

American Farmland Trust Supports Family Farming

(Continued from Page A1)

took 35 years to accomplish legislative support.

He told them that the farmland preservation momentum has grown and it's almost to the point of becoming a household topic and concern.

"We're just about to the point where we can stop pushing the snowball and let it go," he said.

However, he also told them that while the various current programs used to preserve farmland need to be continued and made stronger, "We have to take it to another level."

That level, he said, is to link farmland preservation to the values that the general public places on high-risk farmland.

Preservationists need to look beyond the real, but often repeated arguments to preserve farmland in order to preserve local security of food and fiber.

He said that they need to discover new ways to negotiate new types of agreements between social and community needs and wants, and farmer and landowner needs.

He said that those involved with farmland preservation efforts need not be discouraged if the general public doesn't identify with the security that local farms provide in terms of availability of safe, healthy food and fiber.

Instead, he said that the general public needs to be educated to the other aspects of farmland preservation that provide community well-being — watershed protection, recreation, wildlife protection, and aesthetic beauty (which could well be considered a poorly defined requirement for community mental health).

He said that while there is growing sentiment against the concept of "corporate farming," the general public continues to hold a high regard for the American family farmer.

So, while the reasons for preserving farmland may be different between farmers and nonfarmers, the goal is the same.

That should be recognized, he said, and used to every extent possible to help develop new and more creative strategies and solutions to the problems confronting the preservation of farmland.

He said that they should look to join efforts with some non-traditional areas and organizations to secure farmland protections.

He said the group has to consider that "farmland protection is a symptom of a larger problem."

That larger problem he said is increased competition for natural resources, not only caused by increases in population, but through less efficient uses of placing people on land.

Grossi said the problem is not going away. He supported his statement with population growth projections, as well as with examples of how urban sprawl, cluster developments, and large lot zoning restrictions have actually allowed some stagnant and shrinking populations to occupy up to 50 percent more land than previously occupied.

He said that generally he believes that farmers are environmentalists and desire to be good stewards, but that society at large in America tends to place the burden upon resource (land) owners to provide additional services beyond what the farming business supplies.

He said it has to be recognized that some farmers are reluctant to

participate in any type of preservation program because of the restrictions being placed upon them to provide free services to the non-farming population, such as recreation, etc.

There are also fears that farmers have in doing some environmentally beneficial activities, he said, such as encouraging wildlife, which could potentially result in a farm becoming a host to an endangered species and then having further restrictions placed upon farming operations.

He said at the same time there are also efforts to pressure farmers to provide more at their own cost and the landowners are getting squeezed from both ends.

That is where the farmland preservation people need to explore new thinking and agreements. They need to have access to information of programs that can work in certain situations and be ready to provide negotiating services, and to educate and convince the public and legislators that farmers and landowners need to be compensated in some way for providing additional public services.

According to Grossi, the opportunity for bringing farmland preservation efforts to the national forefront seems to be tied into the next Farm Bill.

He said that at least a healthy portion of the \$6 billion spent on farm support that is to be phased out according to the 1996 Farm Bill should be redirected back into agriculture, not for wasteful short-term price manipulations, but to pay for all the additional services the public wants from landowners.

He said wetlands programs, stream buffer programs, stream-bank fencing, and other such programs need to be funded to help protect the land from overdevelopment. The public can't expect landowners to foot the bill by themselves for the benefit of the public.

He urged the group to focus efforts on convincing legislators to take some action to redirect those funds for preservation-effective programs, not social welfare.

The entire farmland protection issue is hampered because it is attempting to become a common vision in an unfocused kaleidoscope of government and social programs, many at odds with each other.

The farmland preservation environment is complex.

While it is generally recognized by the agricultural community that the best way to preserve farmland is for farming to have substantial enough returns on investment to make it a competitive enterprise versus shorter term, high profit uses, such as residential and commercial development, that recognition means nothing if it can't be used to be more competitive with non-agricultural land uses.

Adding to the problem heavily is that agricultural enterprises around the world are competing with local low-profit farms, producing the same crops under different circumstances.

While it is possible that the same investment/return ratios and regulatory concerns that rule agricultural production here may eventually even out around the world (as other communities around the world develop similar standards for production), it can be assumed that time will run out for farmland here before that happens.

There is no turning back.

Once deep-soiled lands currently used for farmland are converted

for any other purpose, such as to site residential properties, it does not return to agricultural production.

The cost of creating land with the soil structure and characteristics suitable for farming is prohibitively expensive.

Also, those aware of the need to preserve farmland should be keenly aware that a purely capitalistic system of valuation gives little respect to common resources.

The simple capitalistic valuation principle is that only a commodity in short supply has the most value.

Cold War-inspired fear of the word "socialism" belies the fact that the only reason for a government is to provide communities with commonly shared necessities of life.

The trend has been that, as those necessities (real or imagined) increase, the demands upon landowners have been increased.

