California Women for Agriculture's Comments as prepared for CDFA's Farm Bill Listening Sessions – July 2006

If you eat food and wear clothes, you are involved in agriculture...that is California Women for Agriculture's motto. We are the state's largest, all-volunteer agriculture support organization. Our membership is comprised of mainly women who come from a variety of backgrounds and professions such as farmers, ranchers, bankers, homemakers, teachers, attorney and agriculture-related support businesses.

California agriculture is as diverse as our membership. The Farm Bill needs to reflect that diversity and better assist specialty crop producers and others. California and specialty crop growers receive funds that are disproportionately low and do not reflect the important role each plays in the U.S. agricultural community.

Highly subsidized and low-priced foreign crops are displacing many crops both domestically and overseas. The new Farm Bill must include reasonable and thoughtful policies that recognize the value of all farm and ranch commodities.

The Farm Bill must include provisions so that all farmers have the tools they need to compete fairly in the world marketplace. These tools include access to cutting edge research, marketing programs, workable conservation programs and thorough prevention efforts to keep pests and diseases out of our country.

Farmers and ranchers are already stewards of the lands they tend. Conservation funding should put greater emphasis on programs that promote active land management rather than permanent land retirement. Active land management leads to long-term, sustainable, water and soil improvements. Land retirement ends the active stewardship of the land by the people who know it best.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program

In renewing programs such as EQIP, funds should be allocated directly to farmers and ranchers, where they will provide the greatest benefit to the environment. In addition, the money should be kept under local control, such as the EQIP working groups, which can respond to the needs of each county.

Specialty crop block grant funding should be directed towards research on environmental stewardship, markets, the development of new technologies and products that make California commodities meet consumer demands and are more competitive with the rest of the world.

We must recognize the success of the current farm bill and before changing any of the traditional farm bill structure that assists rice, dairy, cotton and wheat farmers, we must evaluate the impact it could have on rural communities. Any farm bill should be crafted to make these California commodities competitive with what other countries spend on domestic supports.

Finally, as CWA is doing its best to educate our educators, legislators and children about the benefits of eating healthy, the Farm Bill should likewise make every effort to send the message to America on the benefits of healthy eating and fighting obesity. The Farm bill should expand nutritional education and school fruit and vegetable snack programs. The supplies of those fruits and vegetables should come from our own soil.

On behalf of CWA, thank you for bringing the listening sessions to California ~~and~~ the most productive farmland of the world. We look forward to the new Farm Bill and the promise it holds for California agriculture.

Mary Ann Graff
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California Women for Agriculture