

Farm Policy Should Encourage Soil Stewardship, says Iowa Farmer

Varel Bailey, an Iowa crop and livestock farmer, works hard to farm in environmentally sound ways within his challenging, roller coaster-like terrain. Consequently, Bailey stresses the need for results-based conservation programs that encourage producer creativity in goals like erosion reduction and the integration of crops and livestock to minimize the use of purchased fertilizer. "Pay me to reduce soil erosion, but let me adapt that goal to my farm," he says.

Bailey is no newcomer to farming, having taken over his family farm in 1965. He rotates among corn, soybeans and pasture and raises 125 beef cows, 100 sheep and 6,000 hogs annually. The beef and sheep graze on the hillsides, where grass provides an effective barrier against erosion, and his hogs live in 10 canvas-sided structures known as hoop buildings.

While Bailey raises thousands of hogs each year, a deep layer of straw bedding in his hoop buildings both minimizes odor and provides him a fertile straw-manure mix that is easy to transport and land-spread on his crop fields. Hoop buildings are on the rise in Iowa, where farmers have embraced the conservation-minded system that vastly decreases energy bills and turns manure into a resource. (The hoop buildings do not need power-hungry cooling systems required in large-scale confinement houses.) Bailey was at the forefront of using this technology, having served as the first chairman of the Wallace Foundation for Rural Research and Development, which funded hoop research in 1989.

Bailey carefully designed a cropping system that works within the confines of his rolling terrain and challenging soil types. He crops his corn and soybeans in contours and maintains grass pastures on the hillsides for his cattle and sheep. By building a strategic fencing system that runs along the contours,



JEFF LUNDQUIST

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maintaining permanent pastures and constantly rotating crops on the hills, Bailey minimizes erosion.

"It really starts with the land," he says. "The first challenge you have is to optimize use of the land."

While Bailey appreciates the idea behind AFT's drive to shift commodity payments to so-called "green" payments, he stresses the need for flexibility. His farm is unique, he says, and after 40 years of farming, he's figured out how to work around its warts.

"I've done a lot of things here, and one of my concerns about green payments is their lack of flexibility," he says. "I don't normally like the cookbook programs, you have to do x, y and z to get the payments, but it may not fit my situation."

Finally, Bailey advocates more scientific research on conservation practices to protect natural resources while enhancing productivity. If that research were conducted on the farm, so much the better, he says.

Type of Operation: crop and livestock

Land in Agriculture: 1200 acres

Greatest Challenge: erosion and encroaching development

Program Participation: Iowa Department of Natural Resources Manure Management Plan, manure applicators permit, pesticide applicators permit; NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program

Unmet Need: more scientific research on conservation practices and a flexible green payments system

Voices for Change

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Established in 1980, American Farmland Trust is the leading nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting our nation's farm and ranch land. AFT's mission is to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. AFT works at the federal level to effect farm policies and with states and local communities to enact strategies to save their land.

Why Save Farmland?

We rely on our best farmland to feed America and much of the world. In addition,

- Farmland provides more than 70 percent of the habitat for America's wildlife. Developing that land puts America's biological diversity at risk.
- America is becoming more dependent on imported food, some from countries with less stringent environmental and safety regulations.
- When farms and ranches are pushed off the most fertile soil, they are forced to rely more on fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation to do what the best land does naturally. Farmland loss has visible environmental impacts.
- The cost of basic services (schools, fire, police and maintenance) skyrockets in communities across the country that sacrifice farmland to uncontrolled growth. Scattered development increases taxes and makes services more costly.
- Agriculture provides millions of jobs both on the land and in secondary services. Farmland protection is an investment in the backbone of our economy.

We're Saving America's Farmland—where the need is most urgent and where success can have the greatest impact through a three-pronged strategy of:

- Protecting the Best Land by advancing conservation easement programs that allow farmers and ranchers to permanently keep their land in agriculture.
- Planning for Agriculture by developing and implementing sound community planning that achieves a balance between sensible growth and thriving agriculture.
- Keeping the Land Healthy by fostering the best farming practices and guiding farmers and ranchers to adopt these practices.

2007 Farm Policy Campaign

Convinced that strong federal farm policy is the key to saving farm and ranch land, AFT has launched an aggressive campaign aimed at policy change for the 2007 U.S. Farm Bill. We are working to transform U.S. farm policy to a system that links financial support to environmental stewardship and rewards farmers for producing healthy food, clean air and water, wildlife habitat and open space. A diverse and growing consensus is emerging among farmers, ranchers, conservationists, fiscal conservatives and public interest groups to create a new system. Our work on farm policy is rooted in our mission to protect farmland, ensure a future for agriculture and improve stewardship.

