Gov. Rick Perry’s Remarks To The Farm Bureau

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Wednesday, September 15, 2004

Thank you Kenneth Dierschke for those kind words and for the leadership that you are providing this great organization. It’s always good to stand with friends and fellow Texans who share my farming background, the traditions and heritage that make Texas great, and the commitment to keeping agriculture a cornerstone of our state’s economy.

It’s been a few years since I lived and worked on my family’s West Texas cotton farm, but I’ve never forgotten the values I learned there: hard work before leisure, family before self, and faith and freedom before all of those things. Those values are enduring, and I am proud that they are still the glue that holds together many rural communities across Texas today.

Farming and ranching shaped me, and the values it taught continue to guide me. And though many talk about a new frontier involving information technology, the old frontiers of agriculture and energy production remain an important foundation of our economy in the 21st Century. In fact, farming and ranching is the second largest industry in Texas, employing one in five working Texans. The impact made by Texas farmers and ranchers is astounding.

Texas has more cattle than Pennsylvania has people. Texas farms and ranches occupy three times as much land as the entire state of Florida. We lead the nation in the production of cotton, hay, cattle and calves, sheep and lambs, and wool and mohair. And because of a certain university on the Brazos River, we also lead the nation in the production of cloned sheep, cloned cats, and maroon carrots.

I know that when there is a level playing field, Texas farmers and ranchers can complete with anyone in the world. That’s why I was the first statewide official to endorse NAFTA in the early 1990’s, and that’s why I continue to support measures that will tear down barriers to international trade and economic progress for Texas agriculture. We export more than $2.6 billion in agriculture products across the globe each year, with 40% of that total headed to Mexico. Free trade is benefiting Texas farmers and ranchers, the entire Texas economy, and our friends on the other side of our border. But trade must be a two-way street, and that means roadblocks to trade should be minimized. I believe the current restrictions imposed by Mexico on foreign cattle are against the spirit of NAFTA, and I will continue to advocate for the lifting of this ban.

Free trade is only possible when we have fair trade. Fair dealing among trading partners benefits all sides. That’s why I have, and will continue, to strongly reiterate that Mexico needs to fulfill its obligations under the 1944 Water Treaty by releasing the water it owes Texas growers in the Rio Grande Valley. Because we have continued to
engage in diplomacy with federal and state officials on both sides of the border, and received some help from Mother Nature, Mexico has transferred to our farmers in the Rio Grande Valley a full year’s supply of water in time for the planting season earlier this year. This represents the most progress on the water issue we have seen in more than a decade.

At the same time, I remain very concerned that a long term solution to treaty issues continues to elude us. We want a solution that is dependent on more than the generosity of Mother Nature, we want it written in stone. I believe that Mexico has the capability to fully pay off its water debt today, and I will continue to be a forceful advocate for Texas farmers and ranchers on this issue.

These days you hear a lot of talk about how America needs to decrease its dependence on foreign oil. I’m all for that, especially if it means greater dependence on Texas oil. But as we strive for energy independence, we must also have a policy of water independence. Today groundwater provides 58 percent of the water we use in Texas. Surface and aquifer water have been the main sources for Texas for generations. These sources, though rechargeable, are still limited. And alone they cannot sustain the population growth we anticipate over the next several decades.

That’s why we have aggressively looked to expand our sources of potable water, investing in desalination technologies that can take the pressure off current groundwater and surface water sources. Texas took a little noticed but important step in 2003, by providing the first seed money for the study and implementation of three seawater desalination projects. To me, these three projects in Brownsville, Corpus Christi, and Freeport are the first small steps toward realizing one big idea that can transform our future: making seawater a new source of potable water in millions of Texans homes.

This vision, which I first shared with Texans in 2002, has the potential to be realized in just a few years. and certainly in time for the next generation of Texans and before our population doubles over the next few decades. If our large cities can turn to the ocean for water, rural Texas will have less competition with its bigger neighbors for the use of aquifers, streams and lakes. And I will continue to work with the legislature to find new ways to ensure that all Texans, including Texas farmers and ranchers, have access to the fresh water they need, while respecting the rights of property owners. I believe in local control of local water resources, and I believe a transaction needs not only a willing buyer, but a willing seller too.

A year and half ago, in the midst of some very tough economic times and budgetary decisions, Texas came to a crucial crossroads: we could have asked families and employers to pay more so government didn't have to do with less. But we took a different path, the path to fiscal responsibility, balancing our budget without raising taxes, and without adding to the burden of Texas families.

The critics said we couldn’t overcome a $10 billion budget shortfall without raising taxes. We proved them wrong. Today, those same critics are saying that we can’t provide meaningful property tax relief and keep our commitment to funding public education. We will prove them wrong once again.

My commitment is the same as it always has been: I believe we can reform our school finance system, improve education funding, and reduce the property tax burden on the people of Texas. And we can do all this without a job-killing tax hike in its place, or even better, without a personal income tax. We can fund our schools and other priorities without asking Texans to pay 10 percent more a year in property taxes. And I believe we can and should do it without placing a greater burden on Texas farmers and ranchers.

That’s why I support maintaining current agricultural property valuations for property tax purposes and the current agriculture exemptions for sales taxes. We must not only cut property taxes, we must control them too. And I look
forward to working with you in the next legislative session to lower property taxes and make sure that the goal of homeownership remains within reach not only for this generation, but for the generations to come as well.

Let me say that I appreciate all the work the Farm Bureau does to keep the Texas economy strong and to make sure that farmers and ranchers have a strong voice in the Texas capitol. I respect your hard work because I know what your labor of love requires, and I know what your contributions mean for our rural communities, and our way of life. Texas farmers feed and clothe the world, contribute billions to our economy, and continue the Texas tradition of hard work and sacrifice, values that must endure if our children are to prosper.

I look forward to once again rolling up my sleeves and working together with you in the coming months to make sure that Texas continues to be the top agricultural state in the nation.

Thank you, may God bless you and the work you do, and may God bless Texas.