

A Chance to be Listened To

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September 7, 2006

In the past month, the Bush Administration has been conducting public “listening sessions” across the county to solicit and exchange ideas on incentives, partnership programs, and regulations that can improve results and promote cooperative conservation and environmental partnerships. In addition to the Department of Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency, the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce and the White House Council on Environmental Quality are sponsoring the sessions.

The Administration considers these sessions to be a critical element of ongoing efforts to develop widespread support for administrative improvements to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and regulatory streamlining. These sessions provide us all the opportunity to ensure that our concerns with the ESA and other environmental regulations have been heard and to ensure that the actions taken by the Administration reflect input from farmers and ranchers who have to struggle with these regulations day-to-day.

This week, one of those sessions will take place just down the interstate in Redding. On Wednesday, September 13, U.S. Department of Agriculture Under Secretary Mark Rey will represent the Administration at a 1:00 meeting at the Cascade Theatre.

Members of the organization I work for – the Family Farm Alliance- are weighing in at these meetings in places like Spokane (WA), Redmond (OR), Pinedale (WY) and Show Low (AZ). We will have several of our members show up in Redding, as well.

Sandy Denn, an Alliance board member from Willows, will talk about the importance of having strong local stakeholder representation when federal regulatory decisions – such as ESA implementation – are being developed. Unlike paid representatives of so-called “non-governmental organizations” or government agency personnel, family farmers take time away from their occupation, having to pay someone else to cover their position on the farm. They pay their own transportation, food and lodging expenses to attend hearings and meetings, and many times they are not afforded an actual voice or “place at the table”.

While farmers like Sandy – who grows rice in the Sacramento Valley - do not expect reimbursement for attendance costs, they do expect and hope to be included as essential members of a problem-solving team in matters concerning the impacts of the ESA, National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), Clean Water Act, and the like. Many

times in these processes, hearings are held and local input is purely perfunctory as required by law. Sandy and others like her feel that their futures are at stake, and that they need to have actual and meaningful input to the processes.

Serge Birk is environmental director for the Central Valley Project (CVP) Water Association, an organization of water users that also belongs to the Family Farm Alliance. Serge's organization is encouraged by the Commerce Secretary's efforts to provide regulatory assurances for private landowners who undertake conservation measures on their own land. He believes this strategy can be employed in California with CVP diverters. Currently, federal agency efforts to partner with irrigators to evaluate and monitor fish screen efficacy in the Central Valley have stalled because of inability to provide regulatory assurances to voluntary participants.

Bill Kennedy, another Alliance director from the Upper Klamath Basin, will provide testimony at the Redding meeting similar to what he presented in Redmond, Oregon two weeks ago. At that meeting, Kennedy challenged the federal government to grapple with a difficult task.

"The Interior Department has an important direction to take in the next few years," he told the Bush Administration representatives in Redmond, which included Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne. "Experience of people like those of you at this listening session is vanishing. As the land managers who have built collaboration retire and go fishing, Interior hires more biologists and specialists that do not have a clue where the water will flow after 5:00 PM on Friday. Interior needs to replace those that innovate and care for the relationships created today with similar individuals, capable and dedicated to our nation's needs."

Hopefully, the Administration will listen to guys like Bill, who runs a ranch up in Poe Valley. I, for one, believe they will.

Your voice needs to be heard in Redding, where you will have the ear of one of the most influential appointees in the Bush Administration. I will be there, as will Sandy, Serge, Bill and others from my organization, advocating for common sense approaches to water and habitat issues that affect Western farmers and ranchers.