A Summary of Policy Implications for Agriculture
Blaine House Conference on Natural Resource Industries[1]

I. Assuring Access to the Natural Resource Base

A. Water Development

A comprehensive program that assists farmers to develop appropriate water supplies without compromising the access of other essential water users, and to adopt efficient water-use technologies. The program requires technical assistance and grant and loan funding. Identified Federal financial sources should be accessed.

B. Farmland Protection

Initiating and expanding long-term and mid-term farmland protection programs to assure farmers have access to an essential land base.

C. Right to Farm

Evaluating the current program with potential to place it within farmland protection context.

II. Promoting a Vital Local Agriculture

A. Development Program

Constructing a comprehensive development program to achieve the promise of a vital local agriculture system that serves farmers, the environment and the community together. The program requires technical assistance as well as grant and loan resources and authorities.

B. Identity Preserved Product Marketing

Helping farmers access premium market segments by developing products with preferred consumer characteristics. The program should offer technical as well as financial resources.

III. Supporting Human Resource Development

A. Accessing adequate seasonal labor

Assisting farmers to fill essential seasonal labor needs.

B. Health Care

Assisting farmers to finding affordable health care for themselves and their workers

C. New Farmers, New Farming

Enhanced beginning farmer program with new initiative for new farming systems.

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[1] Summary of results of comments on a draft agriculture paper for the BHC-NRI and a meeting hosted by the Agriculture Commissioner Spear on 9/8/03.

Policy Implications for Agriculture
Blaine House Conference on Natural Resource Industries[2]

A number of State policies are essential if agriculture is to continue its contribution to the economic, environmental, and community vitality of Maine. These policies are organized under four comprehensive initiatives: (1) assuring access to the natural resource base, (2) promoting a vital local agriculture, (3) enhancing identity preserved product marketing, and (4) supporting human resource development.

I. Assuring Access to the Natural Resource Base.

Maine agriculture cannot continue to contribute to the well being of the people of the State without reasonable and assured access to its historical natural resource base. Many of those resources, especially land and water, are being lost to agricultural use from unintended policies, waste and neglect. Four policy directives are needed to assure that these resources are wisely used in agriculture for the benefit of the people of Maine.

A. Water Development – assuring access to and efficient use of water for agricultural vitality. Only a couple decades ago irrigation was an added bonus to provide increased security for some Maine farmers. Today, it is essential to the viability of many Maine farms. At the same time, competing uses add increasing demand for water resources. Adequate water supplies are now recognized as essential to the habitat of a number of species and for providing visual and recreational amenities for many Maine residents and tourist visitors. Water sources that do not compromise the value of water for other uses must be found for agricultural use, and farmers must find ways to use water with maximum efficiency.

Maine needs a comprehensive agricultural water development and management program that provides assistance to develop farm water supplies and efficiency in its use. An agricultural water development program should include technical assistance, cost-share grants and revolving loans for both developing water supplies and in distribution (irrigation technology). The Maine Department of Agriculture has made a good start with its water development grant program funded by State bonds. That program needs to be expanded to include grants and loans for efficient irrigation systems and loans for water source development and technical assistance for the farmer. Substantial Federal funds should be leveraged for efficient water distribution. The Department's program to date has convincingly documented the need for this more comprehensive proposal.

B. Farmland Protection – assuring long-term access to an adequate supply of farmland for Maine farmers. Despite previous efforts in farmland protection, an increasing number of Maine farmers are dependent on a land base they do

[2] Results of comments on a draft agriculture paper for the BHC-NRI and a meeting hosted by the Agriculture Commissioner Spear on 9/8/03.

not control and that is exposed to the vagaries of a land market that works against the continuation of a viable Maine agriculture. As our residential and seasonal populations continue to move into farming's space, there is need for a more comprehensive approach to assure that Maine farmers have a reasonable access to an adequate land base.

An agricultural land policy should establish a goal representing the number of acreage under permanent protection and a menu of programs to achieve that goal. These might include a more aggressive development right purchase program and, in areas of heavy development pressure, a development right transfer program.

The State should also consider less permanent programs, like agricultural districts where farmers contract to leave their land undeveloped for a number of years in exchange for receiving certain benefits such as property tax reduction, increased protection from nuisance suits, and priority access to a number of agricultural programs. Federal funds, like the Conservation Reserve Program, can be leveraged to support these kinds of efforts.

In the shorter term, the effectiveness of the Farmland and Open Space program should be evaluated to determine if changes to it, including reimbursement to municipalities for reduced property tax revenues, would better achieve desirable benefits.

B. Right to Farm – assuring farmers the right to practice best management practices. Sprawl and other development pressures have brought new neighbors into farming areas. While some inevitable conflicts have been resolved with the current Right to Farm program, that program needs review and possible revision, with the potential of placing it in the context of an agricultural district program described above.

II. Promoting a Vital Local Agriculture

Support farmers serving Maine families and visitors with a Local Agriculture Development Program. Maine farmers providing food and food services to Maine consumers, either directly or through the existing marketing system, offer impressive growth potential given appropriate State policy.

A. Development Program –Transitioning to this market segment is difficult. It requires additional policy attention and has the potential to serve a number of Maine farmers, while maintaining open space for the enjoyment of Maine residents and tourists and linking community residents and visitors and Maine farmers.

A comprehensive local agricultural development program is called for. Department resources should be increased for technical assistance, cost-share grants, and low-interest loans for those entering or transitioning to local

agriculture systems and marketing enterprises. Current programs like the Department's "Get Real, Get Maine" and "Farms for the Future" could be important components of this initiative, but local agriculture must receive targeted focus and strategic resources. The Potato Market Improvement Fund, for example, might be a good model for program development purposes. Funds should be available from a number of sources including state appropriation and bonding, private sector and revenue generating authorities.

B. Identity Preserved (IP) Product Marketing – linking the farm to the product**.** Many Maine products can achieve market access and premium prices by finding markets segmented for specific characteristics. The State of Vermont, for example, has aggressively helped their farmers develop products and access to segmented and premium markets. State assistance can support efforts to add value to raw agricultural products by further processing and to produce for premium markets. These programs fit both large and small farms, those producing for local, national or global markets. An IP Marketing program would require technical and financial assistance in both market and product development. A critical component will be third party audits to provide customers assurance of the identity preservation practices.

III. Supporting Human Resource Development– helping Maine farm families and farm workers achieve rewarding and profitable work. Three major human resource development challenges face Maine farmers: access to seasonal workers essential to the farming enterprise, affordable participation in the health care system, and attracting new farmers to Maine agriculture.

A. Accessing adequate seasonal labor. While permanent year round agricultural workers are generally available with competitive pay and benefits in most areas of the state, farmers who need seasonal employees find the system difficult to use. Migrant laborers are important seasonal workers, but the recruitment process works through federal programs that are often insensitive to the needs of Maine farmers and guest farm workers alike.

B. Health Care for farm families and farm labor. Many farmers cannot find reasonably priced medical insurance or health care services for themselves and their workers. Those needs should be considered as the Dirigo Health program is developed and implemented.

D. New Farmers, New Farming – helping beginning farmers and farmers new to the state acquire adequate resources. Maine agriculture needs new farmers. For a number of reasons it is difficult to link those wanting to enter farming with those wanting to retire or move on. Entering farmers need an adequate farmland base and the skills to manage it effectively. Programs linking entry farmers to the land and knowledge base of exiting farmers are necessary to maintain a viable agriculture in several areas of the State.