

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition



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SENATE FARM BILL: BIG GAINS, BIG LOSSES

(Washington, D.C. December 14, 2007) The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition called the farm bill adopted by the Senate today a mixed bag of wins and losses for family farmers, consumers, and the environment. While commending the Senate for taking important steps forward on conservation and competition, the Coalition emphasized significant disappointment with the bill's lack of effective farm program payment reform.

“We applaud the Senate’s decision to advance working lands conservation, especially the Conservation Stewardship Program, as well as important competition provisions that will restore balance and fairness to livestock markets,” said SAC Policy Director Ferd Hoefner. “At the same time, the Senate’s failure to pass the Dorgan-Grassley payment limit amendment repudiates the large majority of farmers who support reform and the largest bi-partisan nationwide movement for farm program reform ever mounted. Most importantly, it means uncapped commodity payments will continue to flow to mega farms and push rural communities, family farmers, and the next generation of producers off of the map.”

The Senate farm bill includes \$2 billion over five years for the Conservation Security Program (CSP), a priority program of SAC that was first authorized in the 2002 farm bill. The new CSP (now to be called Conservation Stewardship Program) would allow 13.3 million acres to be enrolled each year through a continuous, nationwide enrollment opportunity and a ranking system to ensure strong natural resource and environmental outcomes. The bill also gives the highly successful Wetlands Reserve Program a new \$2 billion to restore agricultural wetlands during the next five years. Without the new funding, the SAC-supported program would come to a halt.

“The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition strongly supports the new Conservation Stewardship Program,” said Hoefner. “The new CSP will assist farmers making a strong commitment to advanced stewardship. With the House bill stripping out funding for the CSP, we will strongly back the Senate version when the two chambers meet to conference the two bills in January.”

The Senate bill also contains the strongest Farm Bill livestock reforms ever passed in a farm bill, taking important steps to stop the widespread use of unfair contract practices and disproportionate market power of meatpackers. The Livestock Title of the Senate bill includes four key reforms, including a ban on meatpacker ownership, feeding, or controlling livestock

fourteen days before slaughter; the elimination of mandatory binding arbitration clauses in contracts between livestock producers and packers and processors; good faith bargaining and contract fairness on the part of packers and processors; and strengthened enforcement of laws against deceptive and unfair practices of packers and processors. The bill also includes a breakthrough provision to allow meat from small state-inspected meat plants to be sold in interstate commerce provided that the plants adhere to federal food safety standards.

The Senate farm bill also provides or increases mandatory funding for several other SAC-priority programs, including \$130 million for the Bioenergy Crop Transition Assistance Program, \$80 million for the Organic Farming Research and Extension Initiative, \$40 million for the Rural Micro-Enterprise Assistance Program, \$30 million for the Farmers' Market Promotion Program, \$22 million for the Organic Certification Cost-Share Program, and \$5 million for Organic Production and Marketing Data Collection.

“The bill does not go far enough in funding new farm and rural income opportunities, but it does make major evolutionary strides in the right direction,” said Hoefner. “The package for organic farmers is particularly noteworthy. Our biggest regret is the failure of the Senate to provide funding for the highly successful Value-Added Producer Grants program and the much-needed Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development program. Both are funded in the House-passed bill, and we will work hard for inclusion of funding in the final package to emerge from conference committee.”

The Senate bill also authorizes important policy changes for other SAC priorities, including a new mandatory funding requirement for cooperative conservation projects through the Partnerships and Cooperation Initiative, a new “sodsaver” provision to discourage cropping on native prairie, a reduced interest rate and better terms for Beginning Farmer and Rancher Down Payment Loans, a new set-aside of conservation funding for beginning and minority farmers, new eligibility for rural development loans for processing and other infrastructure for local food systems, and the removal of a major barrier to organic farmers' access to crop insurance,

The bill also requires the Agriculture Research Service to invest a larger portion of total research dollars into research for organic systems, includes new competitive grant research priorities for agricultural entrepreneurship, for public breeding research to advance sustainable and organic farming systems, and to investigate antibiotic resistance. The bill also creates a USDA Office of Small Farms and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers to ensure cross-cutting coordination and goal-setting for all small and beginning farmers and ranchers programs, and requires the Secretary of Agriculture to appoint a diverse team of researchers to study existing local food systems and potential community, economic, health and nutrition, environmental, food safety, and food security impacts of local and regional food systems.

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The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition represents grassroots farm, rural, and conservation organizations from across the country that advocate for public policies supporting the long-term economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources and rural communities.