SUPPORTING FARMERS, STRENGTHENING CONSERVATION, SUSTAINING WORKING LANDS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, RESEARCH, AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

OF THE

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SUPPORTING FARMERS, STRENGTHENING CONSERVATION, SUSTAINING WORKING LANDS

THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, RESEARCH, AND BIOTECHNOLOGY,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., Room 1300, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Frank D. Lucas [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Lucas, Baird, Rose, Jackson, Newhouse, Bresnahan, Messmer, Thompson (*ex officio*), LaMalfa, Tokuda, Adams, Davids, Budzinski, Sorensen, Vasquez, Vindman, Mannion, McClain Delaney, Craig (*ex officio*), Costa, and Riley.

Staff present: John Busovsky, Laurel Lee Chatham, Sofia Jones, Joshua Maxwell, Patricia Straughn, John Konya, Suzie Cavalier, Kate Fink, Ari Perlmutter, Ashley Smith, Michael Stein, and Jackson Blodgett.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. FRANK D. LUCAS, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM OKLAHOMA

The CHAIRMAN. The Committee will come to order. Welcome and thank you for joining today's hearing entitled, *Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conservation, and Sustaining Working Lands.* After brief opening remarks, Members will receive testimony from our witnesses today and then the hearing will be open to questions.

In consultation with the Ranking Member and pursuant to Rule XI(e), I want to make Members of the Subcommittee aware that other Members of the full Committee may be joining us today.

Good morning. Welcome to today's Conservation, Research, and Biotechnology Subcommittee hearing. Today we will be examining farm bill conservation programs and hearing from a distinguished panel of witnesses from their perspectives. Title II of the farm bill authorizes a suite of conservation programs that are critical for supporting the long-term viability of farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. These programs have the dual benefit of supporting the producer and addressing pressing natural resource concerns at the local level. As we have today's discussion, hear about the programs, and discuss potential improvements, it is important that we have some context for why and how our system of farm conservation developed over many years.

The roots of our conservation system date back to the 1930s and the actions that the Federal Government took in response to the Dust Bowl. In the 19th century, the Homestead Act (Pub. L. 37–64) was enacted with the best of intentions, but it had unintended consequences. When settlers came West in search of fertile land to farm, it didn't take long for them to realize that the sandy soils in the Southern Great Plains were susceptible to erosion when unprotected, or not protected, I should say, by native vegetation. Coupled with severe drought conditions, this led to massive dust storms in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas in the 1930s. Perhaps the worst fell on April 14, 1935, a day that has become known as Black Sunday. The dust storms were so severe, their effects were felt far beyond the Southern Great Plains, gathering attention of lawmakers in Washington.

Only 13 days after Black Sunday, President Roosevelt signed legislation into law establishing the then-named Soil Conservation Service. Renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1996, the agency administers most of the farm bill conservation programs and provides technical assistance for others administered by the Farm Service Agency. Voluntary conservation practices are critically important for supporting agriculture and ensuring we don't have another Dust Bowl again. With this year marking the 90th anniversary of both Black Sunday and the establishment of the now-named NRCS, today's hearing is timely to hear more about these programs and how Congress may be able to further improve them.

We are currently in the second extension of the 2018 Farm Bill, and rural America badly needs legislation to reflect the current status of agriculture and the rural economy. This extends to conservation programs and reforms we can include to build on the progress we have made in recent farm bills. Last year's Committee-passed farm bill proposed historic new funding for conservation programs by rescinding the unobligated Inflation Reduction Act funding and reinvesting it in Title II. The House-passed reconciliation bill similarly reinvested the unobligated IRA funding into the conservation title. Reallocating those dollars would increase the title's baseline over the long-term, making it a permanent investment in conservation programs. It also allows for continued support for orphan programs, increased funding for successful programs like Small Watershed Program, and the creation of new forestry easement program.

In addition to funding, last year's bill placed an emphasis on science, technology, and innovation. The bill makes precision agriculture specifically eligible for cost-share under EQIP and CSP, requires more frequent updates to conservation practice standards, and creates an office of innovation at the Office of the Secretary. The bill streamlines RCPP, provides commonsense flexibility for ACEP, and reforms the Technical Service Provider Program. The bill also proposes a modernization of CRP and focusing the program on marginal lands by incorporating soil capacity class into rental rates for general enrollment. These are all welcome changes intended to improve program administration and make them more producer friendly.

Farm bill conservation programs have been so successful because they are voluntary, incentive based, and producer-first. The programs have also been so effective because they are locally-led, which allows for states and regions to determine the priority natural resource concerns. As we think about the next farm bill, it is important for us to keep all of this in mind. Conservation programs have been so effective because of the flexibility built into them and because we have continually encouraged the local-led process to work. I am proud of the work that this Committee has done over the past several farm bill cycles to improve the programs because we know voluntary conservation works.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lucas follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. FRANK D. LUCAS, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM OKLAHOMA

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As we have today's discussion, hear about the programs, and discuss potential improvements, it is important that we have some context for why and how our system of farm conservation developed over many years. The roots of our conservation system date back to the 1930s and the actions that the Federal Government took in response to the Dust Bowl.

In the Nineteenth century, the Homestead Act was enacted with the best intentions, but it had unintended consequences. When settlers came west in search of fertile land to farm, it didn't take long for them to realize the sandy soils in the Southern Great Plains were susceptible to erosion when not protected by native vegetation. Coupled with severe drought conditions, this led to massive dust storms in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas in the 1930s. Perhaps the worst fell on April 14, 1935, a day that has come to be known as "Black Sunday."

The dust storms were so severe that their effects were felt far beyond the Southern Great Plains, garnering the attention of lawmakers in Washington. Only 13 days after Black Sunday, President Roosevelt signed legislation into law establishing the then-named Soil Conservation Service. Renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1996, the agency administers most of the farm bill conservation programs and provides technical assistance for others administered by the Farm Service Agency.

Voluntary conservation practices are critically important for supporting agriculture and ensuring we don't have another Dust Bowl again. With this year marking the 90th anniversary of both Black Sunday and the establishment of the now-named NRCS, today's hearing is timely to hear more about these programs and how Congress may be able to further improve them.

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These are all welcomed changes intended to improve program administration and make them more producer friendly. Farm bill conservation programs have been so successful because they are voluntary, incentive-based and producer-first. The programs have also been so effective because they are locally-led, which allows for the states and regions to determine the priority natural resource concerns.

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I'd like to welcome all of our witnesses today; and thank Ranking Member Tokuda for her partnership on this hearing. With that, I yield to the Ranking Member for any opening remarks she would like to provide.

The CHAIRMAN. I would like to welcome all of our witnesses today and thank Ranking Member Tokuda for her partnership on this hearing. And with that, I yield of the Ranking Member for any opening remarks that she would like to provide.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JILL N. TOKUDA, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM HAWAII

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Good morning. *Aloha,* everyone. Thank you for being at our hearing today. As Ranking Member, I am proud to join you and our colleagues in reaffirming a shared commitment to supporting America's farmers, ranchers, and producers through smart, effective conservation policy. I also want to thank our panel of witnesses for being here today and extend an especially warm *mahalō* to Nicole Galase for traveling all the way—I think she came the farthest—all the way from Hawaii to share the perspective of food producers operating in some of the most remote and climate vulnerable parts of the country.

Now, let's begin with some common ground. USDA conservation programs work, whether it is EQIP, CSP, ACEP, RCPP, the whole alphabet soup of acronyms. These programs provide practical tools to improve soil health, manage water more efficiently, and keep operations productive and resilient, but here is the hard truth. The weather isn't what it used to be. No matter what you want to call it—climate change, extreme weather, shifting seasons—our producers are living it every day. Longer droughts, harder rains, heat waves in April, frost in May, it is getting harder to grow the food, fuel, and fiber that this country relies on, and that is not a partisan talking point. It is reality for farmers and ranchers across this country.

Programs like EQIP and CSP can help producers adapt, but they have been chronically under-funded for decades, turning away thousands of qualified farmers each year, not because the programs don't work, but because demand far exceeds supply. That is why the Inflation Reduction Act (Pub. L. 117–169) was such a turning point. The conservation investments in the IRA weren't just a budget line, they were a statement, a bold time-limited, once-in-a-generation effort to meet demand head on and finally give producers the access and the technical support they need to take on the challenges they are facing today.

Now, yes, we have seen bills that move IRA dollars into the baseline USDA conservation budget. And that is a good thing, and on the surface that might look like a step towards stability, but let us not lose sight of what made the IRA conservation funding different and powerful. The IRA wasn't about business as usual. It was about breaking the log jam. It opened the flood gates to let more farmers and more ranchers get the support they have been asking for, for many, many years, and let me be clear: this is not about left or right. It is about forward.

Whether you are in red states, blue states, purple states, or farm country, right in between, producers are not asking for politics. They are asking for access, for flexibility, for conservation tools that make their land more resilient, their water more efficient, and their operations more secure because their livelihoods, as you all know, depend on it and so does our nation's food supply. So as we move forward, whether a farm bill or broader conservation planning, let's protect not just the dollars, but the spirit behind what was in the IRA: urgency, scale and the recognition that changing conditions require bold action, not modest tweaks. So let's make sure that in the name of stability, we don't slip back into scarcity. Our producers don't need diluted promises. They need real, timely farmer-focused support because the weather is not waiting and neither should we.

I look forward to our dialogue today and to working with this Committee to continue improving the effectiveness of NRCS programs, supporting our staff, and supporting Americans' agriculture through thoughtful and innovative conservation practices. And with that, Mr. Chairman, I am looking forward to hearing from our panel, and I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Tokuda follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. JILL N. TOKUDA, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM HAWAII

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for convening today's hearing.

As Ranking Member, I'm proud to join you and our colleagues in reaffirming a shared commitment to supporting America's farmers, ranchers, and producers through smart, effective conservation policy. I also want to thank our panel of witnesses for being here, and extend a warm *mahalō* to Nicole Galase for traveling all the way from Hawai'i to share the perspective of food producers operating in some of the most remote and climate-vulnerable parts of the country.

Let's begin with common ground: USDA conservation programs work. Whether it's EQIP, CSP, ACEP, or RCPP, these programs provide practical tools to improve soil health, manage water more efficiently, and keep operations productive and resilient.

But here's the hard truth: the weather isn't what it used to be. No matter what you call it—climate change, extreme weather, shifting seasons—our producers are living it every day. Longer droughts, harder rains, heatwaves in April, frost in May—it's getting harder to grow the food, fuel, and fiber that this country relies on.

And that's not a partisan talking point. It's a reality for farmers and ranchers across America.

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I look forward to our dialogue today, and to working with this Committee to continue improving the effectiveness of NRCS programs and supporting American agriculture through thoughtful and innovative conservation practices.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady yields back. The chair now recognizes the Chairman of the full Committee for any opening comments he would like to make. Chairman Thompson.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. GLENN THOMPSON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Mr. THOMPSON. Good morning, everyone, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I know it is not easy making the trip to Washington. I really appreciate your willingness to participate in today's hearing. I also want to thank Mr. Lucas for serving as a Subcommittee Chairman at this critical time. There is no Member more capable to help navigate the vital issues of working lands conservation at this moment in time than our esteemed former full Committee chair, so thank you, Frank.

As a former Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have been proud to support these programs, and I have seen firsthand how voluntary conservation directly benefits the producer, soil and water, wildlife habitat, and so much more. Title II programs have been so successful for many reasons, fundamentally because our motto of conservation is voluntary, incentive based, and locally-led. The locally-led part is important, and we must continue to protect that aspect of the programs as we consider reforms within a new farm bill.

The Farm, Food, and National Security Act (H.R. 8467, 118th Congress) was passed by this Committee last year and contains many bipartisan priorities in its conservation title to build on the gains that we have made in recent farm bills. This includes reforms to improve the administration of RCPP, ACEP, and the Small Watershed Program. The bill encourages more innovation in the programs by requiring more frequent updates to conservation practice standards and makes precision agriculture eligible for cost-share in EQIP and CSP. It also proposed a modernization of CRP and important improvements to the technical services provider program. And while these are just some of the reforms this Committee can take to improve the administration of each program, we also have a tremendous opportunity at this Congress to bolster conservation programs over the long-term with significant new funding. The Farm, Food, and National Security Act also proposed rescinding the unobligated IRA conservation funding and reallocating it into Title II. House Republicans are now trying to provide similar reinvestment through the reconciliation process. Instead of letting the IRA funding expire, investing it would provide additional funding for the programs that we all know work and increase the baseline for the conservation title into perpetuity.

Rural America continues to face great economic challenges, and I look forward to working with all of you on strategic investments and policy updates to meet the needs of our producers and the agricultural value chain. Thank you again to our witnesses for your time today, and we look forward to hearing your testimonies and appreciate your expertise with the farm bill conservation programs. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I now recognize the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Ms. Craig, for any opening comments that she would like to make.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ANGIE CRAIG, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM MINNESOTA

Ms. CRAIG. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so pleased to be here with fellow strong advocates for conservation programs. Thank you to each of our witnesses for making time to come up to the Hill today, to share your expertise with us, and a special shout-out to Ms. Galase, who has traveled 5,000 miles to be with us here today.

Our farmers are the natural caretakers and stewards of our land. USDA's conservation programs help continue that legacy while diversifying farm income streams and helping farmers' bottom line. Conservation is essential to keeping our farm and forest lands working for generations to come. Over the last decade my state, Minnesota, has received over $875 million from Natural Resources Conservation Service programs to help producers with everything from planting cover crops and pollinator habitat to implementing reduced tillage and manure management.

For example, in my district in Rice County, conservation champions, like John and Debbie Becker, have enrolled land in the Conservation Reserve Program to protect the country's only self-sustaining trout stream, and more recently, they have used the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to fund planting cover crops. Of course, that is the county's only, not the country's only, and through the Conservation Stewardship Program, Mike and Kay Peterson have added critical area plantings of native prairie on highly-erodible end rows where erosion occurred year after year. These programs are popular because they work. Moving forward, there are some significant issues I believe we must address to get more conservation on the ground.

First, I would be remiss not to mention my significant concern with the current Administration's hollowing out of NRCS. In Minnesota alone, we have lost more than 70 dedicated NRCS employees. Without dedicated and qualified staff working from farmer service centers in rural America, these programs cannot succeed. Yet the President's budget recommends completely zeroing out conservation technical assistance, further jeopardizing our ability to implement extremely popular farm bill conservation programs like EQIP and CSP. This will hurt farmers not help them.

Second, NRCS programs remain oversubscribed. We have to protect the remaining Inflation Reduction Act conservation funding by rolling it into the farm bill baseline, and we should do it in a manner that preserves the original intent of the investment and without busting up the farm bill coalition. We must make sure that money stays in the voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs that our farmers rely on. The investments we made in conservation programs through the IRA might be a once-in-a-lifetime, and we shouldn't give up those gains. I am glad the Majority has recognized the importance and success of the IRA and joined us in trying to get this across the finish line.

Last, it has been too long since we have reauthorized a full 5 year farm bill. There are commonsense, bipartisan changes that everyone agrees need to be made. I look forward to working with my colleagues, our witnesses, and the broader conservation community to protect and improve the farm bill's conservation programs. We have a tremendous opportunity to streamline program delivery, increase incentives for producer participation, and preserve farm, ranch, and forest lands for current farmers and our children, and especially for those of us who have them, our grandchildren. Thank you Mr. Chairman and I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Craig follows:]

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I'm pleased to be here with fellow strong advocates for conservation programs. Thank you to each of our witnesses for making time to come up to the Hill and share your expertise with us. And a special shout-out to Ms. Galase for traveling nearly 5,000 miles from Volcano, Hawaii—we appreciate you making the journey to be here today.

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We have a tremendous opportunity to streamline program delivery, increase incentives for producer participation and preserve farm, ranch and forest lands for current farmers and our children and grandchildren.

Thank you and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. The chair would request that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so that the witnesses may begin their testimony and to ensure that there is ample time for questions.

Our first witness today is Mr. Russell Boening, President of the Texas Farm Bureau. Our next witness is Christopher McLeland, the Managing Director of the Agricultural Programs, Ducks Unlimited. Our third witness today is Dr. Dan Sebert, who is Senior Policy Advisor and former Executive Director of the National Watershed Coalition. Our next witness is Mr. Tim Fink, the policy director at the American Farmland Trust. And I will turn to my colleague to introduce her constituent, my fellow cattleman.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and our fifth and final last, but not least, witness today is Ms. Nicole Galase, the Executive Director of the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council. *Mahalō,* Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you to all of our witnesses for joining us today, and we will now proceed with our testimony. You will each have 5 minutes. The timer is in front of you. It will count down to zero at which your time will expire, and with that, Mr. Boening, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF RUSSELL W. BOENING, PRESIDENT, TEXAS FARM BUREAU, POTH, TX

Mr. BOENING. Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to be here and testify today. My name is Russell Boening. I am a fourth-generation farmer and President of the Texas Farm Bureau. Along with my brother, we produce grain, cotton, and wheat while operating a 450-cow dairy and a beef operation outside of Polk, Texas, which is right southeast of San Antonio. It is an honor to be here on behalf of our member families of the Texas Farm Bureau.

Voluntary conservation practices have become a cornerstone of modern agriculture. Our family implements conservation practices to improve water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat, while keeping our land productive, but we are not unique. Farmers across Texas and across this whole country are seizing the opportunity to utilize conservation programs. For decades, USDA, NRCS, and FSA programs have assisted farmers in executing on-farm conservation practices. Farmers rely on working lands programs such as EQIP, CSP, and RCPP. These programs are highly successful, and the greatest challenge for producers is just gaining entry.

