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USDA INITIATIVES

Glenda Humiston
Deputy Under Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Good afternoon, everyone. I am pleased to be a participant on this panel that is providing its perspectives on the outlook for local, state, federal, and private sector environmental initiatives affecting livestock production.

I am especially looking forward to listening to our other distinguished panelists and to the opportunity to address your specific questions during the closing question and answer period.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL AGRICULTURE

USDA recognizes the important economic, environmental, and social issues centered on animal agriculture in the United States, and in other countries too.

The beef, dairy, pork, and poultry industries face significant challenges and we must all work together to achieve viable solutions that make both environmental and economic sense.

Animal agriculture produces more than \$80 billion per year in farm-gate sales, making it an important part of both our Nation's economy and its food supply.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF ANIMAL AGRICULTURE

However, along with the many benefits that animal agriculture provides, it also produces huge amounts of by-products, such as manure, litter, and waste water. Animal agriculture has garnered much notoriety in this area. It is a significant land use in many watersheds. Public criticism has been triggered by outbreaks like *Pfiesteria* in the Chesapeake Bay area, *hypoxia* in the Gulf of Mexico, and offensive odors from animal feeding operations.

USDA's VOLUNTARY, LOCALLY-LED APPROACH

USDA is working with other federal agencies and local/state public entities, along with the private sector, to help the owners and operators of animal feeding operations to voluntarily address the environmental challenges they face. We need to support science-based solutions that work well for the unique needs of the livestock sector, and recognize the financial constraints that many livestock producers face.

USDA is a strong proponent of the voluntary, incentive-based approach as the principal means to help agricultural producers reduce the environmental impacts of agricultural production.

USDA's conservation programs work in partnership with locally-led processes and other local, state, federal, and private entities to deliver support for individual, group, and community efforts through

information, education, technical assistance, financial assistance, and innovative pilots and policy approaches.

For example, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Technical Assistance and Environmental Quality Incentives Programs are two principal vehicles used by USDA to assist animal feeding operations in meeting environmental objectives in a voluntary manner, while maintaining production.

It is also important to note that USDA's conservation programs are used by many agricultural producers as the technical and financial assistance tools to help them comply with local, state, and federal regulations.

ADMINISTRATION'S CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

Because of the critical role that USDA's voluntary programs play in helping private landowners appropriately balance their environmental and production goals, and in some cases help them comply with other entities' regulations, I am extremely enthused about the Clinton Administration's \$1.3 billion Conservation Initiative in the Fiscal Year 2001 budget.

The Administration's Conservation Initiative would greatly increase the amount of money spent on the conservation of private lands. It represents a bold, new way of looking at agricultural policy by rewarding farmers who want to aggressively develop and adopt new conservation measures.

The centerpiece of the Initiative is a new voluntary conservation program -- the Conservation Security Program (CSP) -- targeted to family farmers and ranchers who maintain or improve their natural resources. The CSP will build upon our existing conservation technical infrastructure and complement other USDA programs. Direct payments will be made to producers to financially recognize them for good land stewardship that produces environmental benefits.

The Administration's Conservation Initiative is strong evidence of the growing support for conservation on private lands. This growing support came through loud and clear during the conservation forums and the "Summit on Private Land Conservation" held late in 1999. We heard farmers, ranchers, executives of Fortune 500 companies, environmental experts, political people, and so many others tell us how we can deepen our commitments to the conservation of America's private lands.

CONSERVATION FORUMS AND SUMMIT

One of the suggestions we heard most at the forums and Summit was the need to make conservation policies and programs more flexible. In fact, flexibility and responsiveness to local issues were cited as necessary ingredients for the triumph of any conservation policy. Another ingredient cited was something that we at USDA know so much about and so deeply believe in -- the implementation of voluntary conservation measures. An approach overwhelmingly preferred by local stakeholders over regulation.

At the forums and Summit, there also was a cry for more technical assistance. One speaker said, "technical assistance is one of the things that there's always been very broad agreement on that the federal government does very well, does very appropriately, and does very cost efficiently."

