Well, thank you very much for that kind introduction, and it really is a pleasure for me to have an opportunity to spend some time with you today.

I think this is probably one of the most distinguished assemblages of folks that I've had an opportunity to spend some time with. And, after having had an opportunity, both yesterday and this morning, to talk with a number of you who have been able to participate throughout the conference, I am particularly impressed with what I am hearing about the dialogue that has taken place and the sharing of experiences and knowledge. Hopefully, in this final session, we'll be able to do some things to wrap up what has been occurring here at this conference, and more importantly, follow up as we go back to our respective jobs and respective communities to truly make some things happen.

I want to thank Mark for including me in this conference. It was interesting to talk with him this morning, both of us having grown up on farms in Indiana, knowing some of the same people back in Indiana and now across the country who are committed to rural development issues.

For those of you whom I have not had an opportunity to meet prior to this conference, I want to share with you that while I work in this job as Undersecretary of Agriculture, I continue to live in Indiana on a farm with my husband. We feel that it is very important for policy, whether it be federal or state or local, to take into account the importance of what takes place in rural communities.

This morning, I would like to talk about a couple of main issues and keep my remarks fairly short so that we have time to continue the dialogue that has begun here at this conference. But, there are two specific areas that I think are absolutely critical for rural communities to make the kind of progress that we need to in this next century. We've all been hearing, prior to this conference as well as at this conference, how the rural economy is going to continue to be dependent upon agriculture, and it's important for us to have policy that keeps agriculture as strong as it can be. But, at the same time, we have to recognize that much of the future growth and development in rural communities is going to come not only from areas related to agriculture, but also from areas that are not related to agriculture.

I would like to focus my remarks on a couple of things that I think are going to be important to production agriculture, to value added, to marketing of agriculture products, but also to other industry developing and growing in rural communities. First of all, it is very important for rural communities to be a part of strategic planning. That strategic planning has to take place at both the local and state levels.

At the Department of Agriculture, I have the responsibility for the administration of the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community initiative that a number of you are familiar with. It is an initiative that was begun by President Clinton and Vice Pres-
ident Gore. It’s based on the foundation that communities that do well and continue to do well, even in times of economic downturn, do so because they strategically plan. The people in the communities themselves work together. You have Methodists who work with Catholics who work with Lutherans. You have Democrats who work with Republicans and with independents and other political groups. Unless you have that kind of working together and that strategic planning, you’re not going to be able to move ahead.

In the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community initiative, one of the things that we have found that has been particularly gratifying is that even the communities that did not get an EZ or EC designation (that we then designated as champion communities and have continued to work with), those communities are growing and doing well and attracting funding not just from public sources, but also from the private sector. They are seeing economic growth occur, not because they have a formal relationship with the federal government, but because they are strategically planning. Their strategic planning is helping them to qualify for funding that comes from federal and state and private sources, from foundations, and so forth.

As I go around the country and talk with farmers and folks from rural communities, the one point that I make is that you really have to put your differences aside so that you can develop a strategic plan in the same way that a business does, where you set goals and then you work together toward accomplishing those goals. Then, you all work together toward accomplishing those goals.

And, equally important to the strategic planning within the community is making sure that the strategy that you put in place ties in with the larger regional economy. You can’t just isolate yourself from that larger geographic and economic community that you sit in the middle of and are a part of. So, the strategic planning has to include those types of things that affect your region, your state, and sometimes it involves crossing state lines. But, unless there is strategic planning using business approaches to development, you’re simply not going to be able to move ahead and develop sustainability and growth for the long run.

In addition to the strategic planning, the second thing that I think is absolutely critical—and I know you’ve heard a lot about this at this conference because I’ve been following through reading the papers that were presented in earlier sessions—is we have to have high-speed Internet access for rural communities.

I came here to this conference from a trip with President Clinton to Whiteville, North Carolina, where he chaired a roundtable that included a number of people from the Whiteville area. There was a discussion of the significance of having high-speed Internet access for rural communities. By high-speed Internet access, I’m talking about affordable access. As we all know, even in those rural communities where you have access, oftentimes the cost is so much greater. And therefore, families and businesses that exist in the rural communities are at a distinct disadvantage in competing with businesses that are located in metropolitan areas.

This actually, I think, ties in with the whole issue of strategic planning. We have to make sure that in each of our rural communities that we represent and that we are a part of and working with, we have to make sure that we work toward the goal of achieving affordable high-speed Internet access. But, we also need to understand that it is not going to come just because we want it to and just because we work toward it at the local level. There also has to be a commitment at the state level.