All of these programs have become increasingly oversubscribed with demand consistently surpassing available funding. For Texans, EQIP is of the utmost importance given the 50 percent set-aside for livestock operations. In 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act allocated additional funding for these working lands programs. Currently, this IRA funding is temporary and does not alter the permanent baseline funding established by the 2018 Farm Bill. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Pub. L. 119–21) that has passed the House last month infuses roughly $11 billion in unspent IRA funding into this baseline for these programs, while also adding $8 billion in additional baseline funding. Incorporating the IRA funds into the baseline would ensure that these funds continue into perpetuity and farmers can stay committed to their conservation work.

CRP is a voluntary land retirement program that assists farmers in removing environmentally-sensitive land from ag production. For many farmers, CRP serves as an important farm safety net by providing a reliable source of income during times when crop prices are low or when certain acres are less productive due to environmental challenges. By enrolling vulnerable or less profitable land in CRP, farmers can receive a guaranteed annual rental that helps stabilize their cash-flow, thereby reducing financial stress and risk.

We support the approach taken in the Committee's bill that proposes using soil classification to determine CRP payments. This approach could better align rental rates with the productivity and environmental value of the land enrolled. By factoring in soil classification, payments could be more accurately tailored to reflect the potential ag value and conservation benefits of specific parcels. It would create a payment scale that incentivizes the enrollment of environmentally-sensitive areas, which focuses on the parcels of land that the program was originally designed to protect.

Farmers often express concern about the shortage of technical service providers available to assist with these conservation practices as this lack of support can delay or limit their ability to implement these programs. Without sufficient TSPs, producers may struggle to develop conservation plans, complete necessary documentation, or receive expert guidance on selecting the effective practices tailored for their land. This shortage can be especially challenging in rural or under-served areas where access to trained professionals is already limited.

Expanding and better supporting the network of TSPs is essential to ensure farmers can successfully navigate conservation programs and achieve meaningful environmental outcomes. Congress must invest in the TSPs that assist farmers in executing these practices. We strongly advocate that the Committee work to make all conservation programs more practicable, accessible, and supportive of modern agricultural challenges. Our members continue to advocate for increased funding and higher payment rates to better reflect the true cost of implementing and maintaining conservation practices. Also, simplifying application processes and reducing paperwork are top priorities, especially for small and beginning farmers who may lack the time or resources to navigate these complex requirements. Farmers seek more flexibility in program contracts and practice options to tailor their conservation efforts to their unique operations.

We ask Members of this Subcommittee to work towards reauthorizing the farm bill to ensure that farmers have access to conservation programs that promote environmental stewardship. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Boening follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RUSSELL W. BOENING, PRESIDENT, TEXAS FARM BUREAU, POTH, TX

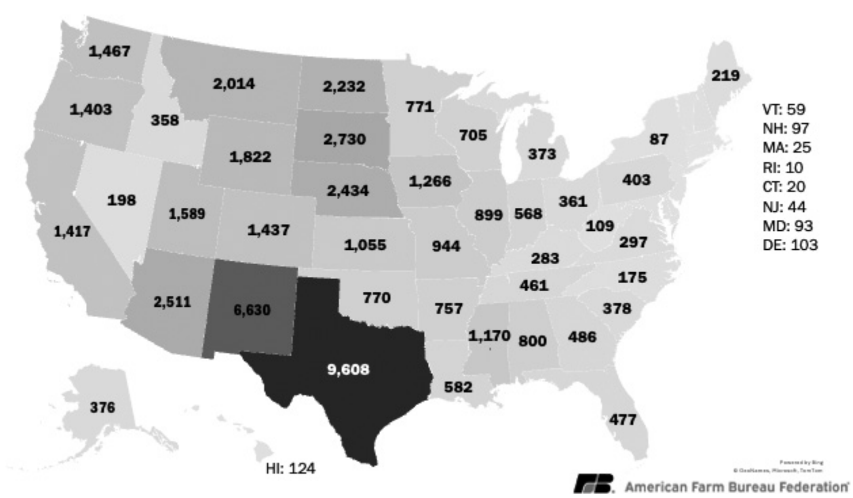
Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the importance of voluntary conservation practices and the benefits they provide to our producers and the environment. My name is Russell Boening, I am a fourth-generation farmer and President of the Texas Farm Bureau. Along with my brother, we raise grain, cotton, and wheat while operating a 450-head dairy and beef operation outside of Poth, Texas. It is an honor to be here on behalf of the 540,000 members of the Texas Farm Bureau.

Voluntary conservation practices have become a cornerstone of modern agricultural operations, playing a crucial role in balancing productive farming with environmental stewardship. These practices allow farmers and ranchers to proactively manage their land in ways that protect soil health, conserve water, enhance wildlife habitat, and reduce pollution—all while maintaining or even improving crop and livestock yields. For several decades, our family has implemented voluntary conservation practices in a variety of ways to improve water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat while keeping our land productive. Our family is certainly not unique—farmers across Texas and the country are seizing the opportunities to improve their environmental impacts and incorporating conservation practices into their business models. As an industry, we have seen improvements in soil health and water quality throughout the communities where we work and live.

Overview of Conservation Programs

Authorized under title II of the farm bill, the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) programs have assisted farmers in executing on-farm conservation practices for decades. The agency provides a variety of programs and an extensive menu of conservation practices for farmers to choose from to address their environmental goals. NRCS provides cost-share and technical assistance, while keeping the programs voluntary and farmer led. I am proud to be here advocating for these programs and the farmers who use them.

Acres (in Thousands) Enrolled in NRCS Programs, FY 2023



Including EQIP, CSP, RCPP, CRP, ACEP and technical assistance.
Source: USDA NRCS; AFBF calculations.

Last year, the House Agriculture Committee passed the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024, led by Chairman GT Thompson. The Texas Farm Bureau appreciates the continued commitment that Members of this Subcommittee have in improving the function of conservation programs. Farmers rely on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program

(CSP), the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to address natural resource concerns. Simply put—each of these programs are essential to achieving our sustainability mission.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

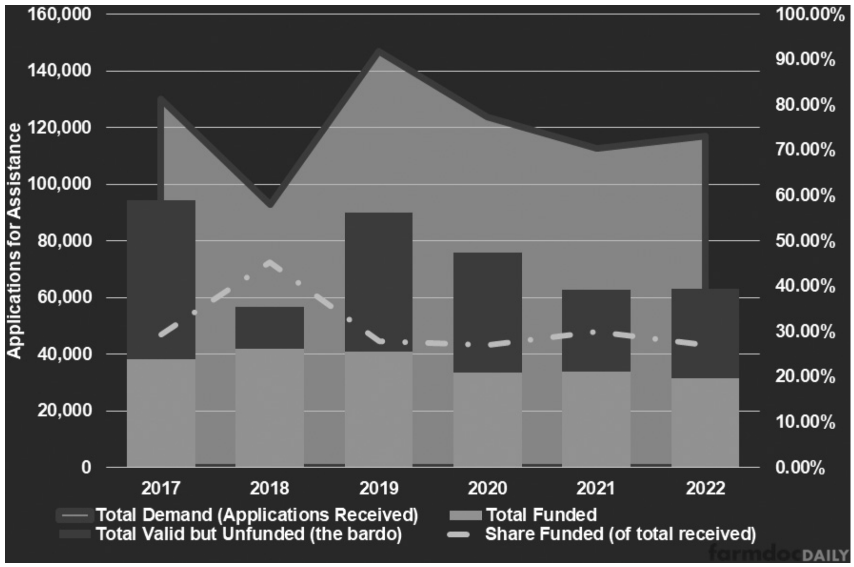
Since its inception, EQIP has consistently been one of the most popular conservation programs for farmers and ranchers. The program provides financial and technical assistance to producers for implementing conservation practices on their land that helps to improve water and air quality, conserving ground, and surface water, increasing soil healthy by limiting erosion and sedimentation and numerous other benefits. We have seen, especially in Texas, the benefits of EQIP are wide ranging for livestock and crop producers alike.

As a working lands program, EQIP provides flexibility by adapting to a farmer's specific situation, offering a wide range of conservation options, supporting diverse producers, and allowing for customized planning and implementation timelines. This makes it a valuable tool for sustainable agriculture without forcing a one-size-fits-all approach. EQIP supports a wide variety of practices—from improving irrigation systems to managing livestock waste—so farmers can address the environmental challenges most relevant to their farms. With customizable conservation plans, variable contract lengths, and multiple application periods throughout the year, farmers can adopt improvements at a pace and scale that works for them. Additionally, EQIP provides higher payment rates and priority support for beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers, making conservation more accessible and adaptable for a diverse range of producers. In Texas, the EQIP program has helped install terrace and waterway systems that reduce sediment loss and nutrient runoff, improve irrigation systems and water use efficiency, and maximize grazing systems—just to name a few.

Including livestock operations in the EQIP is essential for supporting comprehensive, sustainable agriculture. Under current law, 50% of EQIP funding is set aside for livestock-focused practices. Livestock producers face unique conservation challenges, such as managing manure, protecting water sources, and maintaining healthy grazing lands—all of which have significant environmental implications. EQIP provides critical financial and technical assistance that enables livestock farmers to implement practices like nutrient management, rotational grazing, fencing to protect streams, and improved waste handling systems. These practices not only help reduce pollution and improve soil and water quality but also enhance animal health and operational efficiency. By including livestock in EQIP, the program ensures that conservation efforts address the full spectrum of agricultural systems, promoting environmental stewardship across both crop and animal production.

Due to its popularity, EQIP has become increasingly oversubscribed, with demand consistently surpassing available funding. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, the program received 134,450 applications nationwide but was only able to award contracts to 34,222 applicants, reflecting a nationwide acceptance rate of approximately 25% . This high demand has led to significant disparities in contract awards across states, with some states awarding contracts to fewer than 20% of applicants.

Figure 2. National Overview of Environmental Quality Incentives Program Performance (USDA)



[*https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2023/09/farm-bill-2023-nrcs-backlogs-and-the-conservation-bardo.html*]

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

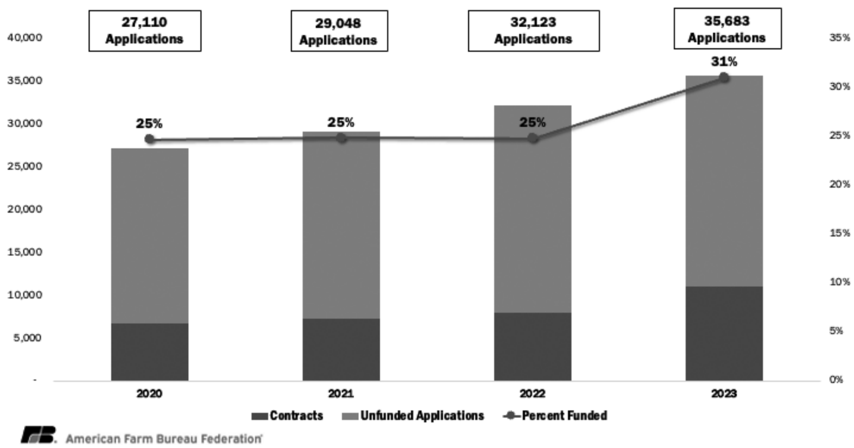
Another popular working lands conservation program utilized by our members is CSP. CSP is designed for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who are already implementing conservation practices and wish to enhance their environmental stewardship. The program offers financial and technical assistance to help producers expand their conservation efforts by adopting additional practices or improving existing ones. Participants receive annual payments for maintaining and improving their conservation activities, with contracts typically lasting 5 years. In FY 2024, USDA increased the minimum annual payment for CSP participants from $1,500 to $4,000 to better support small-scale, under-served, and urban producers, making the program more accessible and equitable. CSP's comprehensive approach encourages producers to address multiple resource concerns simultaneously, such as soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat, leading to more sustainable and resilient agricultural operations. This structure benefits farmers who are already committed to sustainability and like EQIP, provides flexibility allowing producers to choose from a wide variety of enhancements that suit their operation's needs.

Like EQIP, CSP supports conservation practices that support our greatest natural resource concerns such as:

- Soil Health Improvements: These practices help improve soil structure, reduce erosion, and increase organic matter such as, cover cropping, reduced or no-till, crop rotation enhancements and precision nutrient and pesticide application.
- Water Conservation: These practices help conserve water and improve irrigation efficiency, especially important in drought-prone areas such as, improved irrigation systems, irrigation scheduling, water recycling or reuse systems.
- Grazing and Livestock Management: These practices enhance pasture health, reduce overgrazing, and protect water quality, such as prescribed grazing systems, rotational grazing, improved livestock watering systems.
- Wildlife Habitat Enhancement: These efforts provide food and shelter for wildlife, including pollinators and threatened species, such as planting native species, creating buffer strips or field borders, restoring wetlands or riparian areas.
- Climate-Smart Practices: These practices contribute to greenhouse gas reduction and help farms become more resilient to climate impacts such as, carbon sequestration activities, agroforestry, composting, and manure management.

Like EQIP, CSP is consistently oversubscribed, with demand from farmers far exceeding available funding and enrollment capacity. Each year, thousands of producers who apply to enhance conservation efforts on their working lands are turned away due to limited resources.

Overprescription of Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)



Source: USDA NRCS ProTract.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

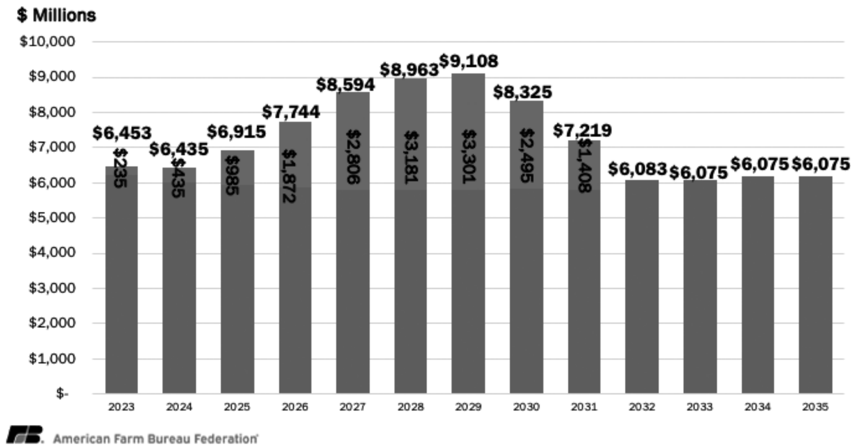
Another conservation initiative authorized by the farm bill is RCPP, which promotes collaboration between the USDA and local, state, and private partners to address regional natural resource concerns. RCPP enables partners—such as conservation groups, agricultural organizations, Tribal governments, and municipalities—to design and lead projects that deliver targeted environmental outcomes while supporting agricultural productivity. Through RCPP, partners contribute funding, expertise, and innovation, while eligible farmers and landowners receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices. The program emphasizes flexibility and local leadership, making it a powerful tool for addressing complex, landscape-scale challenges like water quality, drought resilience, soil health, and habitat restoration.

Farmers often face several challenges when participating in the RCPP, despite its collaborative and locally driven approach. One of the most common concerns is the complexity and length of the application process, which can be more time-consuming and confusing than other conservation programs due to the involvement of multiple partners and project-specific requirements. Additionally, inconsistent communication and coordination between NRCS, partner organizations, and producers can create delays or confusion about program rules, funding timelines, and eligibility criteria. These hurdles can discourage participation, particularly for small or beginning farmers who may lack the resources to navigate the bureaucratic and administrative demands of RCPP projects. Addressing these challenges is critical to ensuring that the program reaches its full potential in delivering effective, landscape-scale conservation.

Inflation Reduction Act in the Baseline Funding

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) allocated an additional $18.05 billion to USDA conservation programs, including EQIP, CSP and RCPP through FY 2031. Currently, this IRA funding is temporary and does not alter the permanent baseline funding established by the 2018 Farm Bill. Once the IRA funds expire, these programs will revert to their original baseline funding levels, further limiting these program's capacity to meet ongoing conservation needs.

How Did *IRA* Supplement the *Baseline?*



Source: AFBF compilations, Congressional Budget Office, Senate Ag GOP.

To ensure sustained support for conservation efforts, there have been discussions within Congress around incorporating IRA funding into the permanent baseline, allowing for continuous and expanded assistance to farmers and ranchers. Our Texas farmers strongly support this transition, as it would provide long-term stability and enable the program to address evolving environmental challenges effectively.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act that passed the House last month infuses roughly $11 billion in unspent IRA funding into the baseline for a variety of USDA conservation programs while also adding $8 billion in additional baseline funding past the budget window of the IRA. Incorporating the IRA funds into the baseline would ensure that these funds continue for conservation programs into perpetuity, subject only to Congressional reauthorization. This could represent a significant increase in the conservation title's available funding.

Additionally, we support the removal of the climate-related sideboards on IRA conservation funding. Congress must reverse these restrictions that tie funding solely to climate mitigation goals. It is unwise to narrowly focus the IRA resources on one specific natural resource concern. Farmers need flexibility and these sideboards are unnecessarily handcuffing our members by picking one resource concern over another.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Administered by FSA, CRP is a voluntary land retirement program that pays farmers to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that improve environmental health and quality. In return, participants receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance for establishing conservation practices. CRP helps reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, enhance wildlife habitat, and increase carbon sequestration. By taking marginal, highly-erodible or at-risk farmland out of production, CRP supports long-term environmental sustainability while providing a stable income source for participating landowners. In 2024, Texas had roughly 2.2 million acres enrolled in CRP to protect highly-erodible lands and enhance wildlife habitat.

For many farmers, CRP serves as an important farm safety net by providing a reliable source of income during times when crop prices are low or when certain acres are less productive due to environmental challenges. By enrolling vulnerable or less profitable land in CRP, farmers receive guaranteed annual rental payments that help stabilize their cash flow, reducing financial stress and risk. This safety net allows producers to manage their land more sustainably without the pressure to overuse or degrade fragile soils. Given the state of the farm economy today, many farmers are looking to conservation programs to keep their businesses solvent.

