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OPENING REMARKS:  
FARMLAND PROTECTION-EXTENDING PAST SUCCESSES INTO THE FUTURE

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard E. Rominger

My thanks to Carl Bouchard and his colleagues in the Natural Resources Conservation Service for coordinating this program and to Ralph Grossi, Gus Seelig, and John Vincent for joining us and for what they do for our farmland every day.

The very fact that we're here, at this Outlook Conference, discussing farmland protection, says more than any of us can about the national visibility this issue is gaining. The outlook forum is a yearly benchmark. It gives us a chance to take stock, assess what's important, sound an alert if needed, and reset our course.

Including farmland protection on the agenda for the first time ever -- in the 75-year history of this conference -- is an alert that we've got to do a better job. That's something that folks like my good friend Ralph Grossi have been saying for many years.

Ralph, this is the third time this year that we've gotten together on farmland protection -- that's some kind of a record for February. Last month, we were both in Chicago with the Soil and Water Conservation Society. And two weeks ago, I was on hand when the American Farmland Trust gave its prestigious Steward of the Land Award to the Uphoff brothers, 4<sup>th</sup> generation family farmers from Wisconsin.

What's happening is that the momentum that's building throughout the nation -- from influential, vocal forums like the Soil and Water Conservation Society and the American Farmland Trust to the quiet, environmental example of thousands of farmers like the Uphoffs -- are pushing farmland protection into the national spotlight. As Ralph has long pointed out, our farmers demonstrate that economics can be balanced with environmental stewardship ... and that's something the nation is beginning to appreciate.

As a farmer myself, with three sons back in Yolo County, California, doing a fine job of sustainable farming -- building ponds in the foothills, preserving habitat along the Pacific Flyway -- I feel that we're long overdue for a national understanding of that balance.

As a nation, we must rededicate our efforts to conserving the health of our nation's landscapes -- public, private, and urban lands. That means stressing the links between landscape health and economic health.

It's up to the people in this room to make sure that as a nation we don't talk about sustainability without talking about agriculture's relationship with its urban neighbors. This is the nation's neighborhood and we've got to talk about it.

As a nation, we've got to face the loss of our farmland. The next century is about to happen -- and the numbers aren't good.

Consider this. More than 80 percent of our fruits, vegetables, and dairy products are produced near urban areas. These farms face the threat of insidious urban sprawl. Since 1960, about 1½ million acres a year have been converted to other uses, disappearing under the concrete to urban, suburban, and rural development.

Beyond total acreage lost, we've got to consider the quality of the land being converted. In most states, prime farmland is converted at two to four times the rate of less-productive land.

This clock is ticking ... it's like the classic story of the commuter who had recently moved to the countryside. Desperate to catch his train, he called to a farmer busy herding his cows along the road. "Hey, grandpa!" Is it all right with you if I take a shortcut across your field? I've got to catch the 8:15!" And the farmer said, "Go ahead, young fella -- but if my bull sees you, you'll catch the 7:45."

If we, as a nation, catch the 8:15, we may be too late.

We need to accelerate the debate. We need more rural-urban interaction. We need folks to sit down and talk. We need to get builders, developers, homebuyers, planners to understand that they -- as well as farmers and ranchers -- will shoulder the cost of urban sprawl. And it won't be cheap.

We need the kind of recognition that Vermont Governor Howard Dean outlined in his State of the State Address -- and Gus Seelig, if you're talking with the Governor, please pass along my thanks. Governor Dean said, "We have an extraordinary opportunity to preserve what we value about Vermont's landscape and keep our sense of community. If you think these values are not at risk, look around you at other states: forest lands stripped, big-box stores turning downtowns into ghost towns; grazing fields now supporting condominiums. We in Vermont have a rare gift, a chance to encourage the best growth possible, while holding off the worst aspects of urbanization paving over too much of America."

The fact is, farmland loss jeopardizes the next century in ways the urban population and some rural folks haven't yet come to grips with -- not just less food but air quality, water quality and supply, energy costs, congestion, wildlife habitat, the nation's rural character, not to mention loss of open space and sense of place. Losing our land compromises our ability to deal with problems ranging from social and economic to environmental.

This is the complex of "livability" issues that the President and Vice President are tackling through two new budget initiatives aimed at giving communities tools to preserve green spaces, curb urban sprawl, and support the work of farmers like John Vincent. These proposals will build on the Vice President's plans for "Smart Growth" in America that include protecting America's prime farmland from development. The Administration has proposed more than \$75 million in federal funds in the year 2000 for the Farmland Protection Program.

