



Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services  
CHARLES H. BRONSON, Commissioner  
The Capitol • Tallahassee, FL 32399-0800

Please Respond to:

July 24, 2006

Representative Marco Rubio, Speaker Designate  
Florida House of Representatives  
The Capitol, Room 317  
402 South Monroe St  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1300

Dear Speaker Designate Rubio: *Marco*

Thank you for the opportunity to provide ideas for the **100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future** program that you and Representatives Sansom and Cannon are leading.

As you and I agreed in early May, I have met with agricultural leaders across Florida about issues the Legislature can address to assist our state's second largest industry. Among my discussions were two formal public events to develop innovative ideas for agriculture. On June 26<sup>th</sup>, Representative Bowen, Dr. Jimmy Cheek, and I co hosted a statewide meeting with leaders representing all sectors of Florida agriculture (report enclosed). Following that, on July 17<sup>th</sup> a similar discussion was held at a meeting of the Florida Soil and Water Conservation Council, a 23 member statutory advisory council to the Commissioner of Agriculture comprised of representatives from the agricultural industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Water Management Districts, the Department of Environmental Protection, the State University System, environmental organizations, and local governments.

I am very encouraged that all of my discussions have been extremely productive, identifying ideas of importance to agriculture that are directly related to critical public policy issues that the Legislature will be considering over the next six years. While there were many good suggestions worthy of further consideration, I have tried to focus on those areas having the greatest impact on the long term sustainability of Florida agriculture.

### Florida Agriculture Today

The diversity and productivity of Florida's agricultural industry is a rich part of our state's culture and history. This continues today with more than 43,000 farmers and ranchers producing 280 different crops on more than 14 million privately owned acres.



---

Florida Agriculture and Forest Products

\$62 Billion for Florida's Economy

Contributing over \$87 billion annually to Florida's economy, agriculture remains the state's second largest industry.

However, in 2006 Florida agriculture is facing enormous challenges. Many of these challenges, such as weather, markets, and international trade are issues over which the state has little control. On other issues affecting agriculture, such as tax policy, Best Management Practices to address environmental concerns and access to adequate water supplies, Florida's leaders have developed innovative laws and programs that benefit the industry. My recommendations to you strongly emphasize that these programs should be continued.

But there is much more that can be done at the state level to assist Florida agriculture in meeting future challenges and taking advantage of future opportunities. To accomplish this, my recommendations identify key actions that can be taken by the Legislature in the areas of Economic Sustainability, Growth Management, Energy Policy, and Acquisition and Management of Public Lands.

Although it is sometimes difficult for the general public to understand, agriculture is a business and, as with any business, to remain viable it must be profitable. For this reason, in the area of Economic Sustainability, my recommendations on affordable agricultural worker housing and invasive species address two high priority threats to our agricultural economy. Other recommendations for market based programs that allow agricultural landowners to receive income for services that preserve or enhance natural resources and new tax relief will provide additional economic benefits.

Perhaps the most significant long term challenge for many sectors of Florida agriculture is the loss of agricultural lands from conversion to development or into public ownership for conservation. A current overview of state landownership is:

Land Area of Florida	34,721,280 acres	100%
Government owned Conservation Lands*	13,194,086 acres	38%
Privately owned agricultural land	14,260,000 acres	41%

\* Includes sovereign submerged lands; does not include federal, state, and local military, municipal and other non-conservation government lands

At the current rates of agricultural land conversion, development will require between 2.2 and 3 million acres of private agricultural land by 2020; in that same time period the conservation community has advocated public acquisition of an additional 2 million acres of land for preservation. Thus, all of this land needed for development and conservation, potentially as much as 5 million acres, will be permanently lost to agriculture.

Faced with these trends, Florida agriculture in the future is likely to be very different than it is today. Increasingly, agriculture, such as specialty crops, nurseries, aquaculture and animal operations, will be conducted more intensively on smaller parcels of land. Agricultural practices requiring large amounts of land, such as forestry, cattle, fruit and field crops, which have the highest natural resource value and public appeal, will be especially threatened by the irretrievable loss of the resource base.

These changes are not new, but with our state's continuing population growth and the rapid escalation in land values over the past several years, the rate of change is placing Florida agriculture in a critical situation. However, I do not believe that using government's traditional approach to "preserving" agriculture is appropriate or just. These types of efforts, based on regulation rather than incentives, have deprived property owners of the right to make reasonable decisions about the use of their land, have often negatively affected property values and hastened the conversion of land out of agriculture.

My recommendations for Growth Management are designed to build on some of the successes the state has had with the *Rural Lands Stewardship Program*, an innovative approach to new development that is market driven, respects property rights, provides choices and incentives to landowners, and can result in development patterns that accommodate agriculture and preserve natural resources. While such an approach must be based on individual choice, and will not be appropriate for all landowners and every situation, it has demonstrated success in several areas around the state. By offering choices to landowners considering transferring their land to a use other than agriculture, these innovative programs have the potential to increase the value of land, and allow development, agriculture and preservation to be driven by the market.

