



NARC National Association of Regional Councils

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

2007 FARM BILL

BUILDING REGIONAL COMMUNITIES – LARGE, SMALL, URBAN AND RURAL – THROUGH ADVOCACY, EDUCATION AND TRAINING

ISSUE

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) supports increased and sustained funding for the 2007 Farm Bill with particular emphasis on the "Conservation" (Title II) and "Rural Development" (Title VI) for increased resources dedicated to rural community improvements that will ensure regions have the ability to grow and compete within the global marketplace, while allowing for more cooperation and authority at the local levels through the help of multi-jurisdictional planning and development organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Support increased funding and resources at a minimum of \$2 billion for the core programs of the Rural Development title, providing stronger and more flexible authority and coordination at the rural planning and regional levels.
- Endorse the provisions for community development, such as simplifying and consolidating rural development programs while providing \$1.6 billion in loans to rehabilitate all current Rural Critical Access Hospitals and \$500 million in grants and loans for rural communities to decrease the backlog of rural infrastructure projects.
- Ensure increased funding for enhancing the rural infrastructure, in particular the water grants, emergency community water assistance grants and community facility grants and direct loads that maintain projects for first responders.
- Urge that rural infrastructure grants and loans be monitored and allocated at the local levels with regional coordination to ensure priority projects are receiving the first round of funds. This would include flexible authority by rural planning organizations and other regional councils.
- Support provisions that bolster rural business development, including Rural Business Opportunity Grants, Rural Development Cooperative Grants, and Rural Entrepreneur and Microenterprise Assistance Programs, which will assist in making rural business competitive in the national and global marketplace and will provide incentives for growth and community development.
- Support and expanding Rural Business grants to include specific language for qualifying rural planning organizations as a primary means to "conduct regional, community and local economic development planning and coordination."
- Support increased opportunities and incentives for expansion of alternative energy research programs and renewable energy grants that will expand rural economies.
- Increase funding to regional planning organizations involved in developing regional land-use allocation plans.
- Seek coordination among all federal agencies that deal with environmental issues to maximize the impact of land-use programs.

BACKGROUND

Rural development is a process focused on the economy, communities and people of areas where demographics show a widely dispersed population. Economic and sustainable development is important in non-urbanized areas that typically have a decentralized workforce and are characterized by out-migration. Rural America is largely agricultural, rich in natural resources and uniquely diverse. Regional councils are key players in advancing rural development through innovative and comprehensive strategic planning and alliances with private, public and nonprofit entities.

Title VI, the Rural Development title, includes nearly 90 programs across 16 federal agencies that provide loans, grants, technical assistance and research for activities that support rural community development, providing for housing, public works systems, business development, etc. According to USDA, in 2005, alone, the business programs under this title created over 73,000 jobs and helped fund new or improved water treatment systems serving over one million consumers.

Title II, the Conservation title, contains 20 programs to protect and restore soils, waterways and wildlife habitats, including incentives to shift environmentally sensitive lands from agriculture to conservation, better manage land under production, and technical assistance to help produce implement measures and meet federal standards. These programs help reduce water and air pollution, soil erosion and loss of wildlife.

The Farm Bill, which was last authorized in 2002, is an omnibus bill that combines a total of 10 titles into a single piece of legislation for five years. The 2007 Farm Bill is subject to the FY2008 budget restrictions, as well as nearly \$60 billion less to work with as compared to 2002. The Administration requested \$89 billion for agriculture programs, representing an almost five percent drop from the 2006 outlays, falling short of the authorized levels in the 2002 Farm Bill. This proposal creates a new \$500 million fund to account for increases in the 2007 bill. Rural development funding was requested at \$15 billion and many budgetary requests indicate a shift from grants to loans.

The Congressional FY08 budget for agriculture appropriations is \$137 million more than the White House and \$158 million more than the FY07 enacted levels. Congress has requested full funding for the commodity supply, conservation and food nutrition programs and is allowing for a deficit-neutral reserve fund of \$20 billion for the Farm Bill reauthorization.

For the past six years, NARC has actively worked on promoting and providing technical assistance in the areas of rural development, green infrastructure and landcare. The push now is for the new Congress to increase federal spending and grant opportunities for rural development and voluntary farm conservation programs.