As Congress considers reauthorizing the farm bill, they must consider changes to CRP that will make the program more flexible, accessible, and better aligned with farmer's needs. Many Texas producers are asking for higher rental rates and more competitive payments to reflect current land values and the costs of establishing conservation practices. We also seek increased acreage caps and the ability to enroll smaller or more diverse parcels of land, including working lands, rather than just marginal acres. Additionally, farmers want streamlined application processes and greater flexibility in contract terms to better accommodate changing farm operations and market conditions. Overall, these changes aim to balance environmental goals with economic viability for farmers.

Additionally, our members support the approach taken in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024 that proposes using soil classification to determine CRP payments. This approach could help better align rental rates with the productivity and environmental value of the land enrolled. By factoring in soil classification, payments could be more accurately tailored to reflect the potential agricultural value and conservation benefits of specific parcels. The bill would create a payment scale that incentives the enrollment of environmentally sensitive and highly-erodible lands, which focuses on the parcels of land that the program was originally designed to protect.

Conversely, the scale would disincentive the enrollment of prime farmland. The enrollment of prime farmland in CRP has unintentionally created challenges for young farmers by reducing the availability of highly productive land for farming and entry into the agricultural sector. When prime farmland is taken out of production and enrolled in long-term CRP contracts, it limits opportunities for young and beginning farmers to access affordable, high-quality land needed to start or expand their operations. This can increase competition for the remaining farmland, driving up land prices and rental rates, making it harder for new farmers to establish financially viable businesses. Additionally, with less prime land available, young farmers may be forced to work on lower-quality or more marginal acres, which can reduce their productivity and profitability. As a result, while CRP supports important conservation goals, it can also unintentionally hinder generational renewal and the long-term sustainability of the farming community.

Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program

Feral swine pose a serious and growing threat to farmers across many regions, causing extensive damage to crops, pastures, and farm infrastructure. These invasive animals root up fields in search of food, destroying valuable crops like corn, soybeans, and vegetables, which leads to significant financial losses for producers. Their digging also damages soil structure and can contribute to erosion and the spread of invasive plant species. Beyond crop damage, feral swine compete with livestock for forage, contaminate water sources, and can carry diseases that threaten both animal and human health. The presence of feral swine increases costs for farmers who must invest in fencing, trapping, and control measures to protect their land and animals, making them a persistent and costly challenge to agricultural operations.

The 2018 Farm Bill established the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (FSCP) to address the significant threats posed by feral swine. With an estimated five million feral swine causing approximately $1.6 billion in annual damages across just 13 states, the FSCP allocated a total of $75 million over the life of the 2018 Farm Bill. While the FSCP has made significant strides in controlling feral swine populations, ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess its effectiveness. It is imperative that Congress continue to support this Federal investment in wildlife management to protect agricultural resources and public health.

Additional Challenges in Executing Conservation Practices

Farmers often express concern about the shortage of technical service providers (TSPs) available to assist with conservation practices, as this lack of support can delay or limit their ability to implement important environmental improvements. Without sufficient TSPs, producers may struggle to develop conservation plans, complete necessary documentation, or receive expert guidance on selecting and installing effective practices tailored to their land. This shortage can be especially challenging in rural or under-served areas, where access to trained professionals is already limited. The resulting bottlenecks slow down program participation, reduce the impact of conservation funding, and increase frustration among farmers eager to adopt sustainable practices but lacking the technical assistance to do so efficiently. Expanding and better supporting the network of TSPs is essential to ensure farmers can successfully navigate conservation programs and achieve meaningful environmental outcomes. Congress must invest in the TSPs that assist farmers in executing these practices.

More recently, farmers are growing increasingly concerned about the closure of NRCS offices, as these local centers are vital for accessing conservation assistance, technical support, and program guidance. Office closures and staff reductions, particularly in rural areas, have led to longer travel distances and wait times for farmers seeking help with conservation planning, cost-share programs, and disaster recovery. This disruption not only delays the implementation of crucial conservation practices but also strains the relationships between farmers and NRCS staff, who often serve as trusted advisors. The loss of local NRCS offices erodes the accessibility and effectiveness of Federal conservation programs, leaving farmers without the support they need to maintain sustainable and productive operations.

Conclusion

We appreciate the reforms the House Agriculture Committee included in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024. In addition to the specific recommendations made above, we strongly advocate that the Committee work to make all conservation programs more practical, accessible, and supportive of modern agricultural challenges. Our members continue to advocate for increased funding and higher payment rates to better reflect the true costs of implementing and maintaining conservation practices, making participation more financially viable. Simplifying application processes and reducing paperwork are also top priorities, especially for small and beginning farmers who may lack the time or resources to navigate complex requirements. Additionally, farmers seek more flexibility in program contracts and practice options to tailor conservation efforts to their unique operations and regional conditions. Finally, expanding technical assistance and addressing staffing shortages within agencies like NRCS would help farmers more effectively access and benefit from conservation programs. We challenge Members of this Subcommittee to work towards reauthorizing the farm bill to ensure that farmers have access to the conservation programs that allow for environmental stewardship. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Boening. Mr. McLeland, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER MCLELAND, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS, DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC., HALLSVILLE, MO

Mr. MCLELAND. Well, good morning, Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on the importance of voluntary, locally-led, incentive-based farm bill conservation programs. My name is Chris McLeland. I am the Managing Director of Agriculture Programs for Ducks Unlimited in the Great Lakes Atlantic Region, and I am also a producer myself, supporting a small cow-calf operation in my home State of Missouri. It is an honor to be here this morning.

As a proud partner of USDA, Ducks Unlimited has a long history of working with farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners across the country to restore and enhance millions of acres of waterfowl habitat. Ducks Unlimited supports balanced agricultural policies that help American farmers and ranchers be more competitive and successful in meeting the demands for food, fiber, and energy, while conserving soil, water, wetlands, grasslands, and forests. DU's focus is not just on the financial assistance dollars delivered to agricultural producers and land stewards, but also the critical importance of conservation technical assistance where partners such as Ducks Unlimited work alongside USDA and participating landowners to help them achieve their conservation goals. We are proud of our ability to deliver quality science-based assistance with agricultural producers alongside NRCS.

The Federal flagship wetlands restoration program, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement, or WRE, is a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based way for private landowners, farmers, and ranchers to protect and restore wetlands on their property. WRE also provides landowners a financially-viable alternative for transitioning farmland with high inputs and low profits to functioning wetlands, while continuing to focus investments and production on more suitable lands, and I have personally witnessed these benefits and the positive impacts WRE has to these program participants.

NRCS also works with landowners to implement conservation practices on older WREs, allowing these lands to continue to provide ecosystem services for wildlife and people. One of DU's biggest priorities in the next farm bill is to ensure NRCS provides landowners with long-term stewardship opportunities. It is critically important that the program provide these additional tools to landowners to maintain their WRE and retain the associated wildlife benefits.

Mr. Lucas, as you know, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, which was originally authorized while you were chair of the Committee, has been a resounding success. The rice industry's symbiotic relationship with waterfowl led DU to a historic partnership with USA Rice. This partnership has had phenomenal success in delivering on-the-ground conservation to rice farmers with more than 800,000 acres of rice impacted and over $100 million of additional conservation funding directed to these program participants. And while there still are administrative hurdles with the program, Ducks Unlimited asks Congress to provide thoughtful and targeted solutions that allow the program to continue to succeed.

The Conservation Reserve Program, CRP, provides farmers and ranchers with additional financial options while improving soil health, enhancing water quality, and supporting wildlife habitat. And we do thank FSA and Administrator Beam for recently opening CRP general and continuous enrollments and appreciate the Committee's efforts in addressing policies last Congress that promote locally-led activities and reinstate management tools and options, such as mid-contract management, as well as increasing the rental rate payment practices under Continuous CRP and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement.

I have discussed our partnership with NRCS in providing conservation technical assistance when delivering these programs. This assistance, which is directly provided to the agricultural producers, is essential to the long-term success of a producer's conservation system. Conservation technical assistance is just as important as the financial assistance provided through the suite of farm bill programs. The priorities mentioned in my testimony were included in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act that passed out of the House Agriculture Committee last Congress, and I thank Chairman Thompson and the Members of the Committee for supporting Ducks Unlimited's priorities last Congress, and we ask you to continue to support those provisions in the upcoming farm bill.

Ducks Unlimited proudly partners with NRCS and passionate farmers and ranchers and landowners who invest their own financial resources to bring these farm bill programs to their lands, and DU's mission to conserve, restore, and maintain wetlands and waterfowl habitat would not be possible without these voluntary programs. Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. McLeland follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER MCLELAND, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS, DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC., HALLSVILLE, MO

Good morning, Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on my perspectives of voluntary, locally-led, incentive-based farm bill conservation programs.

My name is Chris McLeland, and I am the Managing Director of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited in the Great Lakes and Atlantic Region. When I'm off the clock, I enjoy spending time on the farm, with my daughters and our cattle. Growing up in a rural community in north-central Missouri, I learned from a young age that agriculture and wildlife conservation were not mutually exclusive activities. In fact, they can very much mutually inclusive and complementary. It has been my passion for agriculture and wildlife conservation that has guided me throughout my career and is a passion that I am working hard to instill in my children.

As a proud partner of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Ducks Unlimited (DU) has a long history of working with ranchers, farmers, and other private landowners across the country to enhance and restore millions of acres of critical waterfowl and other wildlife habitats. The organization was established in 1937 amid the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. DU was founded by people who understood the value of wetland resources and bolstered by the passage of the first Federal duck stamp in 1934. With more than one million supporters across North America, DU has become the premier organization for wetlands and waterfowl conservation with a mission to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for the continent's waterfowl, other wildlife, and people. To date, DU has restored and enhanced more than 19 million acres across the continent focusing heavily on the priority landscapes for waterfowl populations.

The voluntary, locally-led, incentive-based conservation programs that are authorized and funded through the farm bill are the backbone of DU's cooperative conservation work. Many of the remaining wetlands in the United States are on private lands, where most waterfowl are raised, migrate and winter. To further our mission, DU supports agricultural policies that can help American farmers and ranchers be more competitive and successful in meeting demands for food, fiber and energy while conserving soil, water, wetlands, grasslands and forests. The farm bill is the most effective tool for conserving wildlife habitats on private land.

DU collaborates with USDA and other partners in helping deliver farm bill conservation programs, including the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. Our focus is not just on the financial assistance dollars delivered for agriculture producers and land stewards for on-the-farm conservation practices, but also as a technical assistance partner working hand-in-hand with USDA and program participants on their lands. We are proud of our ability to deliver quality, science-based assistance to agriculture producers cooperatively with NRCS.

Wetlands in the Farm Bill

The Federal flagship wetlands restoration program, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE), is an NRCS program that is popular and oversubscribed. WRE is a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based way for private landowners, farmers and ranchers to protect and restore agricultural lands and wetlands on their property. WRE has multiple benefits and can be tailored to many types of wetland ecosystems, including the prairie potholes (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa), floodplain wetlands and coastal tidal marshes. Ducks Unlimited provides technical assistance to implement practices on WRE that, for example, restore and manage wetlands to filter pollutants, which naturally leads to water quality improvements.

WRE also provides landowners and producers a financially viable alternative for transitioning farmland with high inputs and low or negative profits to functioning wetlands while continuing to focus investments and production on their more suitable lands as key to sustaining property ownership and promoting generational transition of agriculture and forest lands. I have personally witnessed the impacts on the farm viability and ecological improvements that extend beyond the farmgate. We see this program as a win-win for farmers and ranchers and our North American waterfowl.

In my home State of Missouri, wetland restoration programs such as WRE have been extremely popular among producers, recreational landowners, and conservation partners alike. Missouri is a state that can experience extreme flood events. Programs like WRE provide an avenue for landowners to restore wetland acres, provide a diverse array of wildlife habitats, create outdoor recreational opportunities, while also reducing operational risk in the form of lost revenue. Through the hard work of partners such as USDA–NRCS, the Missouri Department of Conservation, and groups like Ducks Unlimited, Missouri has restored over 167,000 acres of wetlands through the WRE program.

Using the Lower Mississippi Valley as an example, since 1998, Ducks Unlimited has partnered with NRCS in reforestation and hydrology restoration activities in states from Missouri to Louisiana. In Louisiana alone, DU has helped reforest 52,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods by enrolling these acres in WRE. Prior to WRE, an estimated 80 percent of the bottomland hardwood wetland forests were converted. With Louisiana being one of the most intensive farmed regions in the nation, WRE projects and the restoration of bottomland hardwood forest ecosystems ultimately filter out sediment, nutrients and farm runoff that would otherwise end up in the Mississippi River.

There is also a stewardship component to WRE where NRCS works with landowners to implement conservation practices on older WREs (formerly known as WRP), allowing these lands to continue to provide multiple ecosystem benefits to local communities. One of DU's biggest priorities for the next farm bill is to ensure NRCS provides landowners these long-term stewardship opportunities. It is critically important that the program provides these additional tools to landowners to maintain their WRE and retain the associated habitat benefits. In addition, DU has advocated to modify the county cap restriction on WRE. Focused on the more marginal lands, this provision provides flexibility to NRCS allowing more acres in areas where duck habitat is critically important. We are excited, both of these provisions were included in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act (that passed out of the House Agriculture Committee last Congress). Thank you, Chairman Thompson and Members of the Committee, for including this critically important language.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program

Building on the success of WRE, the Emergency Watershed Protection Program incorporates floodplain easements as an alternative tool to landowners, farmers and ranchers who seek long-term protection of life and property and avoid future agriculture crop losses after devastating natural disasters. It is proven that wetlands provide flood control, slowing the flow of water and allowing it to replenish the ground water supply and reduce flood damage in areas downstream. DU partners with NRCS to implement voluntary floodplain easements to restore floodplains, forests, or conservation practices to pre-disaster conditions. We firmly believe USDA should leverage the easement purchase by adding habitat value similar to those provided by the WRE. For minimal additional restoration investment, we can see substantial improvement in hydrology, habitat quality and wildlife usage of these easements that are positioned in our most critical flyways.

EWP has been a critically important program along our countries big river systems, with the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers being no exception. An example of EWP in action is the Dogtooth Bend project. Dogtooth Bend is a 17,000 acre peninsula in southwest Illinois created by a meander of the Mississippi River. It's fertile soils in the Mississippi floodplain have made it attractive for row crop agriculture. To prevent flooding a levee system was completed around 1943 and stood until the great flood of 1993. The levee was rebuilt but flooding continued repeatedly, through the 2010s, culminating in a major event in 2019 that deposited massive amounts of sediment across the peninsula. The EWPP–FPE Easements (2600 acres) were critical to helping landowners recover from this disaster as the site is no longer economically viable to farm.

Again, the Farm, Food and National Security Act, included DU's priority of language that promotes management and restoration of floodplain easements, as well as restoring the land for the long-term health of the watershed.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Mr. Lucas as you well know, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) which was originally authorized when you were Chairman of the Committee has been a resounding success. As you well know, the rice industry's symbiotic relationship with waterfowl led DU to a historic partnership with USA Rice, called the Rice Stewardship Partnership (RSP), in 2013. While both organizations have separate missions and methods, we have managed to collaborate and develop goals for our Partnership, including work on RCPP where our focus is to work with producers to maintain lands in agriculture production while managing those acres to supplement wildlife food and cover, improve water quality and promote water conserving practices.

The Rice Stewardship Partnership's RCPP projects have pulled together nearly one hundred diverse partners to help implement their goals, communicate successes, and ultimately share the cost of investment in working lands conservation programs. The Rice Stewardship Partnership has had phenomenal success in delivering on-the-ground conservation to rice farmers. Since the creation of RCPP in the 2014 Farm Bill, the RSP has beneficially impacted over 800,000 acres of rice and rice rotation ground and provided over $100 million in additional conservation funding. From Missouri to Texas and California in the west, America's rice producers have literally filled the void in critical wildlife habitat needs by adapting their operations to include wildlife benefiting water and cover management practices,

For the upcoming farm bill, Ducks Unlimited would note the complexity plaguing RCPP and its impact on the long-term viability of a crucial partnership program to rice farmers. Congress should work to address barriers for partners including the overly detailed and complicated application process, multiple layered agreements, the length of time it takes to finalize an agreement, and burdensome accounting for technical assistance within the agreements. Simplifying RCPP will help deliver more timely assistance to producers. While administrative barriers can present unnecessary obstacles and costs for partners, Ducks Unlimited asks Congress to provide thoughtful and targeted solutions that allow the program to successfully function as it has for nearly a decade without the overly bureaucratic process that has plagued the program over the last several years. The House Agriculture Committee worked tirelessly last Congress to address these concerns in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act. We thank you for your thoughtful attention to these concerns and encourage Congress to support these provisions in the farm bill.

CRP

I must also mention another important voluntary conservation program at USDA under the Farm Service Agency, CRP. CRP is a prominent component of the farm safety net by providing farmers and ranchers with financial options while improving soil health, enhancing water quality, and supporting wildlife habitat, in particular nesting cover. Ducks Unlimited primarily provides technical assistance to landowners and producers who enroll in the CRP Continuous sign up. This sign up allows eligible land to be enrolled at any time, targeting high-priority conservation practices such as buffer strips, riparian buffers, and wetlands.

We thank FSA and Administrator Beam for opening CRP General and Continuous enrollment and appreciate the Committee's efforts in addressing policies in last Congress' farm bill that promote locally-led activities, reinstate management tool options like mid-contract management, and increase rental rate payments for practices under Continuous CRP and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE).

Working Lands Programs

Working lands programs, like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), serve as economic drivers and provide farmers and ranchers with the support they need when considering conservation plans on their land. EQIP is one of the largest conservation programs within the farm bill. It helps producers maintain working agricultural lands and improve farm infrastructure like fencing, water irrigation, post-harvest flooding and more. We at Ducks Unlimited support working lands programs as a way to retain critically important habitats and to sustain working farms and ranches.