UNIFIED NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR AFOs

Specifically toward achieving the goal of helping animal feeding operation owners and operators to manage their operations in a profitable and environmentally sound manner, USDA entered into the joint USDA/EPA Unified National Strategy for Animal Feeding Operations in March 1999. NRCS is a principal player being looked on by USDA to help implement this Strategy because of its technical standards and expertise, traditional ties to producers, ability to forge partnership approaches, and the agency's presence in nearly every county in the nation.

The Strategy has established a national performance expectation that all AFOs will have planned and be implementing Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs) by 2009. This is a tremendous challenge -- one that will require major investments in research, technology development and transfer, training, technical assistance, and financial incentives to accomplish.

To support the implementation of the Strategy, USDA has been working hard to ensure that the environmental needs associated with animal feeding operations are a top conservation priority, by focusing the energy and identifying the resources needed to carry out:

- Effective information and education of AFO owners and operators.
- Research and technology transfer.
- Direct technical assistance.
- Cost-sharing assistance.

COMPREHENSIVE NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PLANNING TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

Toward achieving the objective of getting the needed technical guidance in place to help public and private technical specialists assist AFO owners and operators with their development of CNMPs, NRCS released on December 9, 1999 the draft Technical Guidance for Developing Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans. By releasing this draft technical guidance for a 90-day public comment period, we anticipate receiving constructive public input that will help us to release the best possible technical guidance in July of this year.

The technical guidance will provide a framework for helping animal feeding operation owners and operators to develop their site-specific, technically sound CNMPs. NRCS' technical references, processes, and procedures will fill in the framework.

A CNMP is a subset of a conservation plan. It is a grouping of conservation practices and management activities which, when combined into a system, will help to ensure that both production and natural resource conservation goals are achieved for animal feeding operations.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the CNMP workload, there is no question that the public and private sectors will need to collaborate closely, using the NRCS CNMP technical guidance and supporting technical references and tools, if we are to succeed in achieving the national expectation laid out in the Unified National Strategy for Animal Feeding Operations.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION

USDA intends to continue to protect the special relationship of trust that exists between farmers and USDA. In assisting AFO owners and operators with the development and implementation of their

CNMPs, the same “confidentiality of information” policy that USDA operates under now, will continue to apply.

USDA’s ACTIONS TO HELP LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS

In summary, USDA is focusing significant resources and energy to help livestock producers voluntarily balance livestock production with environmental quality. More specifically, USDA is:

- Working to ensure that flexible, innovative, and credible technical tools and approaches are being prepared for CNMP development and implementation.
- Working to ensure that the knowledge, skills, and support are in place for NRCS and partner field staff to provide quality technical assistance.
- Working with the private sector to ensure that third-party vendors have access to training, technical information and tools, and certification processes.
- Developing a more integrated approach in USDA for addressing AFO needs, especially with USDA’s principal research agencies -- the Agricultural Research Service and the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service.
- Working to build an outcome reporting capacity in order to quantify the economic, environmental, and other major benefits and effects from CNMP implementation.

The bottom line is that USDA is using every tool available to us -- from research to technical and financial assistance to education incentives -- to help livestock producers voluntarily meet environmental quality objectives.

CONSERVATION SUCCESS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

USDA provides a wide variety of assistance, both technical and financial, to landowners/users, communities, conservation districts, units of local and state government, and other federal agencies to help address conservation and resource protection challenges. USDA’s conservation assistance is provided through local conservation districts and in partnership with state conservation agencies, an approach that has proven successful for over 65 years. At USDA, we rely heavily on this nationwide network of state and local partners to get cost-effective, science-based conservation on the ground.

Beyond the federal, state, and local government partnership, however, we also need more private sector initiatives and public/private partnerships, such as the On-Farm Environmental/Odor Assessment Review Project sponsored by America’s Clean Water Foundation. Without question, animal agriculture industry-led initiatives, for example, can significantly increase the voluntary adoption of CNMPs to protect water quality.

The environmental and economic challenges faced by today’s farmers and ranchers are too complex and too significant for us to do anything less than commit to strong public/private partnerships that benefit our natural resources, the private landowner, and the American public.