

## Preface



# *Agriculture Sustainability In Utah*

### **Dear Utah Citizen:**

As co-chairs of the Agriculture Sustainability Task Force, we are delighted to share this report with you. In this report, we have tried to capture the work of the Task Force and provide you with critical information about Utah agriculture.

### **What is Sustainability?**

There are two ways of looking at it: *The capability of being sustained*, and *the capability of sustaining*. The taskforce looked at both ideas. We wanted to know how agriculture sustains our communities, and how our communities sustain our agricultural lands, producers, and heritage. To answer these questions, we needed answers to several key questions including:

### **What is Utah Agriculture?**

Every farm or ranch is different. Usually, we think of ranchers on horseback surrounded by their animals, or a farmer in a large field with a tractor. These types of farms still contribute the majority of agricultural products in Utah, but urban farms are also adding to our local food supply. These are small acreage operations growing vegetables, fruits, eggs, honey, and sometimes meat, for the consumer market. Such farms are often found in cities, or suburbs, rather than far away in rural areas. These farmers have found a niche market by using different marketing strategies such as selling at farmers markets or offering a subscription to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

### **Why conserve our farms?**

Farms of all sizes provide a number of benefits that are critical to our quality of life. They produce food, fiber, nursery stock, and flowers. They clothe us, beautify our surroundings, and supply us with the energy we need everyday. All of these products can be imported from outside of Utah, but the cost of transporting them and the concerns with the safety, nutrition and availability of the imported products make having local capacity to produce food very important and beneficial to us. We do not want to become dependent on foreign sources for such a basic critical need as food.

### **Why is this important to me?**

Population growth, land prices, and fluctuating operating costs and market prices for agricultural products make it hard for farmers to make a living. As farm businesses continue to decline, our local food security is at risk and we are all subject to additional inflationary costs for our food.



Commissioner of Agriculture and Food, Leonard Blackham (left), co-chaired the Task Force with Lt. Governor, Greg Bell (right).

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### What can we do?

There are many things that we can do. Mostly, however, it boils down to this: We have to make it easier for farmers and ranchers to make a living on the land available to them.

Strategies can include:

- Provide new markets for agricultural products;
- Find ways to keep more of the billions of dollars we spend each year on food within the State of Utah;
- Use new media, the internet and other innovative marketing strategies to inform the public of our efforts;
- Change tax policies and zoning regulations to favor agricultural production;
- Create other options to help promote the economic health of our farms and ranches.
- Utilize current tools, such as conservation easements or transfer of development rights to ensure that our agricultural lands are permanently protected, can be used when necessary to protect the health of these vital assets. Another important tool is the USU Extension Service's ability to provide critical information to our farmers and ranchers.



Utah Agriculture Sustainability Task Force members at work, 2011

### What are the benefits of protecting farms and ranches?

Farmers and ranchers are natural stewards of the land. Wise management of their lands protects critical watersheds, provides habitat for important wildlife, maintains clean water and air, and provides other benefits that save taxpayers the costs of cleaning the water and air. Overall, this kind of management has the power to promote a better quality of life.

### Recommendations:

We have developed and adapted these recommendations for the state, local governments, producers, and consumers.

We trust these recommendations will start deliberations on these important issues and will result in concrete solutions to protect farms, ranches, farm families, and most importantly, the communities that are served by the benefits of Utah Agriculture.

Sincerely,

Greg Bell, Chair  
Lt. Governor

Leonard Blackham, Co-chair  
Commissioner of Agriculture

## Executive Summary

As agriculture in Utah continues to face increased pressure from urban development, changing demographics, economic pressures, and a myriad of other issues, it is increasingly important that policy makers and citizens understand the critical role that agriculture plays to Utah's security, economy, society, culture, and well-being. To better understand and address these concerns, Lieutenant Governor Greg Bell and Commissioner of Agriculture Leonard Blackham convened the Utah Agriculture Sustainability Task Force, comprised of state legislators, local government officials, conservation districts, agricultural producers, and other interested parties. During the discussion of key agricultural sectors, eight overarching issues emerged:

- Food Security** - Local farming gives us the ability to feed people in their community independent of outside influences and keeps dollars spent on agricultural products in the local economy. Once prime or important agricultural lands are converted to urban development, the ability to produce food is lost and our ability to be self-sufficient is decreased.
- Invasive Species** - More effective coordination is needed to inventory and control weeds on public and private lands and to educate the public.
- Grazing Management** - Livestock grazing is the dominant sector in Utah agriculture. While the number of permitted livestock on public lands has been decreasing, rangeland can support additional livestock grazing that is beneficial to wildlife, healthy lands, and quality recreational opportunities, if it is properly managed. Landscape-scale grazing management can be a tool to effectively manage the resource for wildlife and livestock.
- Immigration** - Utah farms and ranchers require an ample, sustainable, and legal workforce.
- Urban Agriculture** – Urban agriculture is a growing segment in which “every acre counts”. Creating agriculture-friendly zoning ordinances will help expand food-producing opportunities throughout our cities and counties.
- Agriculture Promotion and Profitability** - To be sustainable, agriculture must be *profitable*. This will require increased local marketing opportunities (*Utah's Own*), processing capacity, and distribution capacity.
- Next Generation Farms** – As the average age of farm operators in Utah continues to increase, it will be important to provide Utah farmers and ranchers with reasonable options for generational farm transfer.
- Irrigation Infrastructure** – The availability of water is critical to agriculture. Improving water distribution systems to deliver water to farm lands in a cost-effective manner will be critical for both sustainable agriculture and projected population growth.