Technical Assistance

Across all the farm bill programs and all of USDA's conservation programs, I have discussed our partnership with NRCS in providing technical assistance in advance of, and when, delivering these programs. From program outreach to conservation planning, conservation practice design, implementation and evaluation, this staff assistance provided directly to agriculture producers is essential to the success and long-term sustainability of a producer's conservation system. We are concerned about the recent downsizing and loss of personnel in the field, on the front lines with our private land stewards. As USDA realigns their personnel resources and program policies, DU will work alongside our NRCS colleagues and producers to fill gaps as this process moves forward. While we have resources to contribute in support, the technical assistance component of each of the farm bill programs is as essential as the financial assistance provided. We ask that you continue to provide for sound, science-driven, field-based technical assistance directed at the field level to each participating agriculture producer.

Conclusion

Ducks Unlimited is a proud partner with NRCS and the passionate farmers, ranchers and landowners who invest their own financial resources to bring these farm bill conservation programs to their land. DU's mission to conserve, restore and maintain wetlands and waterfowl habitat would not be possible without the voluntary farm bill conservation programs and our partnerships with many in the agricultural industry. I encourage Congress to pass a farm bill that supports strong funding levels for conservation programs, maintains the integrity of the conservation programs and sustains wildlife and the farm economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and share my perspectives on the farm bill conservation programs.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. McLeland. Dr. Sebert, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF DAN A. SEBERT, PH.D., ORIGINAL CHARTER MEMBER, SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR, NATIONAL WATERSHED COALITION, PAWNEE, OK

Dr. SEBERT. Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dan Sebert. I am a charter member of the National Watershed Coalition. I also served the Coalition as Executive Director for over 20 years.

To begin, I want you to understand that the Watershed Program touches me on a personal level. I was raised on the banks of the Washita River, one of the original 11 upstream flood protection demonstration watersheds. I also witnessed the incremental improvements as one watershed dam after another was completed on those tributaries and creeks, not huge, massive dams on the river. It was the smaller structures dotting the landscape, integrated into private farms and ranches that shaped my views and my passion for a lifetime of service in conservation.

While USDA may be better known for providing a financial safety net for farmers and ranchers, the Department also provides an actual safety net for rural communities. The Watershed and Flood Prevention Program is a vital, but often overlooked infrastructure program in the NRCS portfolio. I consider Chairman Lucas as the godfather of the program, an heir to the legacy of watershed leadership shaped by his family and community stalwarts in rural western Oklahoma. The reason behind this is simple: of the nearly 12,000 watershed structures nationwide, over 2,000 of them are in the State of Oklahoma. As a matter of fact, 71 percent of those nearly 12,000 dams are in the states represented here by this Subcommittee's Members.

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Pub. L. 83–566) authorizes NRCS to work with local sponsors to install watershed improvement projects. Projects provide flood prevention, water quality, and quantity protection, agricultural water management, municipal water supply management, and wildlife habitat protection. The program has gained even more importance as a tool for helping farms, ranches, and rural communities adapt to increasing weather volatility and reducing risk against catastrophic weather events. The annual benefits these projects produce is over $2 billion. There are watershed project structures in 218 Congressional districts across the nation. As a result, more than 48 million people across the United States benefit from the watershed program every year.

A crucial part of the watershed program is the Dam Rehabilitation Program. Many dams today are in a far different setting than when constructed. In addition, many of these structures built by NRCS had a design life of only 50 years. Since most of this construction occurred from the 1940s to the early 1970s, many of these dams are now past their design life and they show the effects of aging. Mr. Lucas led the development of rehabilitation legislation in 2000 that ensured the nation's investment in the watershed program had the opportunity to continue into the future. Under this program, dams are selected for rehabilitation through analysis and a rigorous assessment process. I cannot overemphasize the importance of Congress and the USDA as full partners in the watershed program.

We do think there are improvements to be made to the program. Our farm bill priorities are quite simple: increase funding to the program; increase the flexibility of the program's authority to make repairs that go beyond routine operation and maintenance, which is required of the local sponsors, but fall short of the threshold for full rehabilitation; provide flexibility in cost-share to states; reduce the regulatory and administrative barriers that add years to project implementation; and add statutory language to provide oversight and accountability for program funds.

The National Watershed Coalition is pleased to see its recommendations integrated into the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024. We cannot thank Chairman Thompson and Subcommittee Chairman Lucas enough for their support of these policies, and we look forward to working with them and the other Members to continue this work into the next farm bill.

I will conclude where I began. The implementation and success of the watershed program shaped my life and the western Oklahoma communities that thrived under the umbrella of protection these structures provide. Similar stories, can be found across the nation, where in a blend of Federal, state, and local partnership, these projects have been successfully implemented. As we look to the challenges and the need for increased resiliency in our agricultural production and the communities which support it, the watershed program is more important today than ever in history.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Sebert follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAN A. SEBERT, PH.D., ORIGINAL CHARTER MEMBER, SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR, NATIONAL WATERSHED COALITION, PAWNEE, OK

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Dan Sebert, an original charter member of the National Watershed Coalition. I served the coalition as Executive Director for over 20 years. To begin, I want you to understand that the watershed program, to which I will speak, touches me on personal level. I was raised on the banks of the Washita River, one of the original 11 upstream flood protection demonstration watersheds authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944. I was raised by parents and grandparents that had personally experienced the ravages of the Dust Bowl and the subsequent flooding which decimated both farms and communities across western Oklahoma and the nation. My youth and perspective were formed with knowledge of the catastrophic damage to communities and farms by the Washita River's frequent floods and I witnessed the incremental improvements as one watershed dam after another was completed on those tributaries and creeks. Not huge, massive dams on the river, it was these smaller structures dotting the landscape, integrated into the private farms and ranches that shaped my views and passion for a lifetime of service in conservation.

While the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) may be better known for providing a financial safety net for farmers and ranchers, USDA also provides an *actual safety net* for our rural communities. The Watershed and Flood Prevention Program (Watershed Program) is a vital, but often overlooked, infrastructure program within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) portfolio. I consider Chairman Lucas as the godfather of the program, an heir to a legacy of watershed leadership shaped by his family and community stalwarts in rural western Oklahoma. The reason behind this is clear and simple. Of the nearly 12,000 watershed structures, over 2000 of them are in the state of Oklahoma.

Building on the success of the Flood Control Act of 1944, the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations established through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83–566) authorizes NRCS to work with local sponsors to install watershed protection and improvement projects. Projects can and do provide flood prevention, water quality and quantity protection, agricultural water management, municipal water supply management, fish and wildlife habitat protection, and public recreation development. The program has gained even more importance as a critical tool for helping rural communities adapt to increasing weather volatility and reducing risk against catastrophic weather events.

There are about 2,100 NRCS assisted watershed projects in the Unites States, covering 145 million acres, with projects in every state. In 1,271 of these projects, 11,845 flood control dams have been constructed by local watershed sponsors with NRCS assistance. In most cases, a local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) serve as the local sponsors. In some cases, they are assisted by other co-sponsors such as watershed districts or county government.

The benefits of this program are significant and far reaching. The total average annual monetary benefits these projects produce is over $2 billion. In addition, over 282,000 acres of wetlands and over 9 million acres of upland wildlife habitat have been created or enhanced by watershed projects. There are watershed project dams in 218 Congressional Districts across the nation. As of today, these projects are protecting more than 610,000 homes, 46,000 businesses, 180,000 farms and ranches, 61,000 bridges, and 28,000 domestic water supplies. As a result, more than 48 million people across the United States benefit from the Watershed Program every year.

These projects create and protect vital infrastructure while conserving natural resources and contributing to local economies. The Watershed Program focuses on both the design and construction of structural water control measures, managing agricultural water, and on land treatment measures. Watershed planning provides a basis for partnering at state and local levels to identify and co-invest in projects reflecting the highest priority needs.

Conservation practices within these approved project areas improve water quality and are also a vital part of all watershed projects. Practices such as terraces, waterways, grass buffers, strip cropping, and grade stabilization structures, are used to prevent soil erosion and reduce sediment. They also increase the service life of dams and their ability to provide flood damage reduction.

Flood prevention and reliable water quality created by the Watershed Program are essential to developing and maintaining strong rural communities. Watershed projects not only protect lives, property and reduce flood damages, but also create economic growth and strengthen local economies. Flood protection is essential to prevent the unnecessary loss of infrastructure and capital to developing economies in rural America. Coalition staff recently toured areas of Kentucky impacted by April/May 2025 floods where Watershed Program infrastructure reduced damage and provided significant protection of life and property.

Watershed Rehabilitation Program

I cannot understate the looming crisis facing rural America. Recognizing the aging watershed infrastructure, watershed dam rehabilitation is a critical component of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program, authorized in 2000. Many dams today are in a far different setting than when they were constructed. Population has increased; residential and commercial development has occurred upstream and downstream from the dams; and land uses within many watersheds have changed. Many of these dams do not meet current state dam safety regulations that have been enacted and revised with more stringent requirements than when the dams were built resulting in higher dam hazard classifications, primarily due to population at risk. In addition, many of these structures built by NRCS had a design life of only 50 years. Since most of this construction occurred from the 1940s to the early 1970s, many of these dams are now past their design life and show the effects of aging with deteriorating metal and fractured concrete components.

The protection these structures afford our communities touch every aspect of our daily lives and have been so effective for over 60 years that many folks are unaware of their presence on the landscape. Chances are as you travel across western and southern Oklahoma highways or perhaps south on Interstate 35 through the heart of Texas some portion of the road receives flood protection from an upstream Watershed Program dam. The local economy that is driven in part by grain, cattle, oil and natural gas relies daily on this protection. The roads and bridges that carry our children to and from school are protected. In several cases the school itself along with other key elements of community are protected.

Many of our most productive farms and our healthiest soils are in these protected watersheds. There are many less obvious benefits that come in the form of the prosperity and opportunity made possible by these projects. The partnership between USDA and local sponsors that brought us this protection is extremely important in keeping it in place. Rehabilitation is necessary to ensure dams continue to protect lives, businesses and homes. Failure to provide for the rehabilitation of these dams could result in dam breaches which would have catastrophic consequences.

As previously alluded Mr. Lucas led the development of rehabilitation legislation in 2000 that ensured the nation's investment in the watershed program had the opportunity to continue into the future. Under the Dam Rehabilitation Program, dams are selected for rehabilitation through analysis and a rigorous assessment process. This commitment from state and local partners is necessary to ensure that sponsors are fully committed to a project. This legislation gave us the pathway and the procedure for reinvestment.

As the significantly invested local sponsors of watershed projects, state and local sponsors have felt that we have suffered from an inadequately funded Federal partner for much of the past decade. Sponsors and state watershed program partners have responded with O&M dollars, rehabilitation matching funds, technical and financial assistance. **I cannot over emphasize the importance of Congress and the USDA–NRCS as full partners in the watershed program.** We hope these recent investments are a signal to USDA about the importance of these programs and the willingness of the state partners and local sponsors to share in protecting the local communities and agriculture producers in this ever-changing environment.

National Watershed Farm Bill Priorities

The National Watershed Coalition (NWC) has several suggestions for reforms for the watershed Program. The first is an *increase of mandatory funding for the program.* Increased funding will create certainty and stability to ensure valuable projects can flow from planning to implementation and meet the changing pressures placed on our watersheds and rural agriculture producers. The program largely survives on discretionary program funding but did receive $50 million in annual funding through the 2018 Farm Bill. I would note that the program did receive this funding in the recent reconciliation bill passed by the House. This historic investment and commitment to our rural communities is appreciated and its importance cannot be overstated.

Second, NWC recommends increased flexibility in the program's authority use of program funds to repair and replace essential structural components. Many of the program constructed dams now require significant repairs that go well beyond the routine Operation and Maintenance required of the local project sponsors but fall short of the threshold for full rehabilitation. This adjustment in authority preserves the previous investment in infrastructure and flood protection by providing Federal funding for design and construction for repairs of the structural components thereby extending their performance life. Failure to repair and remediate common component and material deterioration on these dams could result in loss of life, loss of the investment in infrastructure and most certainly a loss of benefits to the nation.

Third, NWC recommends raising the Federal cost-share for rehabilitation as these structures are often high hazard. With few exceptions, these flood prevention structures were fully funded by Federal funds. For decades, the local sponsors have assumed the responsibility for inspection, operation, and maintenance of these structures. With limited access to funding to provide the required local cost share to complete the cradle-to-grave planning, design and construction necessary for rehabilitation, Federal support is essential. The potentially catastrophic outcome of this cost-share requirement barrier is that many project sponsors will not initiate rehabilitation of aged, high hazard, high priority projects. Increasing the Federal cost-share will alleviate this significant financial burden placed on local project sponsors.

Fourth, NWC believes it is crucial to reduce the regulatory and administrative barriers that adds years to project implementation timeline. The authorities in the watershed program provide for the planning and implementation at a smaller scale benefiting agriculture production and rural communities. The project scale is significantly smaller than the much larger public works of the Department of [the] Interior and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This program is accomplished in partnership with local units of government, termed project sponsors. Yet, compliance with the OMB's Project Planning Principles and Guidelines, benefits thresholds, other Federal Agency permitting requirements, and complicated procedures impair or negate project implementation and consume limited sponsor staff and financial resources. Providing a streamlined process with a system of checks and balances commensurate with the scale of the projects will accelerate project delivery and serve out rural communities well. In addition, several states have or can develop the capacity to deliver this program effectively with oversight from NRCS. Statutory clarity to provide authority and requisite funding to capable state agencies could streamline and promote more efficient delivery of the program.

Finally, NWC would like to see statutory language added to provide oversight and accountability mechanisms for program funds. Real-time transparency in all aspects of program delivery will ensure and support program integrity through the accountability for allocations, expenditures, and timeliness of delivered projects.

The National Watershed Coalition was pleased to see its full set of recommendations integrated into The Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024. We cannot thank Chairman Thompson and Subcommittee Chair Lucas enough for their support of these policies and look forward to working with them and other Members to continue this work into the next farm bill. Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to address the Committee with respect to the watershed program. I would point the Members and Committee staff to the Coalition's website *www.watershedcoalition.org* for additional history, facts, figures and multiple Watershed Program success stories. I will conclude where I began. The implementation and successes of the watershed program shaped my life and the western Oklahoma communities that thrived under the umbrella of protection these structures provide. Similar stories can be found across the nation where in a blend of Federal, state and local partnership these projects have been successfully implemented. As we look to the challenges and the need for increased resiliency in our agriculture production and the communities, the watershed program is more important today than ever in history. Not only for new planning and implementation around flood protection, water supply and water conservation, but also taking action on the older structures needing attention to continue to protect populations and infrastructure expansion that has occurred in the decades following their initial construction . . . the result of the many benefits this program continues to provide.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you for your career involvement in this, Dr. Sebert, and clearly, it is a classic example if you work long enough and hard enough, you can still do good things in this country.

With that, I turn to Mr. Fink. Please begin when you are ready, sir.

STATEMENT OF TIM FINK, VICE PRESIDENT OF POLICY, AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. FINK. Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and honorable Members of the Committee, I am Tim Fink, Vice President of Policy for American Farmland Trust, an organization founded 45 years ago to protect farmland, advance sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. I thank you for the opportunity to testify and applaud the Committee for its continued work in strengthening our nation's voluntary farm bill conservation programs. While AFT has a broader farm bill platform, our testimony today will concentrate specifically on the Agricultural Land Easement subprogram, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

Farmland is too often viewed as an unlimited resource, but according to AFT research, in the first 15 years of this century, we have lost 2,000 acres a day. That means 11 million acres of farmland were paved over, built up, or converted to uses that otherwise threaten agriculture. This is the equivalent of all of the acreage in the U.S. devoted to fruit, nut, and vegetable production. AFT research projects that without further policy intervention, we are likely to lose 18 million more acres of agriculture to development by 2040, and many communities are already seeing this prediction being outpaced. Continued conversion of this finite resource threatens our food security, our national security, and the viability of our agricultural sector. To put simply no farms, no food. It is also pushing production in the marginal lands and slamming the doors shut to the next generation of producers.

Agricultural conservation easements are essential to stemming this tide. They offer landowners a vital option, a way to extract equity from their land without selling it for development, which is often the only option for a land-rich, cash-poor farmer when they reach retirement or face family or business expenses. Land under easement remains in private ownership and on the tax rolls, and it could be transferred to a new owner at any time with the easement conditions running with the land.

Such easements benefit farmers, the farm, the community and society as a whole. Here are four ways. First, easements support reinvestment in agriculture. Research shows that farmers and ranchers use easement proceeds to improve or diversify their operations, purchase new equipment, land infrastructure. Second, easement support the transfer of agricultural land. The sale of an easement can help finance retirement without the farmer needing to give up their most cherished asset. For aspiring farmers, protected land is more affordable. In fact, it may be the only land they can afford.

Third, easements spur additional conservation. A recent survey found that the majority of landowners with easements have NRCS conservation plans, and over 75 percent have adopted at least three conservation practices. This is because of something we refer to as permanent syndrome. Farmers are more likely to make these long-term investments if they know that the land is going to remain in agriculture long enough for those investments to bear fruit. Fourth, easements benefit rural communities and economies. A 2022 Montana study found that between 2014 and 2021, every ACEP dollar spent yielded nearly twice that amount in economic activity. These investments also supported over 1,000 local jobs. It is for these reasons that 30 states and over 100 local governments invest in easement programs. That list now includes the State of Tennessee. AFT was also pleased to see Secretary Rollins point to the benefits of ACEP–ALE as part of the Administration's Farmer First Agenda.

We are grateful to this Committee and especially to Chairman Thompson for championing important easement reforms in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024. I will highlight just a few.

