Comments by
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Farm Bill Listening Session Held by California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)
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Good afternoon, Secretary Kawamura and other listening session panelists. I am Barry Bedwell and I am president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League. We are a voluntary public policy organization that represents approximately 85 percent of the volume of California's table grapes and deciduous tree fruit. We very much appreciate you taking the time and making the effort to conduct this listening session today in the most productive agricultural county in the nation. We are very encouraged by the role that the California Department of Food and Agriculture is taking in regard to the formation of the 2007 Farm Bill and we commend you your proactive participation.

The members of our organization feel, like so many others associated with American agriculture, that these Farm Bill discussions come at a historic juncture and present a very tangible opportunity to shape farm policy for the

better. We recognize that these discussions are being conducted during a time of changing attitudes as to the basic purpose and needs of U.S. farm policy. We realize that the fiscal dynamics of our nation as well as the international impacts of worldwide agricultural trade require dynamic new thinking when it comes to how we can best produce food, for not only our nation, but for the world as well.

From an overall viewpoint, we believe that farm policy must recognize the growing importance of fruits and vegetables and their role in providing nutrition and fighting obesity. The economic impact of specialty crops cannot be ignored as well. This sector comprises approximately fifty percent of the value of crops grown in the United States as well as employing almost three-quarters of the nation's agricultural workforce. In California, the importance of specialty crops is well documented in that they represent an estimated 92 percent of the state's agricultural crop production value and a like number of the agricultural workforce.

Today's discussion we understand is designed to specifically address commodity programs, conservation programs and energy and rural development. Before I comment on the commodity and conservation areas I

would first like to briefly relate to you as well our feelings on the importance of international trade and research as it pertains to future farm policy. Let me say that with about 44% of California's table grapes and just under one third of tree fruit production being exported, we clearly understand the need for growing international trade. In that regard we clearly support and call for the expansion of such programs as TASC (Targeted Assistance for Specialty Crops) and MAP (Market Access Program) as well as written policy to increase the coordination of trade objectives between key USDA agencies. The aforementioned programs have already shown to be highly effective and deserve increased support. In the area of research, we support the development of a specialty crop priority as part of the National Research Initiative (NRI) and the establishment of a grant program within USDA to improve the efficiency and competiveness of specialty crop producers.

In regard to the commodity section of Farm Bill, the interest of our members center around the fact that grape and tree fruit growers, like many other growers of specialty crops, have much higher input, particularly labor, costs as well as high gross values so that current limitations dealing with adjusted gross income limits or disaster assistance payment limitations are unrealistic when compared to other crops that have historically been the primary focus

of farm policy. These limits or eligibility requirements need to be reviewed and adjusted to more realistically address this situation.

Our members feel strongly that the conservation component of the Farm Bill is of growing importance and they are encouraged by what has already been accomplished by such programs as EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program). There have simply not been enough resources available for this program and we feel that as the new Farm Bill takes shape a mandatory portion of EQIP funds should be designated for specialty crops. Farmers are actively seeking ways to improve their operation and the environment. They know that by protecting the environment as well as their productivity today they will make sure they are sustainable in the future.

And in closing let me say that he United States government has taken a very high profile position, and rightfully so, in promoting healthy eating habits by the release of the USDA's Food Pyramid and nutritional guidelines. The goal of eating more healthy foods and fighting the obesity epidemic is certainly worthy and needed. However, when we look at these guidelines and how U.S. farm policy has been formulated and how funds are allocated, there is clearly a disconnect between what is recommended for consumer

consumption and how we fund agriculture in this country. Wouldn't it make more sense to look toward the Food Pyramid as a guideline for support and promotion of United States agricultural production rather than a depression era model out of the 1930's? We certainly think so and would hope that such a path would lead to an improved quality of life for all of our citizens.

Thank you again for conducting this listening session today and for allowing us the opportunity to participate.