



The Farmland Stewardship Program

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FLORIDA TO USDA: BE SURE FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS ACCOMMODATE REGIONAL DIFFERENCES & UNIQUE LOCAL CONDITIONS

WASHINGTON, D.C., Aug. 21, 2002 -- A coalition of Florida agriculture interests and the office of the only member of the Florida Congressional delegation that serves on one of the Congressional agriculture committees has prepared an extensive set of comments for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to consider in its rule making on the farm bill.

The comments were transmitted today to USDA Secretary Ann M. Veneman in a letter from Craig Evans, president of Stewardship America (formerly Florida Stewardship Foundation), a rural stewardship organization that has been promoting simpler applications and contracts, and greater coordination among all agencies in the delivery of conservation programs, to make it easier for more producers to participate in conservation programs.

Evans worked for over two months to gain consensus on the comments with 60 individuals, who represent all of the major agricultural groups and producers in Florida, and the office of Rep. Adam Putnam (R-FL, 12th District), who serves on the House Agriculture Committee and sponsored legislation to establish a "Farmland Stewardship Program" that is the basis for the "stewardship agreements" in Sec. 2003.

The letter to Secretary Veneman says, "The comments represent a statewide view on how farm bill programs should be applied to agricultural operations that:

- "-- do not always fit the standard USDA definitions and criteria for program eligibility,
- "-- often operate under conditions very different from ag operations in other parts of the country (especially the states dominated by grain, corn and soybean production),
- "-- are dominated by livestock and specialty crop production, and
- "-- epitomize the need for more flexibility in USDA conservation programs so these programs will meet a broader range of producer needs and unique local conditions."

"We recognize that USDA has a very difficult task," Evans says, "writing rules for programs that must work equally well in Hawaii, California, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Maine. Moreover, the rule making must be done in a short period of time, with staff that has other duties to perform.

"Our goal," Evans continues, "is to ensure the rule making process will foster, not frustrate producer participation because of regional differences, and will accommodate and adapt to unique local conditions, not turn them into obstacles."

Evans concludes the letter by saying, "We hope the comments that have been provided by Florida ag interests, working cooperatively to reach consensus, will resonate with producers in other specialty crop (and, yes, even in commodity crop) states, and be of value to USDA in its rule making efforts."

The comments provided to USDA that accompany the letter to Sec. Veneman can be viewed on the Internet at http://privatelands.org/usda_comments.htm

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Stewardship America is a nonprofit research and education organization working to advance initiatives that will engender a thriving rural economy, with an economically robust agriculture, a healthy natural environment, viable rural communities, and safe, abundant supplies of food and fiber.