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National summit on private land conservation

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) held a series of regional forums in October 1999 to discuss conservation issues that affect America's farms, forests, and rangeland. In December, input from the five regional forums (held in Sacramento, Portland, Denver, Syracuse, and Atlanta) was summarized and presented at the National Conservation Summit held in Ames. Comments from the regional forums and from the summit confirmed that conservation is one of the USDA's most important tasks.

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INTEGRATED CROP MANAGEMENT



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U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman released highlights of the latest USDA National Resources Inventory (NRI) at the National Conservation Summit. The NRI is a statistical analysis that is conducted every 5 years, and it serves as a national checkup on America's private lands.

Glickman said although the NRI reveals that extraordinary strides have been made in conservation, there are many worrisome trends and that challenges are mounting and intensifying more quickly than we are solving them. "The NRI concludes that, although we've been quite successful in conquering soil erosion on our most fragile lands, we are no longer making progress in overall erosion control," said Glickman. "It finds that urban sprawl and development are swallowing up some of our best farm and forestland at an unprecedented rate. Wetland losses have accelerated, although we've been able to mitigate the impact on agricultural lands."

Glickman went on to comment that one of the reasons we've fallen behind is inadequate federal dollars. "On an acre-per-acre basis, we spend \$5 on management of public lands for every \$1 we spend on private conservation. The Conservation Reserve Program is bumping up against its 36.4 million-acre ceiling, and we don't expect to enroll significant new acreage for several years."

"Farmers, ranchers, and foresters want to do the right thing. Their proximity to the land makes them our most conscientious land stewards," said Glickman. "But we must give them the tools and resources they need to keep their operations economically and environmentally sustainable."

Most summit panelists who spoke at the summit agreed with Glickman, saying conservation efforts in the 21st century will go beyond slowing soil erosion to include protecting farmland, improving water quality, restoring wetlands, preserving soil productivity, managing livestock manure, enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, and promoting conservation-based principles of land use to urbanites.

Panelists agreed that there is a need to reward producers who are already conservation

stewards. Most past and existing conservation programs provide incentives only to producers who enroll for implementing new conservation practices. Panelists spoke about the need to provide conservation program payments to producers who are and continuing to carry out conservation practices on private lands.

Comments collected from the five regional forums and at the summit show that the public desires increased levels of environmental protection and natural resource conservation. Producers should expect that an emphasis of the 2002 Farm Bill will be on providing stronger incentives, recognizing land stewardship, and developing better environmental and natural resource policies. Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack, speaking at the summit, said that 95 percent of Iowa's land is privately owned, with almost all of that percentage characterized as "working land." Vilsack called for compensation to be paid to landowners and producers for producing "conservation commodities." Vilsack promised to work on programs that encourage the use of best management practices that result in reduced soil erosion, improved water quality, restored wetlands, and enhanced fish and wildlife habitat.

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