First, the bill would increase long-term funding for conservation programs by transferring unspent IRA conservation dollars into the farm bill, a measure also included in the recent reconciliation package. This is AFT's top farm bill priority since it will enable more farmers to protect their land and implement the very practices they need to build more profitable operations for decades to come. Second, the bill would increase ACEP's general Federal match and offer a lower match option for program partners. The increase in the match would enable more participation in the program in parts of the country where there are no matching funding to be found. The lower match option would provide an alternative for public programs that have had trouble reconciling their program rules with that of USDA.

Third, the bill will streamline ACEP by empowering experienced certified entities to play a larger role. Certified entities help to reduce easement closing times and can do more to improve the experience for landowners. A greater focus on certification can reduce both costs and administrative burdens for USDA. And fourth, the bill eliminates ACEP–ALE's adjusted gross income eligibility requirement. This change recognizes that an easement payment is different than a conservation cost-share payment. This will also help reduce closing times and ensure that the program is focused on the lands most vital to conservation.

I thank you again for being here and for your time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fink follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TIM FINK, VICE PRESIDENT OF POLICY, AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for giving American Farmland Trust (AFT) the opportunity to testify today on the role of USDA in safeguarding one of America's most important natural assets—our rich and productive agricultural land. I am Tim Fink, Vice President of Policy for AFT.

AFT was formed in 1980 as the first and still only national conservation agriculture organization devoted specifically to stemming the loss of agricultural land. AFT is known for our policy advocacy, groundbreaking research, and innovative programing. We take a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. We have a strong and longstanding partnership with USDA. Since 1994, AFT has operated the *Farmland Information Center (FIC)* [i] in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The FIC serves as the nation's primary clearinghouse for information and data related to farmland retention and protection for landowners, producers, policymakers, and the public. Our "Farms Under Threat" and predecessor "Farming on the Edge" research series, also conducted in partnership with NRCS, are the nation's foremost studies on agricultural land loss.

To build awareness of tools and voluntary approaches to saving farm and ranch land, AFT hosts the *National Agricultural Land Network,* [ii] a network of over 1,500 public agencies, farm and conservation organizations, farmers, ranchers, and concerned citizens seeking to do more to reduce the loss of working lands in their states and communities. AFT also works directly with farmers, ranchers, and agricultural landowners, providing critical on-the-ground conservation and business technical assistance, assisting with farmland transition and access, and supporting landowners who choose to donate or sell agricultural conservation easements, including through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

America's Agricultural Land Is a Vital and Irreplaceable Asset

For most of our nation's existence, the Federal Government has viewed private working lands as a limitless asset. Federal programs and policies have supported—and even subsidized—the conversion of some of America's most productive agricultural land to cities, suburbs, industrial, and infrastructure development simply because this land has been the easiest and least expensive on which to build.

Unfortunately, this "limitless" asset is, in fact, limited. According to AFT's *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States report,* [iii] in just the first 15 years of this century—a period with a slowdown in housing starts due to a recession—**11 million acres of productive farm ground were converted.** This includes nearly 7 mil-

[i] *https://farmlandinfo.org/*.
[ii] *https://farmland.org/national-agricultural-land-network*.
[iii] *https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-the-state-of-the-states/*.

lion acres to low-density residential land use and 4.1 million acres to urban and highly developed land use. These 11 million acres are equal to all the U.S. farmland devoted to fruit, nut, and vegetable production in 2017—or **2,000 acres a day paved over, built up, and converted to uses that threaten the future of agriculture.**

Without policy changes, this alarming trajectory will continue, if not worsen. AFT's *Farms Under Threat* [iv] modeling shows that the **U.S. is likely to lose another 18.4 million acres** of productive farm ground to development by 2040. And in some parts of the U.S., actual development over the past 9 years is already outpacing these predictions. In the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, farmland and ranchland is being developed 49% faster than we anticipated, fueled by many of the same trends we are seeing across the U.S.—demand for housing, warehouses, data centers, and energy development. While solar is critical to meeting national energy needs, AFT's *Farms Under Threat 2040* [v] solar modeling projects that 83% of new solar development is expected to occur on farmland and ranchland, with almost half on America's most productive land.

Continued conversion of this finite asset threatens our future food security and the viability of our agricultural sector. Farmland conversion limits opportunities for commodity and specialty crop growers alike and increases costs of production. Loss of productive cropland is driving conversion of marginal pasture and grassland to cropland, and foreclosing options for the next generation of producers.

Agricultural Conservation Easements Are an Essential Tool in Preventing Farmland Loss and Supporting Farm and Ranch Viability

Federal programs supporting agricultural conservation easements like ACEP and RCPP are essential tools in stemming the loss of our productive agricultural land. ACEP's Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) subprogram and RCPP are voluntary programs within USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provide funding for the purchase of perpetual agricultural conservation easements on working farms and ranches. ACEP–ALE is the only Federal program dedicated specifically to the protection of agricultural land. RCPP has a broader resource protection mandate, which can include funding for the protection of both working and natural lands. The first Federal investments in agricultural land protection were authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill through the Farmland Protection Program that provided grants to state and local agricultural land protection programs. Since 1996, USDA has invested approximately $2.2 billion in ACEP–ALE and predecessor programs,[1] ensuring that more than *2.3 million acres* [vi] of productive farmland and ranchland will remain forever available for agricultural production.

It's important to understand exactly what an agricultural conservation easement is, and what it does and does not do. **An agricultural conservation easement:**

- Is a powerful tool for ensuring that agricultural land remains forever available for agricultural use. With an easement, a landowner voluntarily restricts some of the rights to the use of their land. In doing so, they are exercising their private property rights. While these restrictions can be tailored to meet the unique goals of the landowner, all agricultural conservation easements limit non-agricultural development in perpetuity and spell out allowable uses of the land.
- Can be donated or sold to a qualified entity such as a public agency or a private land trust. The entity that holds the easement is then responsible for making sure that the restrictions are followed. The value of the easement is determined by appraisal, comparing the land's value for its highest and best use (typically development) and its value as restricted by the easement's terms and conditions.
- Land under easement remains in private ownership, and the landowner is free to transfer the land to a new owner at any time with the conditions of the easement transferring along with the land.

Here are some of **the benefits of agricultural conservation easements** which have been demonstrated through surveys of participating farmers and ranchers and other research:

[iv] *https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-2040/*.

[v] *https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-2040-solar-modeling-reports/*.

[1] Compiled by American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center using data supplied by the NRCS Resource Economics and Analysis Division and Easement Programs Division using information from NEST and FMMI, April 2024.

[vi] *https://www.farmers.gov/data/easements-overview*.

- ***Improved farm viability.*** Proceeds from the sale of an agricultural conservation easement are often reinvested into the farm or ranch operation. Farmers and ranchers have used proceeds to construct, expand, or repair agricultural buildings; buy equipment for farming, processing, or marketing products; pay down debt; or buy additional land.[2] Protected farms and ranches also have a positive impact on neighboring farmers and ranchers, providing them a sense of confidence in the "permanence" of agriculture in the community and helping to encourage additional investment in their own operations.[3]
- ***Additional conservation practice adoption***—Many landowners who protected their land through the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) used proceeds from the easement sale to implement additional conservation practices. The survey shows that this increase in conservation was due to the recognition that their land will remain forever available for agriculture. FRPP landowners have a significantly higher rate of conservation practice adoption than the general farm population.[4]
- ***Enables older producers to transfer land without liquidating their most valuable asset***—The sale of an easement allows older farmers and ranchers—who are often "land rich but cash poor"—to finance their retirement and facilitate an intra-family land transfer without having to liquidate a cherished asset and legacy. An AFT study found that virtually all surveyed farmers wanted to see their land remain in farming and saw the sale of an easement as the only means to make their land affordable for a next generation producer.[5]
- ***Improved land access for next generation farmers and ranchers***—Escalating land values and competition for land from developers and non-farming investors is putting land ownership out of reach for many producers. This includes both those with established operations seeking to expand and, even more so, for undercapitalized producers and those just getting underway. Land access has long been the number one challenge facing new farmers and ranchers and has only been exacerbated *by a 106 percent* [vii] increase in cropland values and *a 73% increase in pastureland value* [viii] over the last decade and a half. By limiting its future use to agriculture, ACEP typically makes land more affordable, helping to create pathways for land ownership and wealth generation for a new generation of producers.
- ***Economic benefits for rural communities***—Studies have shown that ACEP and other Purchase of Agriculture Conservation Easement (PACE) programs also strengthen rural economies. A *2022 study* [ix] led by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Montana, the Montana Association of Land Trusts, and the Heart of the Rockies Initiative found that between 2014 and 2021, every Federal dollar of easement financing invested in Montana's farms and ranches through ACEP yielded $1.89 of economic activity. In addition, the $109 million ACEP investment produced a total economic impact of $182 million, supported 1,057 local jobs and $41.5 million in labor income, and contributed $99 million to the state's GDP. A *similar study* [x] completed by Colorado State University's Agricultural and Resources Economics Department in 2018 found similar results for Federal investments made from easement programs in Colorado between 2008 and 2017.

Given these many benefits, it is unsurprising that thirty states, and over 100 counties and municipalities, have PACE programs. The most recent addition to this

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[2] Dempsey, Jennifer (2023). *Analyzing the Lasting Impacts of the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/analyzing-the-lasting-impacts-of-the-farm-and-ranch-lands-protection-program/).* Northampton, MA; American Farmland Trust.

[3] Sherman, R., Millshaw, S., Freedgood J. and Wagner B. (1998). *Investing in The Future of Agriculture: The Massachusetts Farmland Protection Program and the Permanence Syndrome.* Northampton, MA: American Farmland Trust.

[4] Dempsey. *Analyzing the Lasting Impacts of the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/analyzing-the-lasting-impacts-of-the-farm-and-ranch-lands-protection-program/).*

[5] American Farmland Trust. *Keeping Farmers on The Land (https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/AFT_E-FS_D_GainingInsights_GainingAccess.pdf).* 2016. Accessed June 2, 2025.

[vii] *https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2024/2024LandValuesCashRents.pdf.*

[viii] *https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2024/2024LandValuesCashRents.pdf.*

[ix] *https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Montana_Working%20for%20Montana%20Agriculture%20-%20Economic%20Impact%20Analysis%20Full%20Report.pdf.*

[x] *https://api.mountainscholar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/4d17eb79-b9db-41eb-b6fa-41bee188a8ea/content.*

list is the State of Tennessee, which this year passed a new $25 million state Farmland Preservation Fund with strong support from the governor, legislators, and the state's agriculture industry. AFT was similarly pleased to see Secretary Rollin's *Farmers First agenda* [xi] point to the benefits of ACEP–ALE as a program for farmers interested in keeping their land in agriculture.

Such programs have long been popular with both landowners and lawmakers and are typically oversubscribed. They have assisted thousands of farm and ranch families in realizing their dream of protecting their land and legacy for future generations.

Building on the Success of ACEP–ALE and RCPP in the Next Farm Bill

AFT is grateful to this Committee—and especially to Chairman Thompson—for its strong support of ACEP–ALE and RCPP, as well as for championing program changes in the ***Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024*** that would greatly improve their ability to serve farmers, ranchers, and agricultural landowners. Let me speak to each of these proposed changes in turn.

1. Increases Funding for Agricultural Conservation Programs

We applaud and strongly support the Committee's inclusion of language to transfer the remaining unobligated balance of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding into the farm bill conservation title both within the *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024* and in the recent House reconciliation bill. The House reconciliation package would increase the farm bill baseline for ACEP by $250 million per year (to $700 million annually), and for RCPP by $150 million per year (to $450 million annually). This funding would begin to help fulfill more landowner demand for ACEP and RCPP and enable even more farmers and ranchers to protect their land and implement the conservation practices needed to build more profitable, resilient, and sustainable operations for decades to come.

It's important to note that ACEP consists of two subprograms—Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE). Annual funding for ACEP–ALE easement acquisitions represents less than half of the current $450 million annual funding for ACEP. For instance, from 2019–2021, funding obligated for easements acquired through ALE amounted to just $114 million on average annually, falling far short of meeting landowner demand. For reference, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania spends an average of $34 million annually on its PACE program.

Key ACEP–ALE Reforms in the Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024

1. Expands Opportunities for Landowner Participation Through Changes to the Federal Share of Easement Value

The *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024* would make valuable changes to ACEP's cost-share rates. These include:

- Increasing the Federal share to up to 65% for general ALE easements.
- Providing a lower Federal share option of 25% for easements held only by the partnerentity.

Working lands with high agricultural productivity and conservation values are being lost because of the financial barriers that many landowners face in accessing ACEP–ALE. Currently, NRCS can only contribute 50% of the easement value unless a property is designated as "Grasslands of Special Significance," (GSS) in which case the Federal share increases to 75%. In parts of the country without a land trust or state or local conservation funding source to leverage additional funding, landowners not in a financial position to donate a significant portion of the easement value are often unable to participate in the program.

The lower Federal share option of 25% provides a new and important alternative. Some landowners mistrust government agencies and are reluctant to commit to an easement in which USDA holds an executory interest. Additionally, some states have been unable to reconcile their program's easement deed terms with USDA's terms. This could be addressed if state programs are allowed to use their own deed terms and there is no Federal interest in the easement. Land trusts and public PACE programs with alternative funding sources would be able to leverage this smaller amount of Federal funding to compensate landowners for the sale of an easement. There is precedent for this lower Federal share option; a 25% Federal share for an entity-only held easement is currently available through the RCPP.

[xi] *https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/05/19/secretary-rollins-announces-farmers-first-small-family-farms-policy-agenda.*

Such changes would enable more farmers, ranchers, and landowners across the nation to make use of the program.

2. Improves Program Efficiency Through an Enhanced Certification Process

Established in the 2008 Farm Bill, certification was intended to streamline program delivery and reduce administrative burdens on NRCS by recognizing the expertise of certain program partners to acquire and steward agricultural conservation easements. By enabling experienced partners to acquire an easement with minimal advance NRCS review, certification helps to reduce the time a landowner must wait to be compensated for an easement, which, since FY20, has averaged *over 2 years.*[xii] Until recently, NRCS had certified only a handful of entities. While we commend NRCS for recent efforts to expand certification, experienced program partners could take on more responsibilities to further reduce easement acquisition times and decisions on post-closing stewardship requests. The language included in the *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024:*

- Affirms Congressional intent around the purpose for certification.
- Lowers the threshold of projects required for certification and provides an additional pathway for certification.
- Allows certified entities to use and modify their easement deed terms so long as these terms are consistent with program purposes.

Such changes would both expand the number of certified entities and make certification more meaningful, thereby improving the process for entities and participating landowners.

3. Eliminates the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Eligibility Requirement

We were pleased to see the *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024* eliminate the AGI eligibility requirement on landowners participating in ACEP. Unlike conservation cost-share programs, a payment through ACEP is not a subsidy but rather a real estate transaction and purchase of a specific property interest based on appraised fair market value. Moreover, imposing AGI eligibility requirements on landowners for ACEP defeats the program purpose of conserving land with the highest agricultural productivity and conservation values. In addition, AGI checks administered through the Farm Services Agency and the Internal Revenue Service are slow and cumbersome and are a barrier to getting projects completed in a timely fashion.

We hope the Committee will consider one further change to AGI, relating to how AGI is calculated. Currently, proceeds from the sale of an agricultural conservation easement are considered income for the purpose of calculating a landowner's AGI. This can have the perverse impact of preventing a farm or ranch family that has just sold an easement from participating in other NRCS conservation cost-share programs for several years. We encourage the Committee to eliminate this disincentive for conservation by excluding easement sales from AGI calculations.

4. Provides Additional Program Clarity Around ACEP Easement Administration Actions

We are grateful to the Committee for including reforms related to easement modifications. The language in the *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024* allows for modifications that align with program purposes and address changing circumstances that adversely impact agricultural viability, including changes in water availability. The language also created a new category of "*de minimis*" adjustments, offering a streamlined pathway for minor actions such as correcting typographical errors and changes to building envelope boundaries. Importantly, the language also clarifies that easement modifications are not considered a major Federal action under the National Environmental Policy Act.

These changes are intended to address landowner concerns over often extensive delays or denials of minor modification requests, and to recognize that program partners have significant expertise in addressing easement administration actions in other easements they hold. Consistency in easement amendment and modification practices across the realm of conservation programs is critical to avoid costly and unnecessary litigation as well as for the proper long-term care of perpetual conservation easements. AFT and partners look forward to continuing to work with Committee staff on ALE modifications language.

[xii] *https://www.farmers.gov/data/easements-acquisition.*

Key RCPP Reforms in the Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024

RCPP is designed to foster innovative landscape-scale conservation projects through expanded public-private partnerships. Land conservation organizations and public agencies have used RCPP to focus working lands protection efforts on important agricultural regions and to incentivize conservation planning and practice adoption on permanently protected farmland and ranchland. RCPP is a valuable, complementary tool to ACEP for permanent working lands protection. The *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024* includes several key reforms to RCPP supported by AFT and many others in the farmland protection community. These reforms would:

1. Expand ACEP Certification to RCPP and Allow ACEP-Certified Entities To Use the Same Streamlined Easement Acquisition Process as ACEP

RCPP has often been stymied by program rules that require different acquisition procedures for agricultural land protection than those used by ACEP–ALE, even for experienced state and local land protection partners. We welcome the bill's proposed return to the "covered program" approach, which offers entities the choice of using established ACEP rules for working lands protection or pursuing innovative approaches through Alternative Funding Arrangements. The proposed language also provides assurance that entity certification under ACEP extends to RCPP easement projects.

2. Allow Up to Ten Percent of Project Agreement Funds To Reimburse a Partner for Administrative Expenses Related to the Project and Permit Partner Administrative Expenses Not Reimbursed To Be Part of the Eligible Partner's Contribution

We applaud the *Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024*'s recognition that eligible partners should be permitted to recover personnel and associated costs with RCPP projects, similar to the use of funds for USDA personnel supporting the covered programs.