I think that what North Carolina has been doing—and I don’t know if you’ve had an opportunity to follow what Governor Hunt has been able to achieve in North Carolina—but the three major telephone companies have made a commitment to
provide affordable high-speed Internet access to all citizens and all communities of North Carolina, and I believe it is over the next three-year period. We need, all of us in our respective states, states we work in or have responsibilities for at a national level, we all need to be working with individual states to make those kinds of arrangements and agreements with the providers of Internet access.

The real value of having high-speed Internet access is that it allows us to compress time and space, which in many respects is not unlike what the interstate highway system has done—or in my case, I remember when we got a paved road. My dad often talks about getting telephone and electric service. Those things really did compress space and time, but with high-speed Internet access, you actually collapse space and time.

We are at a very critical point in time. When I was in Whiteville, North Carolina, I had an opportunity to hear a presentation from a local farm supply dealer and his wife who had been dairy farmers. Then they went into this business of supplying chemical and fertilizers and seed and so forth. Their market does not consist of just Columbus County around Whiteville, North Carolina. It includes the entire country, and he talked about how by using the Internet he is able to attract customers from all across the United States, and he made the point that he had several customers from the state of Arkansas—President Clinton's home state, of course. That particular linkup allows business to grow and thrive and provide job opportunity and economic support in that community.

One of things that I have found, as I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, is that I’ve continued to live on my farm in Indiana with my husband. One of the things that we have found is that we have fewer and fewer suppliers for running our farm operation. In many cases, where you have fairly large farms, the suppliers come from a distant place. If that distant place is a city, it helps the economic growth and sustainability of that city. But if it is in a rural community, then it helps rural America.

What I think we are going to see with the continued development of computer technology and Internet communications is new and different kinds of businesses coming into rural communities. We are going to see some businesses grow, some businesses not grow. But, what is most significant is not that a particular kind of business exists in a rural community—it is that there is that opportunity for businesses of many different types to grow and to be strong in rural communities. As we see certain suppliers and businesses go out of business in rural America, then with high-speed Internet access, we are able to attract new businesses and different kinds of businesses.

At the same time, some of those supply businesses that are strong and continue to be strong can appeal to markets outside the immediate geographic area of a particular county or a couple of counties. We have real opportunities, but we are only able to take advantage of those opportunities if we recognize that the next couple of years are going to be very, very critical because businesses are forming and developing as we speak. Because it is so critical in the next couple of years, it is very, very critical in the next several months for us to do everything that we can to ensure that rural America has high-speed Internet access immediately—not five years from now, not three years from now. It is an issue that we need to be working on right now to make it happen.

I go back to what I mentioned a couple of minutes ago, about how we all have had experiences (those of us who come from rural communities) of going from having a dirt road to a paved road. And we know what a difference that made when our road was paved and the next road over was paved. We also know what a difference it made when we got electrical service and when we had improved telecommunications service. All of those things that made a difference, that made it possible for those of
us to do the kind of things we do today, we have to ensure that we are looking to the future to make sure that the children who are growing up in rural communities across the United States have the opportunities that we have worked to create for them.

I think back to my grandparents, and I have the privilege of owning my grandparents’ farm in Indiana. If you looked at the farm, it really looks not all that different from when my grandparents lived there. It is the same house. It has a different roof, different siding. It has better electrical capability than when they first got electricity. It has a computer in it. It has a lot of appliances that were not even imagined when they lived there. But the most significant thing about the changes in that farm is the opportunity that exists for the people who live on that farm and the people that live on the neighboring farms.

So, when we talk about high-speed Internet access and the importance of having availability in rural communities—what it means to collapse time and space—we are not really talking about just high-speed Internet access. We are not just talking about collapsing time and space. We are talking about the opportunities that have to exist if rural communities are going to continue to be strong.

You know we just released a study on Wednesday, a joint study done by the USDA and the Department of Commerce. It is not surprising to anybody in this room and it wasn’t surprising to me. We are lagging behind in rural communities when it comes to Internet access. But, we can do something about it and the way we are going to make it happen is through strategic planning, working together within the communities, setting our objectives, but also working together with our state government and federal government.

I think there is nothing we can’t do in rural America, and I frankly think there’s nothing we can’t do in rural America and do it better. But, we have to make sure that we’re using the same kinds of tools that are being used in urban and suburban America, and to make sure that we’re creating opportunities for the kids who are growing up in rural America today.

This is a very distinguished group, and I think this is exactly the kind of conference that we need for all of us to go back to our respective jobs and communities and make things happen. I think that’s going to happen as a result of this conference and I’m looking forward to working with you. Thank you.