

# Finding Common Ground

## Summary of 2007 Farm Bill Forums

### The Izaak Walton League of America Agricultural Programs



From February to May 2007, The Izaak Walton League of America conducted a series of six forums in Midwest states to discuss the 2007 Farm Bill with the broad spectrum of individuals, interest groups, agencies and officials who propose, implement and interact with federal farm policy. The forums, held in Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, South Dakota and Missouri, were designed to identify areas of shared priority to determine and emphasize common ground rather than debate differences.

Five common ground issues – crossing all forums and interest groups– were identified. These were:

- ⇒ Preserve and fully fund existing conservation programs;
- ⇒ Uphold the safety net function of commodity programs to protect producers in times of down markets, but close loopholes that allow unlimited payments;
- ⇒ Prohibit subsidies for any new cropping of remaining prairie and pasture grasslands;
- ⇒ Institute a strong accountability system to ensure intended goals of the Farm Bill are being met and public funds are being used effectively; and
- ⇒ Prioritize biofuel and biomass energy research and development within a conservation framework.

Each forum consisted of a roundtable discussion of the 2007 Farm Bill and conservation program priorities among representatives from agricultural, conservation, and rural organizations. General audience participation was also encouraged and accommodated, as were presentations and observations from congressional offices and state and federal agencies.

Specifically, the agenda consisted of a morning session that featured brief presentations (five to eight minutes) from participating organizations and individuals detailing their top priorities for the next Farm Bill. Following a noon lunch, participants moved to a dialogue session to further explore the various policies and priorities presented, with the explicit goal of determining where mutual interests in the farm bill occurred.

This summary details findings of common ground to policymakers. We began this process recognizing that participants would not agree on everything. The purpose was not to seek support for the Izaak Walton League or our farm bill priorities. It was to allow others to share their thoughts and perspectives and for all to learn. We have now concluded with the knowledge that all parties share the same basic values: Farming should be profitable. Natural resources should be protected and not wasted. Federal funds should be allocated fairly.

## The Common Ground

Over the course of four months and thousands of miles, an incredible diversity of individuals and organizations attended six separate forums on the 2007 Farm Bill. In each case the goal of finding common ground on priorities for federal farm policy was achieved. In fact, common ground was further found between the results of the respective forums as well.

Forum participation included representation from some 50 different organizations and agencies. Participants varied from the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association to the Wisconsin Pork Association to Ducks Unlimited to the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation to the Illinois Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the Minnesota Farmers Union. Each event also featured attendance by congressional offices, including the offices of both the U.S. House and Senate Agriculture Committee chairmen. Perhaps most importantly, individual farmers and landowners were in attendance at each forum. (Please see <http://iwla.org/index.php?id=420> for listings of representative attendance and reports on the individual forums.)

Driven by the participants themselves, each forum determined its own discussion points and ultimate outcome. Nonetheless, several items were endorsed at every forum.

**Prioritize conservation by maintaining all existing Farm Bill conservation programs, and funding the programs at their full-authorized level.** Participants were also unanimous that federal resources for technical assistance should be increased, while the enrollment process for conservation programs should be simplified.

**Maintain a safety net function with commodity programs that protect producers in times of down markets.** Forum attendees further supported clarification of commodity program policy to close existing loopholes that allow some producers to escape the statutory limits on payments.

**Prohibit commodity, conservation, disaster, and crop insurance subsidies on any new cropland acres that are put into production as a result of breaking remaining prairie grassland with no previous cropping history (Sodsaver).** Remaining native grass prairie and pasture lands may be brought into crop production, but the consensus of attendees was that wise market and land use strategies, rather than federal guarantees, should be the determining factor.

**Analyze the delivery and monitor the results of Farm Bill programs to ensure intended goals are being met and public funds are being used effectively.** Participants agreed that ensuring conservation results are achieved and standards are complied with would maximize the effective and committed stewardship of farm and ranch families.

**Prioritize biofuel and biomass energy research and development within a conservation framework.** Forum participants emphasized that agriculturally derived energy should protect all resource concerns including soil, water, air, and wildlife. Diverse sources, dispersed implementation, and local control were also stressed.

The successful effort to define common ground demonstrated that farm policy, both as it is assembled in Congress and as it is delivered on the ground, is incredibly diverse but entirely interdependent. To develop effective farm policy, it is vital that we recognize the impacts of the policy on the nation as a whole.

The 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity for ensuring profitability for farms and protection for our resources. The process must be about ensuring that we have profitable and productive farms that create food, fiber, and energy while serving as America's front line land stewards. It is imperative that the 2007 Farm Bill establishes the path toward an agricultural future that serves all Americans.