In order to address these issues, the Task Force developed a list of proposed actions that state, local and federal governments, and the private sector can implement.

All proposed action items were unanimously supported by all members of the task force, with the exception of conservation easements. A few members of the task force had concerns with the structure and appropriateness of conservation easements.

## *Action Summary*

### **The 2011 Agriculture Sustainability Task Force proposes the following:**

#### Policy Statement:

Prime, important and unique agricultural lands and soils are the most important lands for sustaining life. The value of these lands surpasses the value of wetlands, lands that are home to sensitive species, and nearly every other conceivable use, and should be conserved for our food security needs.

#### Proposed Actions:

##### **State**

- Develop legislative policy that provides protection for important agricultural land and soils over wetlands in order to sustain food security.
- Fund conservation easement legislation that gives priority to important productive agricultural lands with prime soils or important farmlands. Dedicate greenbelt rollback monies to conservation easements or other productive agricultural uses within the counties where rollback funds are generated. Enable local conservation districts to make recommendations to county commissions related to the use of annual rollback funds.
- Provide new monies to the LeRay McAllister fund to provide matching funds for conservation easements on productive agricultural lands with prime or locally-important soils.
- Create a separate greenbelt designation for smaller-acreage productive operations.
- Amend Utah law to fund mitigation of agriculture lands lost to eminent domain.
- Amend Utah law to encourage energy producers to use directional drilling and other techniques to minimize the surface impacts on agricultural lands caused by energy development.
- Provide a \$1,000,000 increase in general fund money for invasive species mitigation, especially weed control.
- Consider other sources of funding for weed control tied to the spread of weed seeds: these could include funds earned from unclaimed property, trailer licenses, noxious weed impact fees from recreational ATVs, gravel pit fee assessments; a portion of the sportsmen fees gathered by the Utah Department of Natural Resources and other sources.
- Provide \$1,000,000 of on-going state funding to increase landscape-scale coordinated resource management planning. Where feasible, this money will facilitate the development of grazing management plans, and fund watering facilities, fencing improvement, and weed control to complete these grazing improvement plans.
- Augment existing funding or develop alternative funding sources to improve and update irrigation system technologies.
- Enhance the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Big Game Depredation program to mitigate crop and other damages caused by big game to farm and ranch land.

##### **Utah Department of Agriculture and Food**

- Increase the capacity of the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food to directly participate in the planning of state and local infrastructure needs when agricultural lands are an issue.
- Work with the Governor's Office of Economic Development to improve local processing capacity.
- Develop incubator kitchens in each county to provide small-scale agricultural start-ups with a place to test new products.

### **Local**

- Create local zoning options that recognize the importance of agriculture to the citizens of Utah and protect agricultural land uses from unwanted encroachments.
- Propose that local governments develop specialized local food security plans to work toward these goals.

### **Federal**

- Encourage the federal government to eliminate subsidies for agricultural products diverted from the food supply for energy production.
- Urge the federal government to allow greater state agricultural environmental stewardship oversight, in the manner of the historical educational, voluntary programs of the USDA, Conservation Districts, and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.
- Create federal block grants to fight invasive species on federal and state lands.
- Pass a resolution calling on Congress to create a new national agriculture guest worker program.
- Support federal legislation to provide funding for improved agriculture irrigation infrastructure.

### **Call To Action-under the leadership of UDAF**

(Engage partners, education institutions, agriculture support groups and other interested parties)

- Update the inventory of invasive species in Utah and more clearly define the role of county weed boards in statute and identify and prioritize weed control measures.
- Establish outreach and education campaigns to inform the public about how to minimize the spread of invasive species.
- Improve agricultural product distribution capacity by supporting the existing *Utah's Own* program to provide:
  - ◇ Incentives and/or legislation to encourage local stores, restaurants, school lunch programs, state agencies, and other public sector services to buy Utah products first, (when available);
  - ◇ Provide a fund for central distribution points to purchase local Utah agricultural products;
  - ◇ Promotion of innovative agricultural practices and products in our partnerships with food buying groups, restaurant groups and emerging businesses.
- Increase the funding and effectiveness of predator control, and allot reasonable and sufficient compensation to agricultural producers for wildlife impacts that may disrupt agricultural production.
- Support Utah House Bill 116: an ample, sustainable and legal workforce is critical for our farms and ranches.
- Oppose using E-verification until federal guest worker laws are in place.
- Work with Utah State University (USU) and farm support groups to develop and implement business planning and farm transfer programs that will complement retirement and insurance programs for current farmers and ranchers. Support efforts to match farmers without identified successors with young farmers who are seeking opportunities to purchase or lease farms or ranches. Encourage the financial community to finance farm ownership transfer for continued agricultural production.
- Work with conservation districts in a statewide effort to map all Utah irrigation systems. Educate the general public about the irrigation needs of agriculture and the benefits of well-maintained irrigation delivery systems.