

**STATEMENT OF ISAAC KERSHAW  
BEFORE THE SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING  
JUNE 21<sup>st</sup> 2007**

Good morning Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Special Committee on Aging. My name is Isaac Kershaw and I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee on behalf of the National FFA Association and the National Council for Agricultural Education. Today, I'd like to share with you our insight regarding issues associated with aging farmers and ranchers and the challenges facing young people who have a desire to enter production agriculture.

The retirement of aging baby boomers and the graying of American farmers rightly raise significant questions: Who will farm the land? Will we have enough young people willing to enter the field in the future? Will they be successful? Who will prepare them?

Those familiar with agricultural education know there are currently more than a million students in our public schools preparing for careers in agriculture, food and natural resource industry areas. A half million of them are members of the FFA, an organization dedicated to developing the potential of students for leadership, personal growth and career success as an integral part of agricultural education. A rising FFA membership is at the highest point in 28 years and suggests increasing interest by students in agricultural careers. Some 12,000 teachers in 7,200 schools work with these students every day, helping them discover their talents, explore opportunities in agriculture and channel their efforts for career preparation. It's a system that has served generations of the nation's farmers and ranchers, and today it is bringing the best and brightest to agriculture.

Agricultural education programs are designed to create awareness of opportunities in agriculture, motivate students to begin their preparation for a lifelong career in agriculture, and prepare them with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher education and on the job. Students explore careers and begin to understand that 21st century agriculture is a global enterprise based in science, which demands continued growth in discovery and application. Many of these young students choose to pursue careers in farming and ranching. Many others take a different path to an agricultural career, but all are related to the science, business and technology of agriculture. All are tied to food, fiber, fuel and natural resource management.

Plant and animal sciences serve as the foundation body of knowledge for these programs. Students will understand the marketing, processing and distribution systems that support production. Resource management is taught through agricultural education and is critical to success in establishing and managing the business of a complex enterprise. Individuals who plan for a career in production agriculture need strong academic knowledge and skills. Quality agricultural education programs integrate science, math, communication, business and technology into the curriculum and treat these academic competencies as critical for success in college and on the job.

I submit we have an ideal system in place to produce the results we seek. Agricultural education and FFA have the ability to attract, motivate and help prepare the next generation of agricultural leaders, managers, scientists and producers. But we will best serve the interests of agriculture and the nation if we dramatically expand the reach of this program to more of the nation's high schools.

The agricultural education community is in the process of implementing a plan of action designed to significantly increase the number and quality of agricultural science programs in this country. Working under the direction of the National Council for Agricultural Education, we have adopted a long-range goal to increase the number of programs from 7,200 today to 10,000 by the year 2015. This ambitious effort is viewed as a key strategy for attracting the talent and commitment of those who will keep American agriculture thriving and productive.

We know that significant financial resources are necessary for young men and women to enter careers in production agriculture. It will require a comparable investment in education for them to acquire the knowledge tools necessary to be successful. This should be seen as a great and necessary investment in our national future.

The focus of the Special Committee on Aging, to facilitate an effective transition to a new generation of agricultural producers, is timely and critical. The more students we get through the educational pipeline, the greater the number prepared to successfully fill the shoes of the farmers and ranchers who precede them. But we need help with this endeavor. We need more research. We need program innovation. We need more investment through education and agriculture appropriations. We need language in the Farm Bill and in educational policy that strengthens the role of agricultural education and FFA in securing the future agriculture base of the nation. There is a real opportunity for the Federal Government to take an active role as we move forward with the initiatives of having 10,000 quality programs by 2015.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today on behalf of the National FFA Association and the National Council for Agricultural Education to express our views. I appreciate your public service and wish you success in your deliberations.