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Agriculture Can Work in Alaska

Agriculture is one of the great bright spots in Alaska's future. The development of commercial and subsistence agriculture means jobs in the rural communities and lower food costs. Most importantly, this renewable-resource industry has the potential of breaking the boom-bust cycle our economy has experienced for so many years.

Throughout Alaska's history, there have been different attempts to build a large-scale, commercial agricultural industry, but these attempts have fallen short. If we have learned anything from these hard lessons, it is that to get our industry going we must focus on large commercial markets, including those in foreign countries. With commercial agriculture will come community development, transportation systems and processing facilities that will make subsistence and small-scale farming more economic.

Officials in the State of Alaska, the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Station scientists, and the individual "pioneer" farmers have made a great commitment as evidenced by projects in the Matanuska Valley and Delta and the planned ones in Nenana and Mackenzie Point. While the federal government has not been actively involved in the past, there are several things that can be done on the federal level.

The foremost task is the settlement of the Alaskan lands legislation. Conveyance of title of State and Native lands will facilitate the transfer of as much agricultural land as possible into private ownership. Currently, 15 million acres or 80 percent of the high potential agricultural lands have been withdrawn under the President's monument action, primarily in the Yukon Flats. We want to change those designations so agricultural use will be compatible with the environmental protection needed in those areas.

I am urging the various agencies in the federal government to provide initial subsidies for the development of transportation systems, equipment and processing facilities. After all, other agricultural states went through a period of federal support several decades ago.

We hope to provide some federal monies to establish effective research programs. I have put into next year's budget \$1.6 million to be used over the next five years for special USDA soil and water conservation research, because data collected in other states does not apply to our unique soil and climate. Additionally, we are working to establish a cooperative agreement between the USDA and the State to manage and direct the federal research effort into priority areas, and reverse the trend of cutbacks in the USDA funds.

One of our major jobs down here is to clear up misconceptions about Alaskan agriculture among the various agencies that provide support for agricultural projects. We plan to invite several members of Congress and USDA officials to Alaska at the end of this summer to observe our operations first hand.

Agriculture is the kind of business in which our efforts will pay off in 10-15 years, but we cannot give up. If we wait 5 years, it will be that much longer and the problems will be that much harder to solve. Substantial problems are going to arise, but these must be acknowledged and dealt with effectively if we are to succeed.