Conclusion

Private working lands are a finite resource foundational to the essential industry of agriculture. These lands, especially those that are the most critical for future food production, are being carved up and paved over in communities large and small. This relentless conversion threatens the profitability of established farmers and ranchers, the viability of our next generation of producers, and our future food and national security.

The Federal Government has an important role to play in addressing farmland loss. Agricultural conservation easements are an essential tool in this effort. ACEP–ALE and RCPP do much more than simply protect farmland. They help to create more viable farms and ranches, strengthen rural communities, and open the door for the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

In addition to conservation easements, it is important to note that there are other Federal strategies which could support farmland retention. These include strengthening the Farmland Protection Policy Act and making changes in the Tax Code to both better enable the lifetime transfer of agricultural lands and exempt easement proceeds from taxation. AFT welcomes additional discussion on these and other policy topics.

I thank you once again for this opportunity and for this Committee's continued support for farmland and ranchland protection. AFT appreciates your leadership and looks forward to continuing this conversation. We stand ready to serve as a resource as you move forward on these important issues.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Mr. Fink, and we now turn to Ms. Galase. You may please begin when you are ready for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF NICOLE K. GALASE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, HAWAII CATTLEMEN'S COUNCIL, HILO, HI; ON BEHALF OF NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

Ms. GALASE. Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and Members of the Committee, I am grateful to join you today to testify on the value of conservation programs that support our nation's livestock industry. My name is Nicole Galase, and I currently serve as a Managing Director for the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council, a statewide organization supporting ranchers who steward 750,000 acres or nearly 20 percent of Hawaii's total landmass. HCC is an affiliate of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which is the nation's largest and oldest national trade association representing the U.S. cattle industry and represents over ¼ million cattle producers.

Cattle producers own and manage considerably more land than any other segment of U.S. agriculture or any other U.S. industry for that matter. America's cattle producers collectively manage over 650 million acres, nearly ⅓ of our nation's continental landmass. Some of the biggest challenges and threats to our industry come from the loss or conversion of our natural resources. In Hawaii, like many other states, we face a decline in pasture lands. A decline in pasture inevitably leads to a decline in agricultural production, which weakens food security. Our goal is to keep grasslands green.

Since our livelihood is made on the land, resource stewardship not only makes good environmental sense, it is economically fundamental. Maintaining robust voluntary conservation programs must remain a top priority for both USDA and this Committee. Accomplishing this goal is impossible without the flexibility and attention to locally-led decision-making. Cattle producers take pride in our efforts to improve the land and are always looking for partnership opportunities. I urge the Committee to promote initiatives in the farm bill that allow NRCS programs to foster innovative and common-sense land management. Additionally, mandates that stifle implementation or a one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work in the cattle industry. These efforts to standardize programs limit producers' ability to utilize the unique practices that help their individual operations thrive.

The EQIP program is a popular funding source for Hawaii cattle producers. In one example, a Hawaii rancher utilized EQIP for cross fencing to improve his rotational grazing, allowing him to double his herd size while improving soil health. For this producer and others, accessing technical assistance is crucial to success. NRCS staff provide guidance to maximize both productivity and sustainability, and access to EQIP and conservation technical assistance improves soil health, controls erosion, and ensures improved water quality.

It is clear through my experience with NRCS and FSA that lack of funding is not our primary road block. Especially when it comes to EQIP, the 50 percent livestock carve-out is effective in ensuring that necessary monies are available. Access to technical assistance and inefficient funding distribution are the most significant hurdles to producers' success. While these hurdles were acknowledged in the 2018 Farm Bill, few policies actually increase functionality.

NRCS was designed to function as a locally-led Federal agency. While this seems counterintuitive, its structure has proven invaluable for farmers and ranchers who seek specialized solutions for local conservation challenges. Local populations hold a deep understanding of their land, their ecosystems, and their unique challenges. These stakeholders know better than anyone else where to dedicate resources to address urgent and high impact concerns. This insight allows conservation projects to be tailored to the specific needs of the area, reducing costly missteps often seen when national programs are forced on states or counties. In short, locally-led conservation combines the right knowledge, community buy-in, and targeted solutions to efficiently stretch every dollar spent.

As policymakers consider the sustainability of the U.S. agricultural industry, environmental sustainability is only one leg of a three-legged stool. Economic prosperity, social awareness, and voluntary conservation go hand in hand, and we are always looking for conservation opportunities that will have tangible benefits for the environment and to help improve our ranching lands.

USDA's conservation programs are an asset to cattle producers, but only when implemented in a practical producer-friendly and voluntary manner. With USDA as a partner, American ranchers maintain open spaces, healthy range lands, and wildlife habitat while leading the world in quality protein production. Together we can conserve our country's natural resources, maintain economic prosperity, ensure a viable way of life for future generations. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to questions. *Mahalō.*

[The prepared statement of Ms. Galase follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF NICOLE K. GALASE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, HAWAII CATTLEMEN'S COUNCIL, HILO, HI; ON BEHALF OF NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture:

I am honored and grateful to join you today to testify on the importance of conservation to support our nation's agricultural industry.

My name is Nicole Galase and I currently serve as Managing Director of the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council (HCC). I also lead the Hawaii Beef Industry Council, a Qualified State Beef Council, and the Hawaii Rangeland Stewardship Foundation, which is a [501(c)(3)] with a mission to ensure healthy rangelands for generations to come. I have been working with Hawaii's ranchers since 2019 to ensure a viable business environment for the cattle industry. This includes representing ranchers in state and county policymaking, and providing opportunities for them to gain access to conservation agriculture funds that help them in their goals to steward the land while producing food.

The Hawaii Cattlemen's Council's represents 135 ranch members across the state. Ranchers are the stewards of 750,000 acres of land in Hawaii, or nearly 20% of the state's total land mass. HCC is an affiliate of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). NCBA is the nation's largest and oldest national trade association representing the U.S. beef cattle industry, with other 250,000 producers represented through both direct membership and 44 state affiliate associations.

Cattle producers own and manage considerably more land than any other segment of U.S. agriculture—or any other U.S. industry for that matter. Cattle producers graze cattle on approximately 666.4 million acres across the United States—nearly ⅓ of our nation's continental landmass. Additionally, acreage used to grow hay, feedgrains, and food grains add millions more acres of land under cattlemen's stewardship and private ownership. Some of the biggest challenges and threats to our industry come from the loss or conversion of our natural resources. The cattle industry is threatened daily by urban encroachment, natural disasters, and government overreach that makes our stewardship harder—if not impossible. In Hawaii, like many other states, we face a decline in pasture lands. A decline in pasture inevitably leads to a decline in agricultural production, which weakens our food security. Our goal is to keep agricultural lands in agricultural production. Since our livelihood is made on the land, through the utilization of our natural resources, being good stewards of the land not only makes good environmental sense; it is fundamental for our industry to remain strong. We strive to maximize the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of our operations, and it is through voluntary conservation programs that ranchers will continue to be a proud partner with the government to reach our environmental conservation goals.

Conservation programs are one of the most visible and consistently important portions of the farm bill for cattle producers across the country. Many cattle producers' only nexus to farm bill-related services occurs at their local NRCS or FSA office. Building and maintaining robust voluntary conservation resources must remain a top priority for both USDA and this Committee. The 2018 Farm Bill sent a strong signal to agricultural producers across the country that voluntary conservation is a top priority, and we appreciate this Committee's commitment to continually improving these vital programs. As we look forward to the next farm bill, I'm excited to discuss the exciting opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Cattle producers pride themselves on being good stewards of our country's natural resources.

Cattle producers employ various conservation practices, many of which we put in place by utilizing NRCS programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (or EQIP). EQIP is designed to assist producers in implementing conservation practices that will enhance the health of grazing lands, improving water quality, improving soil quality, and reducing soil erosion. One important feature of EQIP has been its focus on livestock operations, and we appreciated the 50 percent funding designation for livestock-related practices in the 2018 Farm Bill. Because crop production receives significant value from other working lands programs, like CSP, a livestock carve-out for EQIP funding ensures that resources are equitably distributed among producers. Federal funds spent on conservation are a good investment in our country's natural resources and the sustainability of agriculture and wildlife, and it is vital to ensure that livestock producers have access to these valuable resources for grazing and feeding management. While the intent of EQIP is to make conservation funding and technical assistance accessible to all producers, barriers to entry often disincentivize producers from utilizing NRCS programs. For example, when NRCS staff are not given enough resources to make site visits and understand the specific needs of a producer, the producer is often offered very rigid guidelines that are not tailored to their situation. While producers may see opportunities to improve the land and environment with EQIP funding, many simply do not have sufficient confidence in the process to apply[.]

Collectively, we could improve upon soil-health-building grazing practices, provide more erosion control, and promote cleaner water sources. More and more frequently, ranchers choose to adjust their budgets to cover the costs of improvement, rather than waiting for assistance and losing valuable time. We care about the environment and our livestock, and any improvement on the land is something we are unanimously proud of. By creating additional hurdles for producers that want to utilize these programs, the Committee and USDA limit access while simultaneously limiting the government's ability to record our environmental improvements. I urge the Committee to support initiatives in the farm bill that allow NRCS programs to support innovation and commonsense land management.

It is clear through my experience with NRCS and FSA that lack of funding for practice implementation is not an issue. Especially when it comes to EQIP, the 50 percent livestock carve-out is effective in ensuring that necessary monies are available. The most significant challenge for producers who want to take advantage of working lands programs is the inefficiency in technical assistance availability and funding distribution that allow us to accomplish a project. While this hurdle was acknowledged by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, few of the policies focused on increasing functionality. The EQIP program is a popular source of funding for Hawaii's cattle producers, as access to technical assistance is a much-needed resource. The technical assistance provided, such as engineering specs of a reservoir, or ensuring designs do not cause erosion, are essential to a producer successfully completing practices that benefit their operation as well as the community around them. Providing enough experienced staffing and resources to our NRCS offices is a key component of ensuring producers utilize the offered programs.

Flexibility is key to ranchers' utilization of conservation programs. Ensuring that producers have the freedom to effectively manage their land goes beyond EQIP, stretching to other conservation programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP has the potential to provide significant environmental benefit but currently fails to maximize its value. Changes made in the 2018 Farm Bill limit our ability to effectively manage CRP acreage with grazing. Livestock graze mature, stagnate grasses and allow regrowth of green, carbon-capturing plants. If we allow more CRP grazing, we will promote more opportunities for beginning ranchers to graze animals responsibly and provide existing pastures with more rest and recovery during drought years. This will be especially beneficial in areas where pasture is scarce and livestock production is rapidly dwindling like my home state of Hawaii. Cattle and other forms of livestock can be the sustainable solution to managing CRP without the negative impact on the ecosystem while also helping ranchers economically. HCC and NCBA support the CRP Grasslands pilot program, and hope to see a permanent authorization for this program included in a final farm bill. Grazing is a valuable tool in maximizing carbon sequestration but is not a tool that we are able to use on CRP acreage. This policy limits our ability to effectively manage our land. By allowing cattle to graze CRP acreage without a reduction in payment, we could greatly increase interest in CRP contracts, while simultaneously maximizing environmental value and economic benefit.

Congress has made clear its interest in building a climate-smart economy, including the integration of climate-smart practices into the agricultural industry. The Hawaii Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities was a tremendous opportunity to provide incentives for voluntary conservation practices that also measured the direct benefits of the practices like managed grazing, silvopasture, and invasive brush management. The incentive provided the funding support to implement the practice, and the measurement of impacts on the soil provided a concrete example of benefit that the producer could be proud of and utilize to enhance their marketing capacity—boasting both the benefit of food production and regeneration of the land. While the Climate-Smart Commodity grant has unfortunately been canceled, we are eager to apply for the Advancing Markets for Producers Initiative. Our hope is that this funding will continue to serve the producers by incentivizing voluntary conservation practices that ultimately provide benefit to the consumer, our community. As with EQIP, technical assistance will be necessary for this program. We understand the goal to get as much funds directly to the producer as possible (in this case, the threshold is 65%). However, we suggest that funds for technical assistance be considered part of the direct-to-producer percentage, as this technical assistance is imperative to successful implementation of practices, and for navigating improvement of markets.

HCC is interested in participating in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program to direct funds to practices that will best address Hawaii's land issues. However, our colleagues currently utilizing the program shared that the application and reporting are cumbersome and laden with red-tape. For example, NRCS manages the RCPP through Conservation Desktop, which is a different platform than is used to manage EQIP and CSP contracts. This adds unnecessary complexity and confusion. Staff are not well acquainted with how to conduct contract management through the new platform, leading to errors and delays. Modifications that should improve the project are also slow to get approval. This puts stress on organizations and increases administrative costs. If this program can be streamlined, organizations like HCC, who are the closest to our producers and can get funds directly to the boots-on-the-ground doing the important work, will be better equipped to successfully implement an RCPP contract.

Voluntary conservation programs work because they are voluntary. While it seems obvious, continuing to fund voluntary conservation programs, while keeping them voluntary, is critical to their continued success. Mandated implementation, or a one-size-fits-all approach that accompanies top-down regulation does not work in the cattle industry. If these programs or practices were to become mandatory, the rules and regulations that farmers and ranchers would be subjected to would make it harder for them to utilize the unique conservation practices that help their individual operations thrive.

NRCS was created as a locally-led Federal program. While this seems counterintuitive, its structure has proven invaluable for farmers and ranchers who seek specialized solutions for local conservation challenges. Communities have deep knowledge of their land, ecosystems, and challenges and know how we can dedicate resources to the most urgent and high-impact issues. This insight allows conservation projects to be tailored to the specific needs of the area, reducing costly missteps often seen when national programs are forced on states or counties. Agriculture is never one-size-fits-all, and the most successful projects are those that can be flexible and adapt to the needs of the producer. This leads to better buy-in from the producer and strengthens participation in the practices that will reach USDA's goals. Local stakeholders are directly affected by the outcomes, which encourages more careful and honest use of the funds. Projects are more likely to be monitored and adjusted if they are falling short of expectations. In short, locally-led conservation combines the right knowledge, community buy-in, and targeted solutions to efficiently stretch every dollar spent.

As policymakers consider the sustainability of the U.S. agricultural industry, environmental sustainability is only one leg of a three-legged stool. Cattle producers strive to balance environmental sustainability with economic viability and social consciousness—maintaining this balance is key to ensuring our long-term success. Economic prosperity, social awareness, and voluntary conservation go hand-in-hand and we are always looking for new, innovative conservation programs that will have tangible benefits for the environment and help to improve our ranching lands.

USDA's voluntary conservation programs have been a great asset to cattle producers, and it is important that these programs are implemented in a practical, producer friendly, and voluntary manner for years to come to ensure that cattle producers will continue to have the ability to do what we do best—produce the world's safest, most nutritious, abundant, and affordable protein while operating in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Ranchers across the country maintain open spaces, healthy rangelands, provide wildlife habitat and feed the world. Together we can sustain our country's natural resources and economic prosperity, ensuring the viability of our way of life for future generations.

I thank the Committee for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, and thank you to all of the witnesses for your testimony today. At this time, Members will be recognized in order of seniority, alternating between Majority and Minority Members and in order of arrival for those who joined us after the hearing convened, and you will be recognized for 5 minutes each to allow everyone to get as many questions in as possible. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Dr. Sebert, I thank you for your testimony and perspectives on Public Law 83–566. In your view, what do you think are the most helpful improvements that Congress could provide to the Small Watershed Program and rehab program?

Dr. SEBERT. Mr. Chairman, I would direct you——

The CHAIRMAN. Your microphone, Doctor.

Dr. SEBERT. I pulled a Jimmy there. Sorry. I would direct you to our farm bill priorities that you are familiar with, not the least of which is the opportunity for NRCS to address remedial and repair work on aging structures that exceed the level for operation and maintenance for which the sponsors are responsible but fall short of full rehabilitation. There is a body of work there that needs to be addressed, and it will require Congress pointing NRCS to that work for that to happen.

The CHAIRMAN. Last year's Committee-passed farm bill contained provisions to specifically authorize cost-share for remedial actions on Pub. L. 83–566. These actions would include the deterioration of a component of a structure faster than expected or structural damage caused by a weather or storm or weather event. So drilling in on this further, Dr. Sebert, in your view, how might such a change improve the administration of the program? We are getting down to the nuts and bolts here.

Dr. SEBERT. This body of work carries an element of risk, and the action that the policies that were put forth in that version of the farm bill would buy down that risk, which protects both the sponsors of the project as well as USDA, and, perhaps most importantly, those living downstream from this flood protection.

The CHAIRMAN. And just one more moment, Dr. Sebert. In the nature of the upstream flood control, remind our friends that these are smaller, interlocking dams, most of which hold no water, simply catch and then meter out at a safe rate these rainfalls. Just the general concept.

Dr. SEBERT. Yes. These small watershed structures are built in a series. Many times, the head of the watershed area will have two to three of these structures on it that catch the rainfall, catch the water, and then release it over a period of 7 to 14 days rather than uncontrolled release from rain events in the upstream reaches of the watershed that send a flash flood or extensive flooding in the main tributaries.

The CHAIRMAN. President Boening, I appreciate your comments and your testimony about the need to simplify programs and reduce paperwork. In recent farm bills, particularly the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress was successful in program consolidation and simplification. Since Congress has, at times, tended to create similar overlapping programs, subprograms within larger programs and regional carve-outs, it seems to me that such simplification must be necessary to restore clarity and update the statute. What are your thoughts about recent efforts in Congress to streamline and simplify programs?

Mr. BOENING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, the short answer there is, we are very appreciative of that. I mean, that is one of the things I kind of said in my testimony. What farmers and ranchers face, remember, we want a farm and ranch, and that is what we do, and when things can be simplified when we walk into the USDA offices, it is much appreciated. So as we work through this, keep that thought in mind.