Under Farmland Protection, which was authorized by the '96 Farm Bill, farmers can continue to farm without development pressures to sell their land. Long-term capital improvements are made. Rural economies are sustained, and valuable farmland preserved.

There's a real philosophy here -- the sense that we must approach our lands as an investment in our national future. That's an approach I brought last spring to the graduating class of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at the University of California, Davis.

Let me tell you a little about that. The invitation to speak at my alma mater was an invitation to speak about any of the huge range of issues USDA works on -- trade, food safety, science and research, biotechnology, risk management.

Maybe it's because the college is so close to the Central Valley of California, the last great Mediterranean-climate, agricultural production area left on earth. Maybe it's because of my conviction that protecting our farmland is the single issue that makes all the others possible. For a number of reasons, I opted to talk primarily about farmland, and I opted to challenge those young people with the wisdom of Richard Critchfield and Wallace Stegner.

After studying civilizations around the world, historian and writer Richard Critchfield concluded that, "A civilization begins to decline when it loses touch with its agrarian roots."

And writer and conservationist Wallace Stegner wrote in 1981 that, "It would promise us

a more serene and confident future if ... we began to listen to the land, and hear what it says, and know what it can and cannot do.”

At this point, it's my pleasure to open this panel with three individuals who do a great job of listening to the land at the national and state levels, and working the land on the farm.

Our first speaker is Ralph Grossi, President of the American Farmland Trust since 1985. The Trust is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to halting the loss of productive farmland and promoting farming practices that sustain the environment.

Ralph is a third-generation California farmer and managing partner in the family partnership raising specialty beef. He's a 1971 graduate of California Polytechnic State University. Ralph is a co-founder and chairman of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust and has served as president of the Marin County Farm Bureau. He's on the Board of Directors of several organizations, and serves on advisory boards that include academia -- such as the Yale School of Forestry -- and other organizations. He holds numerous awards, dating back to the 1976 Outstanding Young Farmer and Rancher of the California Farm Bureau Federation. It's my pleasure to introduce Ralph Grossi.

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Thank you, Ralph. Moving now from a national to a state perspective on farmland protection, I'm very pleased to introduce the gentleman who probably understands that issue better than anyone for the state of Vermont. Gus Seelig is a 1976 graduate of Goddard College. He's been Executive Director of the Central Vermont Community Action Council, a low-income advocacy and community development organization. Gus has served Vermont as a member of boards and associations that range from regional planning, transportation, housing finance, and community action, to firefighting.

Gus has been Executive Director of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board since its start in 1987. In that time, Vermont has invested more than \$100 million in programs, with outstanding results --

- \* 234 farms conserved, totalling over 78,000 acres
- \* 4800 units of housing developed or rehabilitated
- \* over a quarter-of-a-million acres of natural and recreation lands protected.

Here to tell us about the state's accomplishments and how they go about it -- I'm pleased to introduce Gus Seelig.

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Gus, thank you very much. Turning now to the actual business of farming with farmland protection, we're very pleased to have John Vincent discuss his experiences with the Delaware Agricultural Lands Protection Program and the federal Farmland Protection Program. John holds degrees in Biology and Chemistry. He is first and foremost a farmer and owner of Cedartree Farms in Sussex County, Delaware. He's also President of Development and Water Services in southern Florida. He has headed the Water Treatment Division of Consolidated Food Corporation and served as Vice President of the ITEK International Division of Oxford Chemicals. John holds a patent on a wastewater process and is a consultant to the government of Bermuda on wastewater issues. Please welcome -- from the nation's First State -- John Vincent.

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Thanks to all of you for joining us. And thanks to Ralph, Gus, and John for sharing their thoughts and expertise to give us a complete perspective. To wrap up this session, I want to leave you with a couple of thoughts to take back home. As Secretary Glickman pointed out yesterday, we're losing 50 acres of farmland every hour of every day. Isn't it high time that we plan to grow smartly? The U.S. population will reach 390 million in 50 years. Are we prepared to manage our lands so those who follow us will be able to enjoy farmland as we know it today -- and will we do it responsibly?

To keep the discussion open, I encourage you to be with us in Philadelphia June 6th through 9th for the "Keep America Growing Conference -- Balancing Working Lands and Development." It will be an excellent forum. I believe Carl has copies of the announcement. Thank you ... and I hope to see all of you in Philadelphia.