plains or highly erodible lands, or to use EQIP payments to mitigate unsustainable production systems. While all areas of the country need access to conservation program support, local and regional resource priorities should be articulated within each program and then emphasized in program delivery, with rigorous natural resource and environmental standards. Targeting within comprehensive conservation programs is needed to maximize public

benefits, while resisting the view that conservation payments are an entitlement available to all farmers.

Federal government role: FSA and NRCS program funding continues to be distributed using scoring systems that do not encourage or reward public interaction. One way to enhance education and recreation opportunities is to revise the scoring and payment rules for various conservation programs so public access and interaction has economic rewards. For example, the on-farm research, demonstration, and education provisions of the Conservation Stewardship Program are underutilized and poorly rewarded. Another opportunity that is currently being missed is the ability to connect the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative with rural community and economic development goals, including the creation of community and landscape amenities that attract and retain people to rural communities in farming areas.

The last farm bill reduced the opportunity to partner with public conservation agencies and private conservation organizations. For example, USDA is prohibited from reimbursing restoration costs when a government agency buys a Wetlands Reserve Program property. Also, the seven-year ownership requirement for WRP has discouraged conservation groups from bidding on key lands otherwise eligible for WRP. Likewise, the payment limitation rules for the Conservation Reserve Program discourage conservation entities from buying CRP lands in need of permanent protection. The next farm bill should correct the biases against using USDA conservation payments to help acquire public conservation lands.

Finally, we cannot emphasize enough our hope the Administration will articulate a plan to move a significant amount of funding currently spent on production subsidies to support for environmental services through the Conservation Stewardship Program. Through CSP, Congress has provided USDA with a platform to make a lasting re-orientation of the nation's farm program in a direction that is conducive and consistent with the goals of the AGO. Now is the time to seize that opportunity and drive home a truly transformational change in agricultural and environmental policy.