The CHAIRMAN. Absolutely. It is hard to believe having chaired this Subcommittee some time ago how far we have really come, the dramatic increases in the conservation spending in the 2002 program, and now this effort to take one-time money, what remains of it, and turn it into a permanent increase in baseline to work from. I think all of us in the conservation movement together, all of you and all of your supporters back home, we have had amazing success considering the ever-increasing challenges of legislating in the modern world.

With that, I thank all of you for answering my questions and your participation in these programs, and I turn to my colleague, the distinguished Ranking Member from Hawaii, for 5 minutes for questions.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In 2022, USDA launched the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Program, or CSC, which provided funding and technical assistance directly to farmers to help them scale climate-friendly practices like cover cropping, tillage management, and prescribed grazing, to name a few. This program was overwhelmingly popular and food producers across the country leveraged $3.1 billion in CSC funding to get shovels in the ground on cost-effective, partnership-based conservation projects. That was until April when USDA abruptly canceled the program, claiming that CSC projects didn't prioritize direct payments to farmers, but in reality, farmers were receiving direct financial and technical support, often exceeding the arbitrary 65-percent threshold for direct payments, including in the Administration's new Farmers First priorities. Now more than 14,000 farmers covering 3.2 million acres across the country are left wondering what will happen to their planned conservation work, in some cases already with investments made.

There is nothing Farmer First about yanking the rug out from under these farmers, if you ask me. And the USDA, we know, has promised to replace CSC with the Advancing Markets for Producers Initiative or AMP, but it is unclear when project reapplications will, in fact, be reviewed, how much funding will be available, and what farmers who are planning on this funding are supposed to do with the work that is already ongoing.

Ms. Galase, in your written testimony, you mentioned that you are eager to apply for AMP to continue projects started already and invested in under CSC, and you are currently in conversations with the USDA about this reapplication. What impact has frozen CSC funds had on planned conservation work and on your producers? What has been the impact on them given many have already made investments in the ground?

Ms. GALASE. Thank you for highlighting this issue. We did see the Climate-Smart Commodities Program as something that was going to help our producers. We had funds going directly to farmers, ranchers, and foresters. Because it was canceled, those projects are canceled as well. All those contracts were canceled, and if a producer is extremely fortunate, they are going to be continuing those projects on their own dime, but that was not planned for, and as you know, in agriculture, you need to plan for years ahead.

We went through the hard work of getting them through the arduous onboarding process, and we had those funds on the ground. Producers were starting the work. Now they are essentially finished, and they don't know when they are going to get the funding back. And the producer engagement team, such as the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council who are helping with that difficult onboarding, a lot of the other organizations have lost dozens of employees who are now unemployed. And in looking at applying for the next Advancing Markets for Producers Initiative, we are now applying with a very bare-bones team.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you. So this has definitely had an impact on our producers. I know for many, they don't have the cash-flow to just continue on their own, and any investments made that have not been refunded at this particular point is a definite loss to their bottom line. And as you mentioned, employees fired are very hard to rehire in a tight labor market like the one that we are in.

A question to the panel as a whole, there has been a lot of discussion about technical assistance and technical support as being critical. Mr. McLeland, your testimony also cites the importance of NRCS staff being able to help farmers access the technical assistance they need to be able to enroll in these conservation programs. What we do know is with the President's initial budget, he actually proposed eliminating completely CTA funding. We do know that yesterday there was some restoration of that particular funding in the appropriations bill, but we also know that CTA funding has decreased year after year after year. It is never enough.

So to the panel, what impact is going to be the result of NRCS being slashed by the $800 million staffing in the thousands lost to NRCS and CTA funding actually decreasing, not increasing in terms of rural farmers, under-served farmers being able to access this critical conservation funding that we are trying to provide? I don't know who wants to take it up.

Mr. MCLELAND. It all starts with technical assistance. The need for support that we understand from the producers and the growers out there, that is where it starts, from facilitation to getting into the right program, to ensure that we are helping them address their goals and objectives. It is going to be very difficult to deliver incentive-based, voluntary programs without conservation technical assistance that it all builds off a solid foundation of conservation planning.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you. Anyone else want to answer to that?

Dr. SEBERT. Watershed work is a long-term proposition, requires years of planning and work, and so any disruption of that flow does impact the outcome in terms of the ability to implement watershed program work.

Mr. FINK. We are similarly concerned about the damage this could do to the conservation delivery system, and I would just note that not all farmers necessarily want to enter into a specific farm bill program. The conservation technical assistance allows them to get planning and the expertise they need, so it is yet another important avenue for really serving farmers and ranchers.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. LaMalfa, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to join you in Committee today. A key topic, very important to my home district in California as well, with over ½ million acres of rice, as well as other adaptable habitat for the betterment of waterfowl and conservation.

So as you know it, in my real life, I am a rice grower in the Sacramento Valley, and my farm and many of my neighbors utilized the EQIP program in the past and have done at least a certain amount of effort to provide the habitats to all the many species we have in the Flyway so plentiful in the Sacramento Valley. In the 2018 Farm Bill, there was a provision included that will allow the Secretary to enter into EQIP contracts for up to 10 years for practices solely for the benefit of wildlife, including post-harvest flooding. It would help maintain seasonal wetlands for the waterfowl and migratory bird habitat. So to my knowledge, USDA has still not carried out any contracts for longer than a few years, a couple years at a time. So I am curious, with the provision that we worked on in 2018, why have not there been more longer, up to these 10 year contracts that the bill provided for?

As you know, depending to what level you are participating, the infrastructure, the effort you might do in shaping your lands, shaping the irrigation systems and other aspects of what you would do to enhance waterfowl and conservation does require a certain amount of effort, a certain amount of investment in doing that. So for Mr. McLeland, what is your familiarity with EQIP putting out actual 10 year contracts, again, because if I was going to invest, then I would want to be able to know that I am going to get a return, that the money I spend, the effort I make, is going to be more for than just a couple years. And maybe I don't get to be in that contract after that and you are out that effort, which I think most people that participate at all probably wouldn't mind being in it for a longer period of time. It is not a hard thing. It is not like, say, in some cases permanent easements, which shy a lot of people away. So what do you think about that?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, thank you for the question. It is certainly good to have that option for sure, and each contract, each interaction with that producer, it is very tailored to their operation. So we work with them and are very sensitive to that, and we haven't seen as many 10 year contracts as we probably would have expected, generally average around 5.

Mr. LAMALFA. You have seen some 10 year, though?

Mr. MCLELAND. I have seen some, yes, but there——

Mr. LAMALFA. What state or what region they would be in that where you are seeing that happen?

Mr. MCLELAND. Arkansas.

Mr. LAMALFA. Arkansas?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, and we have definitely seen 5 years be the norm, though, one to five. One to five, and that generally ends up being a function of the operation and the preference of the landowner.

Mr. LAMALFA. So do you hear clamoring by growers for the 10 year contracts, or is it really a low-demand situation? What do you think?

Mr. MCLELAND. It seemed like to be a more low-demand situation.

Mr. LAMALFA. Because we have run into anecdotes, at least on that. We are wondering why NRCS is not allowing them or processing them or what have you as defined in the 2018 Farm Bill to give that additional flexibility and long-term. Depending to what level, to what stage you are practicing, I would want to know if I am making significant changes in my operation that if it worked for me or a neighbor, whatever, that you would have that option, but I guess we need to get a little more direct input from folks that have sought these 10 years. Anything else you would have?

Mr. MCLELAND. Again, we would like to see as long a contracts as we can get, so 10 years is good but definitely need to take some look at the implementation side of it.

Mr. LAMALFA. Well, it is very important we tailor these two individual needs, as you mentioned at the top there.

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Heck, I know it is a positive thing in that, but we will have to get some more information together on the anecdotes, but is NRCS generally cooperative on doing them? Do they have any reason maybe in the California region that you are aware of that they are not putting them out internally?

Mr. MCLELAND. Not that I am aware of.

Mr. LAMALFA. All right. Okay. Well, we will follow up on that. So any thoughts you have, anybody else on the panel—I ran out of time already on that—please send that along to my office if you wish. So thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from North Carolina, Ms. Adams, for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Madam Ranking Member, and thank you all to the witnesses who have come today.

President Trump's 2026 budget proposal would cut funding that goes toward conservation technical assistance at the USDA, and there is language that would cut the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service staff. And yesterday, the House Agriculture Appropriations Majority released a bill that aligns with that by slashing funding by five percent below Fiscal Year 2025 to the Natural Resources Conservation Service's conservation operations, and so this is going to make it harder for farmers to get technical assistance as it relates to conservation.

So for Mr. Fink and Mr. McLeland, can you explain how slashing funding for operations and technical assistance programs affect the effectiveness of conservation programs, the future of farming, and the day-to-day experiences of farmers?

Mr. FINK. We are definitely concerned about potential cuts to conservation technical assistance. A lot of farmers, as I mentioned earlier, are not necessarily interested in entering contracts on farm bill programs, and so that is the funding that they access just to get that general technical assistance. And I think it is absolutely critical to recognize that for a lot of NRCS staff, these are boots-on-the-ground. These are people working directly with farmers who have trusted relationships. You cannot severely slash that funding without actually impacting the staffing component.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay. Mr. Fink.

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, and I would agree. As I mentioned earlier, conservation planning starts with technical assistance, and these are long-term relationships that these conservation planners have with these producers, and it is a long-term investment. As Mr. Fink mentioned, some may not be looking for participation in a program. They just be looking for recommendations and advice to address a need or concern that they have.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay.

Mr. MCLELAND. And so that is a very important piece of the foundation.

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you very much. So could you explain how this proposed cut might affect the intended outcomes of conservation efforts such as lowering production costs for farmers and achieving better environmental results? Yes, sir, you can go right ahead.

Mr. MCLELAND. Just given the importance of conservation technical assistance, it would be very difficult to ensure that the programs are implemented to the degree that that they would be otherwise.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay. Well, I agree with you. Well, let me move on. One of my main priorities on the broader Committee is advocating for racial equity and justice in agricultural spaces, and it is the same for this Subcommittee because when we help minority or black farmers, we help all farmers. And one of my signature bills, Justice for Black Farmers Act of 2023 (H.R. 1167, 118th Congress), has a few provisions related to conservation, such as using mandatory funding to support conservation technical assistance at the USDA and the Conservation Stewardship Program. And at a time when farmers are facing more climate-related pressures than ever, it is vital for Congress to give them the resources that they need to remain resilient and profitable. Hurricane Helene devastated Charlotte, which is where I represent, and the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, we have seen devastating impacts of natural disasters on farm country in the past few years.

So for Ms. Nicole, is that Galase?

Ms. GALASE. Galase.

Ms. ADAMS. Is that right?

Ms. GALASE. Galase.

Ms. ADAMS. Okay. Thank you. So can you tell us about the role that USDA conservation programs like EQIP play in helping landowners recover from natural disasters?

Ms. GALASE. Sure. EQIP has been really essential for recovering from natural disasters. EQIP funds things that reduce erosion. You can put in windbreaks so that there is less erosion, and these are things that prepare you for and when natural disasters come. We are seeing things like flooding. We are seeing things like drought. So reservoirs that EQIP funds, that allows us to capture the water when we need it in order to be prepared for when disasters like this happen. Reaching our historically-under-served producers, these are the producers who normally don't have access to these programs, and so we need to build the trust for them to step into those NRCS offices and know that they are going to get the help they need with the technical assistance that needs to come with it so they can be successful.

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you very much, and thank you to all of our witnesses today. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Indiana, Mr. Baird, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I think it is very appropriate that you mentioned the Dust Bowl and the Soil Conservation Service in your remarks, because it is relevant to what we are talking about in this Committee. And I wanted to share with you, when I was a young kid on the farm in Indiana, we had one of the worst floods that I had ever seen, and it took out railroad trestles and filled, as a example, a 5 gallon bucket of water in a very short period. Back then we fed hogs on wooden platforms and put feeders on them. We saw pigs going down that flooded stream, still on the platform, and there wasn't anything you could do about it.

But my point is the local farmers got together with the Soil Conservation Service and implemented the small watershed projects. And so when I get around to it, Dr. Sebert, I am going to start with you, but the question goes to all of you. But those small watershed projects, that went up the tributaries rather than a big main dam on mainstream and went up to tributaries, and those small dams functioned like the water tank on a toilet, in my opinion, and let it out slow, and we haven't had a flood in that area since that. I am sorry, sir, but anyway. But we haven't had a flood in that stream since then. The only thing I see happening is that they have come to the end of their useful life, and there is some thought about maybe taking those out. My suggestion would be that we restore them and replenish them.

But going on to my question, science, technology and innovation, they are really central to progression of American agriculture and have led the U.S. agricultural industry being the most reliable and efficient in the world. So how can we be sure to maintain clear eligibility requirements for these conservation programs that we are talking about, paving the way from implementation of new technologies when they come about, like precision agriculture, and technologies, or new land management practices? Dr. Sebert if you would like to comment on my original thoughts, and then the rest of you on this precision agriculture that would be appreciated.

Dr. SEBERT.—to speak across——

Mr. BAIRD. I would rather do that than be here to tell you truth, but anyway.

Dr. SEBERT.—to take you across the country and let you tell that story. There here are, in fact, 132 NRCS structures in your state at this point in time. I agree with you that in the majority of the cases, it is not take them out, it is rehabilitate them and continue to provide those benefits. Highway culverts, county road culverts, bridges, school bus routes have all grown accustomed to the protection those structures provide, and to take them out, in my opinion, would be an error, and folks would learn fairly quickly with the volatile weather we see around the country that something was doing a good job. Even though it was a silent sentinel, somebody didn't know it was there. They didn't know what the function of it was. It was providing the protection necessary to keep commerce going in that county and keep kids safe going to school.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you. Starting with Mr. Boening, anyone else have a comment in this regard, especially about precision agriculture?

Mr. BOENING. Yes, sir, I would like to comment. I appreciate the question. I got to thinking here when you went down that road how much has changed in my 43 year farming career, and things just simply like GPS has enabled us to move to things like minimum tillage and nutrient management, and those are all conservation efforts as well. When you think about fertilization application rates that you can tailor as you go across your field and apply them at variable rates to, then there is no excess. You don't overuse it. You don't under use it.

So precision ag, and I will share this, it has been a little difficult to keep up. I think my 8 year old grandson will be able to help me here pretty quick on some of that stuff, and it really ties into conservation because, like I said before, you can manage your nutrients. You cannot over overuse fuel. It has been a good thing.

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes. I would just comment quickly that I concur with Mr. Boening's comments here as well. And would also add that technology is providing opportunities for us in our space, too, to better utilize conservation as part on-farm operations where, in this case, wetlands may provide a suitable alternative and fit well within a farm operation, strengthening the bottom line and increasing profitability too. So precision is helping us identify those opportunities.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you, and my time is up. I am sorry for the last two, but we can talk later. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes an old colleague from the Science Committee, Mr. Sorensen of Illinois for 5 minutes.

Mr. SORENSEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Always fun to be able to talk about the intersection of agriculture and science.

Today we are at a critical point where we must do more to conserve the fertility of our land by investing in soil resilience. Not doing so would risk the very foundation of our food and energy systems. Recent reports from the National Weather Service underscored a stark reality: our land management choices have real and often dangerous consequences. On May 1, 2023, multiple crashes occurred on Interstate 55 near Springfield, Illinois, in Congresswoman Budzinski's district. Thirty-seven people were seriously injured, and seven people died. The dust storm originated from freshly-tilled and planted farm fields picked up and lofted by 40 mile per hour winds, but this wasn't a onetime deal. Less than a month ago, a dust storm in my district southwest of Bloomington, Illinois, quickly tracked northeast on the heels of strong winds, causing zero visibility on roads and highways. And I, coming back from Washington, D.C. to my district, watched as the dust storm moved over O'Hare Airport, causing massive delays. Thankfully, no one died because of the quick action and the funding of the National Weather Service.

Meteorologists like me, we call these dust storms, but more importantly, they are erosion events, the result of overly-tilled, unhealthy soil, which creates dry, dusty earth that can easily be carried off by high wind. It is a similar tale to what happened in the Dust Bowl years of the Central Plains in the 1930s. It is not just a visibility issue. What we are seeing here is our nutrients go into the air and are gone, and we can prevent these disasters by ensuring that our farmers have the funding and the assistance that they need to implement smart ag, like no-till or cover crops that mitigate erosion and improve soil health over time. These practices not only ensure that our farmers can withstand stronger weather events, but also protect travelers in our communities. What happened in my district in Bloomington and downstate in Springfield should serve as a wake-up call because this could easily happen next May or even in this fall if we are still in drought condition.

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS, plays a vital role in how we move forward, but it requires the funding and the staffing needed to meet the moment. Unfortunately, what we are seeing is an Administration that is hellbent on making cuts to USDA's workforce, specifically within NRCS. With a massive $300 billion cut in food assistance on the horizon, it is hard to envision how this Committee will pass a farm bill that sufficiently provides support through conservation programs like EQIP and CSP.

Mr. Boening, in March, west Texas experienced its own erosion event, turning the sky an eerie orange across the Permian Basin from El Paso to Dallas-Fort Worth. How can we best integrate smart agricultural practices into risk management planning to prevent future events?

Mr. BOENING. Thank you for the question, Congressman. We have climate change. We know that. We experience it. Some of that is brought on by some extreme drought that we have had in those areas, and these conservation practices that we have been talking about, since 10:00 a.m. this morning, are really the tools that we need to use as we go forward. I mean, you mentioned cover crops, you mentioned minimum tillage. In some places, not everything works exactly the same in every area. I will just use my area somewhat. We cover crops on our dryland acres. Non-irrigated acres are difficult because of limited rainfall, so we go back to doing as minimum tillage as we can, leaving as much residue on the surface as we can, and planning buffer zones, whether they be wind breaks, whether they be grass waterways, grass strips. Those are all things that we need to look at as we go forward, and we need to work on the funding for those quite frankly, and we understand that.