One of the great opportunities for Florida agriculture is due to the untenable situation the United States is facing due to reliance on imported energy supplies. With our agricultural expertise and climate, productive soils, and abundant water supplies allowing for multiple crops year around, Florida is uniquely suited to be a leader in national energy policy on bioenergy research and development, production, and use. For these reasons, recognizing Florida's inherent advantages, my recommendations on Energy Policy call for the development of a comprehensive state bioenergy program.

Finally, I know that my recommendations for Acquisition and Management of Public Lands are supported not only throughout the agricultural community, but by many members of the Legislature as well. Florida's nation leading land preservation program, based on acquiring agricultural land that has been cared for over generations, has exceeded government's ability to properly manage the public's resources.

Significantly greater use of the expertise and stewardship of private land managers can deal directly with this concern and, at the same time, provide long term opportunities for agricultural production. Similarly, if the Legislature enacts a successor land preservation program to Forever Florida, the continuance, where appropriate, of agricultural operations should be among the criteria for acquisition.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Continue Existing Programs for Agriculture**

Many people all over Florida have strongly emphasized to me that there are existing programs that are critical to the maintenance of a viable agricultural industry in Florida, are significant for the availability and protection of water and natural resources, and should receive continued support from the Legislature.

- Classification and assessment of agricultural land (greenbelt). Chapter 193, F.S.
- Sales tax exemptions for agriculture. Chapter 212, F.S.
- Research, development, and implementation of agricultural best management practices for water quality protection and water conservation, including agricultural practices associated with the restoration of Lake Okeechobee and protection of the Suwannee River. Chapters 201, 373, 403, 576 and 597, F.S.
- The Water Protection and Sustainability Program for development of alternative water supplies. Chapters 373 and 403, F.S.
- Long duration agricultural water use permits. Chapter 373, F.S.
- Research for new crops to diversify agricultural production

#### **New Legislative Initiatives**

##### Economic Sustainability – reduce expenses, increase return

- Develop a state incentive program, linked to federal initiatives, for adequate and affordable housing for agricultural workers.
- Develop a fully funded comprehensive program for control of invasive plants, animals, insects, microorganisms and diseases.

- Develop market-based mitigation bank type programs for water quality treatment, preservation of uplands that support sustainable agriculture, and beneficial storage of excess water on private land.
- Expand agricultural sales tax exemptions to apply to all agricultural production inputs and provide tax relief for agricultural structures built for environmental enhancement.

Growth Management Policies – sustain agricultural land, protect natural resources

- Provide seed funding to expand the use of the *Rural Lands Stewardship Program* under Chapter 163, F.S., or other similar stewardship programs. If landowners choose to use these types of optional programs on 20% of Florida's agricultural lands that are remaining to be developed, over the next 20 years the result could accommodate development needs for 1.3 million residents, preserve 1.4 million acres of important natural resources and 1.2 million acres of agricultural land through an incentive based market driven program.
- Fund individual agricultural easements under the Rural and Family Lands Protection Act established in Chapter 570, F.S.

Energy Policy – Florida agriculture as a leader in national energy policy

- Develop a comprehensive Florida Bioenergy program which would:
  - ✓ Implement a comprehensive farm to fuel initiative to enhance the market for and promote the production and distribution of renewable energy and conduct an information and education program to educate the general public about the benefits of renewable energy.
  - ✓ Support research to identify which crops will be most effective for energy production, improve the efficient conversion of waste materials and invasive plants into energy, and document the environmental benefits of growing energy crops.
  - ✓ Provide incentives to promote the production and use of renewable energy and biofuels from agricultural products and wastes.

Representative Marco Rubio, Speaker Designate  
July 24, 2006  
Page 6

Acquisition and Management of Public Lands – agricultural stewardship of natural resources

- Provide for increased private sector management of public lands, following the “Babcock Ranch Approach”, to allow greater use of compatible agricultural operations as a land management strategy.
- For any successor public land acquisition program to Forever Florida, provide that land supporting sustainable agriculture will be eligible for acquisition.

If you have questions about any aspect of Florida agriculture or any of these recommendations, please call me directly. I appreciate your recognition of the important contributions Florida agriculture makes to our state’s economy and environment, value your commitment to support Legislative actions that will help agriculture continue to provide these benefits to our citizens in the future, and look forward to meeting personally with you to explore these ideas in more detail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles H. Bronson".

CHARLES H. BRONSON  
Commissioner of Agriculture

Enclosure

cc: Representative Marty Bowen  
Dr. Jimmy Cheek