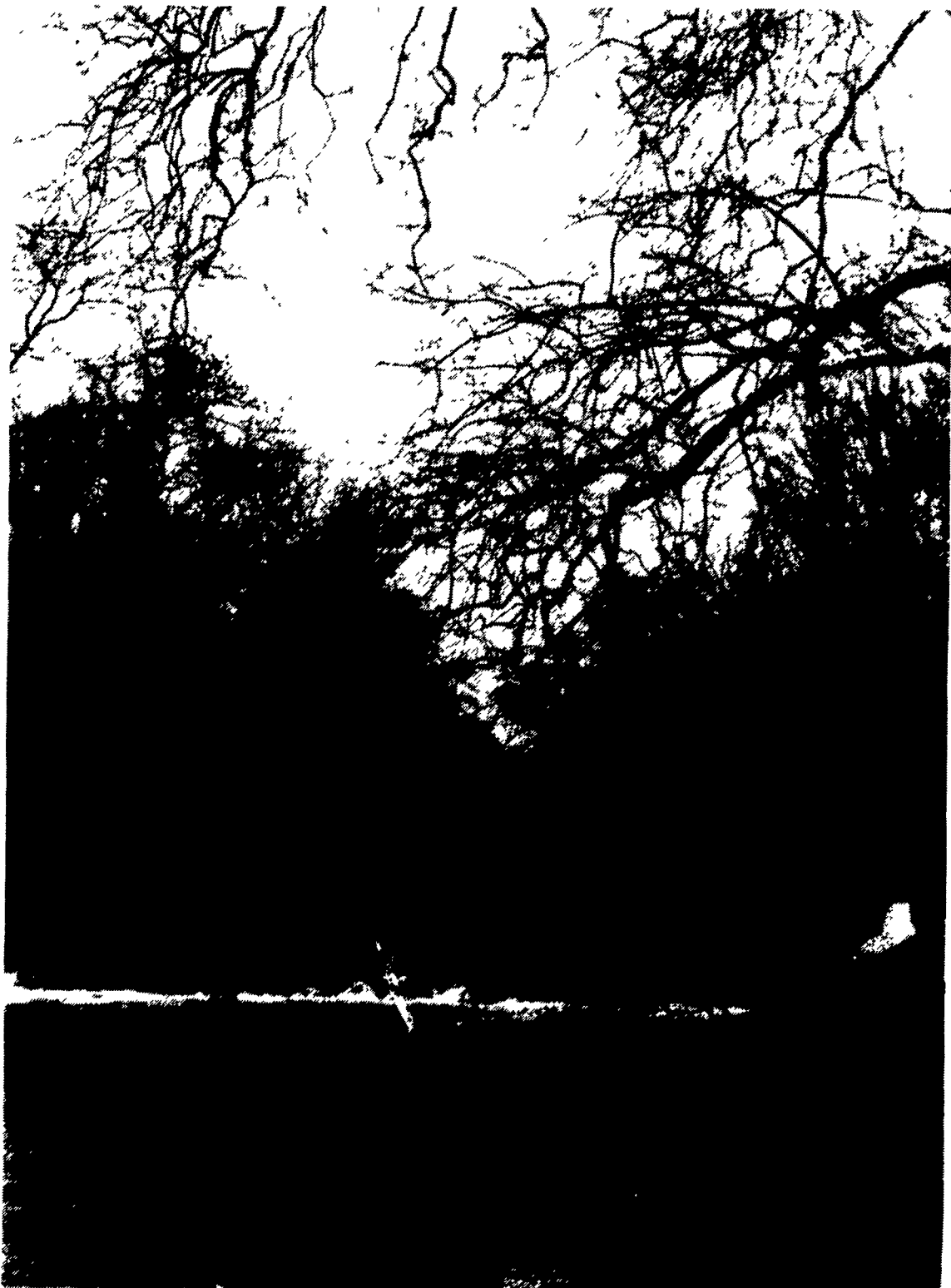
In other words, while democratically derived mandates have been placed upon landowners, those who desire those mandates haven't been willing to fund the changes necessary to achieve it.

That has to change, according to Grossi and others.

(Turn to Page A41)



From the left, Robin Sherman, communications specialist with American Farmland Trust, stands with Ralph Grossi, president of the organization, and Raymond Pickering, director of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Bureau of Farmland Protection.



To fly fishermen around the world who fish for trout, this "Allenberry" stretch of the Yellow Breeches Creek near Boiling Springs is a famous, frequently visited and used site. While it may seem strange to mix farmland preservation with what some consider an elitist outdoor activity, it isn't, according to American Farmland Trust President Ralph Grossi. It is at the heart of what the general public expects from farmland preservation — conserved resources, watershed protection and recreational and aesthetic opportunities. The American Farmland Trust selected the Allenberry Resort as the site for its first regional convention held in Pennsylvania.