



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

110 Maryland Avenue N.E. Phone 202.547.5754
Washington, D.C. 20002 Fax 202.547.1837
www.msawg.org

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Contact: Ferd Hoefner
PH: (202) 547-5754

COALITION PRAISES BEGINNING FARMER BILL

Washington, D.C. – The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition praised the introduction today of the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act of 2007, a cross-cutting initiative to help the next generation of farmers and ranchers enter into agriculture and take advantage of emerging markets. The bill is sponsored by Representatives Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD) and Tim Walz (D-MN) in the House and, in the Senate, by Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) along with Committee Members Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Max Baucus (D-MT), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH). Other original co-sponsors may be added today as the bill is dropped.

The bill will be included in Chairman Harkin's farm bill proposal likely to be released in the coming month. House champions Herseth Sandlin and Walz both sit on the Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee, which is scheduled to mark-up its titles of the farm bill next week. The beginning farmer bill includes conservation, credit, and research title provisions.

The face of farming and ranching is changing. In 1978 there were 350,000 farmers age 35 or younger. Since that time the number of young farmers has declined dramatically with experts predicting the 2007 census may reveal as few as 70,000 farmers under the age of 35. At the same time, the percentage of farmers that are over the age of 65 years is increasing. With an estimated 400 million acres of agricultural land transferring to new owners over the next two decades, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and others believe the time is now to encourage the next crop of farmers and ranchers.

“The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act seeks to address the challenges and opportunities the next generation of farmers and ranchers face,” said Ferd Hoefner, policy director of Coalition. “By providing tools and resources such as training in farm management, down payment loans, matched savings accounts, and conservation incentives and set-asides, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher bill promises to help new farmers and ranchers get started in agriculture and become economically viable stewards of the land.”

At the same time that retiring farmers are looking to transfer their land and knowledge, there is a growing movement of people seeking a start in agriculture, including immigrant and women farmers, two of the fastest growing segments of agriculture. Additionally, in many parts of the country consumer demand for fresh, sustainably-grown produce and meats is outstripping local and regional supply. Many see the 2007 Farm Bill as an opportunity for public policy to foster and connect these trends.

“There are real opportunities in agriculture today. Unprecedented consumer demand for organic, locally-grown, and grass-fed agricultural products provides those just entering farming with exciting market prospects” said Hoefner. “The 2007 Farm Bill presents us with a chance to give these new farmers and ranchers the tools they need to take advantage of these markets. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher

initiative lays the foundation for the next generation of farmers and ranchers as well as the future health and vitality of our food system. ”

The bill incorporates modified versions of several suggestions made by USDA Secretary Mike Johanns in his farm bill proposal but includes many additional measures as well. A summary of the bill, as well as a letter of support from 23 farm and rural organizations, are attached.

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.