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Moving Toward a Bio-Based Economy

Today, a college football player may just as likely get a facemask full of soy turf instead of natural grass. In the past five years, industrial uses of U.S. soy have increased 50 percent. During that time, many major college and professional sports programs have adopted a soy-based artificial turf over labor-intensive grass or the petroleum-based turfs of yesteryear.

When Kansas State University needed to improve playing surfaces at its football and baseball fields, it turned to fields of a different kind - soybean fields - for a green solution. The university installed approximately five acres of AstroTurf with a soy-based backing. Currently there are sports teams in 42 states across America competing on more than 900 acres of soy-backed AstroTurf.

This is, in essence, how a bio-based economy takes shape.

There are more than 3,000 companies producing more than 20,000 bio-products made from grasses, grains, oilseeds, and agricultural waste, rather than petroleum. The products are common things like detergent, bed linens, ink, fertilizer, and disposable cutlery. These cutting-edge innovations will help us break our dependence on foreign oil while helping to build a new industry of competitively-priced, American grown and made products. In fact, making these items employs about 100,000 Americans-many of them in rural communities-by fusing two important economic engines: agriculture and manufacturing.

At USDA, we think there is incredible potential for this industry to grow, innovate and create economic opportunity. So we have taken action to expand markets for these products. One year ago, we created a bio-based product label called USDA BioPreferred that will soon be featured on more than 500 products you can buy at a local grocery store or pharmacy. We hope the label becomes a powerful image of American ingenuity, much like our USDA organic label. Ten years have passed since USDA launched the organic label. Today, you see the organic seal on thousands of fruits, vegetables, meats or other goods at the local market, and more than two-thirds of Americans buy organic.

Bio-based products may hold even greater potential.

Last week, President Obama announced steps to encourage the federal government to dramatically increase our purchases of bio-based products. Bio-based cleaning goods and construction materials like carpet pads and insulation are grown and made in America, as are lubricants, paints, oils and paint removers used in aircraft, motor vehicles, and by the military.

As the federal government encourages use of these cost-competitive alternatives, it will mean more contracts for American businesses and more American manufacturers creating good, middle-class jobs. Of course, these options exist thanks to the ability of our farmers to drive many other sectors of the economy, including manufacturing and transportation.

Over several decades now, U.S. agriculture has become the second most-productive sector of our economy. American farmers apply the latest in technology, achieve a nearly unparalleled level of productivity, contribute to a homegrown supply of renewable energy, and are responsible for 1 out of 12 jobs here in the United States. Our farmers feed people around the globe and yet still produce enough food to keep our grocery bill among the lowest in the world. In other words, no challenge is

too great for America's farmers.

As we lay the foundation for an economy that is built to last, this effort to establish a bio-based economy will create middle-class jobs, drive innovation, reduce our dependence on foreign oil, and support incomes for farmers and ranchers.