Times have changed. No where is that more evident than in U.S. agriculture. Increasing global integration, expanding world agricultural markets, and broadening environmental priorities both at home and abroad are defining new policy challenges for the United States. Passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Uruguay Round Agreements of GATT have spurred debate about the effects that liberalizing trade might have on the environment, and these debates continue. As the 104th Congress prepares to deliberate reauthorization of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act (FACTA), more commonly referred to as the 1995 Farm Bill, the relationships among agriculture, trade, and the environment are prominent subjects.

Anticipating further debates on free trade, on FACTA, the Clean Water Act, and other policy issues related to agriculture, trade, and the environment, Congress requested this assessment to provide guidance on policies and technologies needed for U.S. agriculture to be competitive in world markets and to ensure that environmental goals are met. Committees requesting the assessment were the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; the House Committee on Agriculture; and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

This report provides information that can help align agricultural legislation with emerging needs and trends. Current policies do not ameliorate conflicts between agricultural production and environmental quality, between trade and the environment, and between agriculture and competitive trade. Opportunities for greater complementarity among these areas are possibly being missed.

Technology is integral to achieving complementarity. So often, agricultural technology has been developed for the sole purpose of increasing production with little attention to the market, environmental, or budgetary trade-offs. Unintended consequences have often been the result. Today, with the vast array of powerful scientific tools available, such as biotechnology and advanced computer technologies, it may be possible to develop technologies that incorporate multiple objectives, such as increasing production while enhancing environmental quality. Innovations in science and technology paired with future-oriented policies to guide agriculture, trade, and the environment could position the United States as a leader in world markets and in domestic environmental protection.

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