Mr. SORENSEN. Thank you, Mr. Boening. Dr. Sebert, my time is limited. I appreciate your soil and water conservation work. My focus in meteorology school was hydrology and stream flow management. Could you explain in the last 30 seconds that I have how important it is to lock the nutrients into the fields, keeping them out of the rivers, and, more importantly, how Congress and the Federal Government should support the effort?

Dr. SEBERT. [Inaudible]. We can apply every conservation practice we know, and all it takes is one flood to take that away. So by controlling the flow of water across the land, we can lock things in place and have those remain where we have adequate production.

Mr. SORENSEN. I love your idea of an all-of-the-above approach. I appreciate you all, and, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes the full Chairman of the Committee, Mr. Thompson, for 5 minutes.

Mr. THOMPSON. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you both. The One Big Beautiful Bill, as passed by the House, provided key investments for farmers and ranchers. This includes necessary updates to the farm safety net, investments in livestock security measures, research, and trade promotion. It also rescinded unobligated IRA conservation funds and reinvested those dollars into the standing conservation programs. By doing so, we will have eliminated the climate sideboards and returned the funding to meet an important core principle: locally-led conservation that benefits all farmers. Mr. Boening, how important are these investments for our agriculture producers?

Mr. BOENING. The simple answer there, Mr. Chairman, is of the utmost importance. We talked about all morning here, these programs were successful, and Chairman Lucas mentioned it in his opening statement, because they are flexible, they are voluntary, and they are locally-led. So those programs are what farmers have worked with and benefited from over the years. So, quite frankly, and it is not just the farming and ag community that benefit from it. It is our rural communities, it is all of those things, so those investments are of the utmost importance to farmers and ranchers.

Mr. THOMPSON. So isn't it true that in addition to just the fact that American agriculture can be defined as *science, technology and innovation,* coupled with this type of investment, and these programs really help to contribute to the fact that our farmers, ranchers and foresters are the climate champions of the world with the amount of carbon they sequester? And the beauty of it in agriculture, when we sequester carbon, we manufacture topsoil, which means we grow things for the benefit of everyone.

Mr. BOENING. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Mr. THOMPSON. The Inflation Reduction Act required that funding provided by the law for conservation programs could only be used for climate-related practices, thereby restricting funding for many other practices otherwise eligible under the program. And some very credible individuals, including the NRCS chief during President Obama's Administration, for one, have said, it would be best if the sideboards were taken out so that the state technical committees and local groups can decide which practices work best for the natural resource concerns that they wish to address. Through the current reconciliation process, we are trying to reinvest those IRA-unobligated conservation funding, as we have talked about in this hearing already, into the existing conservation programs to provide a permanent increase to the title's baseline. In doing so, we would also remove those climate sideboards required by the IRA to allow for more local prioritization.

I will just open this up to all of our panelists. Do you agree that reducing, removing the climate sideboards would better allow it to be a locally-led process to be able to work and be able to use conservation practices that may vary depending on where in the country the farmer is actually farming? I can think of many places where, if you put a cover crop in it, would suck every last bit of moisture out of the ground, and you won't be able to grow a cash crop. In some places it gets too cold too soon to be able to do planting like that. So I will just open it up for anybody who would like to comment on that question.

Mr. BOENING. I will just go really quickly. So by opening it up, removing those sideboards, it goes back to the same things we have been talking about: being flexible, being locally-led, and it is still voluntary. The climate-smart practices will still be eligible, so it goes back to the core of how these programs work the best.

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, I will second that to say at Ducks Unlimited, we are fully supportive of locally-led, voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs that are flexible Farmer First, and that certainly would be the case in this instance.

Mr. THOMPSON. Very good.

Mr. FINK. As an organization, AFT is very supportive of climate-smart practices. They are essential to the profitability of farmers, but the number one thing that is limiting the ability to get these practices on the ground is total available funding. We support the transfer of this funding with or without those sideboards.

Mr. THOMPSON. And any comments—I will just finish with that—won't be a part of the farm bill, but it is a law today. The Biden Administration just never really got it together, the [inaudible] programs. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from New Mexico for 5 minutes, Mr. Vasquez.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you Ranking Member. It can't be lost on us today that we are sitting here for a hearing titled, *Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conservation, Sustaining Working Land,* when just 3 weeks ago, some of my colleagues on this Committee voted essentially to gut the farm bill and limit the chances of passing the historic bipartisan farm bill. So I think if we are going to talk about conservation, let's talk about conservation initiatives that are effective, that are based in science, and that are supported by farmers and ranchers on the ground, not the talking points from the White House.

Because I am limited on time this morning, I am going to make this easy and ask our panel some simple yes or no questions and shift the focus to some legislation that we can pass as part of a farm bill, hopefully. Mr. McLeland, you stated that you learned early on that agriculture and wildlife conservation were not mutually exclusive activities, which is something that I completely agree with. Do you still agree with this?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Well, then I think you would support my bipartisan bill, which is the Habitat Connectivity on Working Lands Act of 2025 (H.R. 2235), which was written for this exact purpose and expands voluntary USDA programs to improve wildlife corridors on private working lands, including habitat for waterfowl and upland bird habitat. Thank you. Mr. McLeland.

Mr. MCLELAND. Thank you.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Mr. Fink, do you agree that farmer-to-farmer education, which creates mentorship opportunities between experienced and new producers, is a valuable tool for farmers using Federal dollars?

Mr. FINK. Yes. It is, in fact, one of our top farm bill priorities in conservation.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Well, thank you so much. That is the idea behind my bipartisan Farmer to Farmer Education Act of 2024 (H.R. 8488, 118th Congress), which creates mentorship opportunities between experienced and new producers, and I appreciate your support for this approach.

Mr. FINK. Thank you for your leadership on it.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you. Ms. Galase, you said that the cattle industry is threatened daily by government overreach in part of your opening statement documents, and it is one of the impediments to conservation for ranchers. Is this correct?

Ms. GALASE. Yes.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Well, I think you will be happy to support or endorse my bipartisan bill that is exactly what this does. The Ranching Without Red Tape Act of 2025 (H.R. 2238) aims to fix this issue by removing bureaucratic delays so that ranchers can make much-needed improvements on time without having to renegotiate their leases on Federal land. Thank you, Ms. Galase. Mr. Boening, in your testimony, you raised concerns about the closure of NRCS offices, which is something New Mexican farmers are also facing. Is this still an issue for farmers in Texas?

Mr. BOENING. Yes, sir, it is somewhat. Yes.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you so much. Well, I am sure that you will also then, hopefully, support my legislation, which is the Honor Farmer Contracts Act (H.R. 2396), which stops the USDA from indiscriminately closing NRCS offices and requires the Federal Government to honor its already-signed contracts with American farmers and ranchers. Thank you, Mr. Boening.

I want to thank you all for your support of these bipartisan legislative priorities that I hope get to see the light of day both in this Committee and the House Natural Resources Committee, because these are important priorities in which, if we have the absence of an actual farm bill, we can pass to help support farmers and ranchers across the country. And that is why I have introduced this full package of legislation designed to meet those goals.

These are practical bills that are crafted with input from farmers and ranchers that strengthen conservation partnerships, expand wildlife corridors, and help producers sustain and grow their operations. I believe this is the kind of work that we should be focused on, both in our subcommittees and in the full Committee, delivering real solutions that producers in New Mexico and across the country are asking for. Instead, and unfortunately, the priorities of this Committee have advanced a bill that just cut SNAP and delayed or eliminated billions of dollars from farmers, families and food retailers. So if we are serious about supporting farm country, we should act like it.

I urge my colleagues to continue to support farmers and hold legislative hearings just like this one and markups on commonsense bills like mine that I laid out today, bills that actually solve our problems for our constituents and for farmland, and for farmers and ranchers across the country. Thank you so much. I yield back Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Indiana, Mr. Messmer, for 5 minutes.

Mr. MESSMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for sharing your testimonies in Committee today.

My son-in-law owns a farm together we bought a few years ago, which, by the way, the neighboring farmer that plants it uses no-till, so we try to address good soil practices. To address some drainage and erosion problems, we have put in drain tile and had some earthen dams built. While it solved the erosion and runoff issues, it bore a hefty price tag, and it will take us about 3 years from the cash rent to pay off the upgrades that we put on that property. On the Committee, we say all the time, farmers are the best stewards of our land, but investing in soil conservation practices is neither cheap or risk free. The programs we are discussing here today help producers bridge the gap.

Mr. Boening, in your testimony, you mentioned that technical service providers play a vital role in helping producers reach their conservation goals, especially as they work through the application process. One of the complaints I hear from farmers back home is the complexity of the program application. To give some context, could you share what a typical application looks like and why it could present a barrier to entry?

Mr. BOENING. Thank you for the question, Congressman, and just as a quick aside, you mentioned drainage tile. And as a young farmer many years ago from south Texas, I had to figure out what drainage tile was, why it was important, because we don't have that issue in most of Texas, as you well know. There is really not a typical application process. That is really the deal. They vary immensely often from county-to-county and state-to-state, for sure. There are a multitude of programs, as you well know. There are different environmental and conservation practices that work in those different areas. There is a ranking and scoring component of these applications.

So I guess, not to disagree with your question, but I would just say that there is not a really typical application process. And for us, that is why it ties back to the technical service providers that local folks that know the areas, that know their county, that know their region, that can provide that expertise, as our farmers and ranchers navigate these application processes.

Mr. MESSMER. Well, thank you. Mr. McLeland, would you like to comment on the application issue from the lens of the RCPP?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, absolutely. I think just to start to say that the RCPP program has been effective. The 2014 version was very streamlined. It allowed us as technical service partners to provide support and get dollars in the hands of the producers very, very quickly, very expeditiously. In the process of the 2018 Farm Bill, again, the process is a little bit more lengthy, which kind of doesn't make it as expeditious in terms of going through the application process, the planning process, and getting the resources to the producer, so a little bit of a longer time lag there with RCPP as it stands right now, and, generally, that has to do with some administrative bottlenecks.

Mr. MESSMER. Okay. Thank you. I appreciate your insight, Mr. McLeland. The last thing I want to have is a stack of papers that separates private landowners from incredible opportunities for conservation. While we are on the topic of RCPP, I want to praise the success of the public-private investment model. By encouraging skin in the game from private entities, these partnerships allow conservation efforts to be tailored, innovative, and follow a business-minded approach. Mr. McLeland, given your experience with Ducks Unlimited, can you share how programs that encourage private investment increase the reach and efficiency of these conservation programs?

Mr. MCLELAND. Absolutely. Producers bring resources to bear in these projects all the time, and these projects can be expensive, and so continued investment is very important. And so, from our standpoint, looking to maximize the outcomes as best we can and primarily assuring that we achieve the producer's goals and objectives, resources are provided. So the more partners involved, the additional investments that are made generally helps ensure quality of the projects and maximizing the scale and scope of the projects.

Mr. MESSMER. Okay. Thank you very much. I yield back the remainder of my time.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back. The chair now turns to the gentlelady from Illinois for 5 minutes.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you, Chairman Lucas, and thank you, Ranking Member Tokuda. I am really excited to get to serve on this Subcommittee again. I represent a district in central and southern Illinois with issues around conservation and biotechnology, are incredibly relevant, so it is great to be back. My district is the home to some of the most productive soil in the world. In the last Census of Agriculture, multiple counties in my district were in the top 15 corn- and soybean-producing counties in the entire country, and the farmers in my district are extremely driven to protect that valuable resource, especially as we see increased frequency of severe weather.

Over the last few years, my district has seen dry enough drought conditions, that we had a fatal dust storm along Interstate 55, as well as several tornadoes, severe flooding, and a derecho that hit the Springfield community as well. Severe weather events like these increase the risk of agricultural operations across the country and threaten long-term soil health. That is why USDA conservation programs are so important to my district. They can help reduce risk on the farm, protect soil and crops for our farmers, and improve water and air quality for all of us.

With that in mind, I want to talk about how we can help farmers access the critical programs to reduce the risk of their operations. Just as an example, in Illinois, at the state level, we have the Cover Crops Premium Discount Program that allows a $5 per acre premium discount on crop insurance for acres where cover crops are planted. This is a great program that many farmers have taken advantage of, but $5 an acre is certainly below the cost of adoption for cover crops. Mr. Fink, if I could ask you this question. I know that American Farmland Trust has been active in uplifting conservation practices as a part of risk management. In your opinion, how could the Federal Crop Insurance Program be updated to better reflect proven risk-reducing properties of conservation?

Mr. FINK. Thank you for that question, Congresswoman. I will say, first and foremost, we need to make sure the crop insurance system is not conflicting with these good farming practices. There has been a lot of progress on that front. There is still probably more progress to be made. I think the other aspect is that, when we look at the crop insurance system, if we are talking about creating additional incentives, it is something that has to be actuarially sound. And the good news is when we look at cover crop adoption, we have seen a lot of the research, it is reducing overall indemnity payments in the face of a lot of these extreme weather events. It is also reducing prevent planting payments. And so whatever we can do that looks at the actuarial soundness, builds the research to make that case, and ultimately, our goal is to reward farmers for practices that are saving the public money and saving themselves money.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Great. Thank you, and maybe just a follow-up question for any of the panelists. If you could share how conservation practices have reduced risk for you or members of your organization, I would love to hear about that as well.

Ms. GALASE. Some of the most important conservation practices that have been funded have been things like invasive species removal to reduce fire fuel loads and cutting fire breaks. This is protecting not only the ranch and the producer, but the community around the ranch, which makes them a good neighbor. It helps their business, and it is better for the planet.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Great. Anyone else?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, I would just add that, from our standpoint, conservation programs like WRE, Wetland Reserve Easement, they add to the safety net. You don't know, in my home State of Missouri, we see flooding somewhat frequently, and so the opportunity to have a program like WRE that can do a wetland restoration projects and be available as an option to a producer, is part of risk management. It can be a solution there in terms of taking a loss on those acres 3 out of 5 years, so it is really important, and it is decisions that we see get made, and we are thankful to have options for producers like that.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Okay. Thank you.

Dr. SEBERT. One of the things that hasn't been mentioned this morning is the Emergency Watershed Protection Program. It is a component of the Small Watershed Program, which, when administered, helps areas recover from the type of disasters that you are talking about, and it is an opportunity for NRCS to have a role in that recovery and provide that safety net to producers.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you.

Mr. BOENING. Just one thing quickly that hasn't been mentioned and as far as conservation, the feral swine program that was initiated in the 2018 Farm Bill is very important to Texas, very important to much of the southern states. And as we go forward, and I know this Subcommittee and the full Committee has probably already heard about the New World screwworm issue moving North. I think those types of programs are still going to be very, very important. Just wanted to get that mentioned.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady yields back, and that is an understatement by the President of Texas Farm Bureau about the nature of screwworms and the curse called feral hogs, and add in Eastern Red Cedar, too. With that, the chair now recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Bresnahan, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to the Ranking Member for holding this hearing. I am honored to represent Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District, home to the scenic Pocono Mountains, and the Delaware and Susquehanna River watersheds. Interwoven throughout these national treasures, northeastern Pennsylvania is also home to over 1,000 family farms that help and feed to sustain our local communities. The continued success of this relationship between our working lands and our natural landscapes that surround them depends on a strong commonsense conservation programs like the ones we are discussing today.

Mr. McLeland, I appreciated hearing your testimony and dual perspective, not only as a representative of Ducks Unlimited, but also as someone who runs a cow-calf operation. I specifically want to hear more insights from your boots-on-the-ground perspective. Could you speak to how Ducks Unlimited works with the dairy and cattle industry when it comes to conserving land and supporting our farmers and ranchers?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that question, too. For us it really is multifaceted. We try our best to be technical assistance providers, boots-on-the-ground, so starting working one-on-one with those producers to help them achieve their conservation goals and assess opportunities for conservation and operational efficiency. So it starts there from a conservation planning standpoint, and we are grateful to get to work with those producers and very grateful for all that they do. To take it a step further there, if there are opportunities for or a need for financial incentives to do conservation programs that will also increase their profitability, provide wildlife habitat and ecosystem services, we are going to help facilitate that process and bring that needed financial to bear to get them again where they want to go. So that is our role is to facilitate that process, to be a source of information and help and guide them along the way as much as we can, and we are grateful for the opportunity to work in that space.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. What are the NRCS programs that are most utilized by farmers and ranchers like yourself?

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes. Otherwise we have been discussing here today, it all starts with conservation technical assistance. It starts there with conservation planning, getting those initial site visits, and then the Environmental Quality Incentives Program is a program that has been very important to farmers and ranchers. And so taking that a step further, prescribed grazing practices that provide infrastructure for increased profitability and utilization of pasture planting, native plantings things like that have been very popular in our practices that we work with quite a bit, in addition to wetland restoration, the suite of wetland restoration practices where applicable.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. I think it is important to point out the direct help that conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited provide to our farmers. Just one last question. Can you expand on the technical assistance that Ducks Unlimited provides and how that partnership with NRCS actually works?

Mr. MCLELAND. Absolutely. So we try our best to be a force multiplier for NRCS. We are grateful for the partnership with them, and in many cases, we are not in every state, but in states of need or high workload where our missions overlap, we are generally working right alongside NRCS. So we have the ability to do conservation planning and provide technical assistance, again, to help facilitate participation in conservation programs that address the needs of the producer. So again, I use that phrase, *force multiplier.* We try to be added lift out there to help address the demand. Again, it is to be a service to the producer, and so we are there to provide our expertise and support as best we can, hand-in-hand with NRCS.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. I appreciate that, and thank you to all the witnesses for giving up a day here to come in and testify. With that, I yield back. Thanks.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Maryland, Mrs. McClain Delaney.

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, and thank you to all the panelists. I was listening in from my office, and I was very impressed by all the testimony. But I think I heard from all the stakeholders here that, from the Texas Farm Bureau, to our cattle dairy industry, to American Farmland Trust and Ducks Unlimited, that we all need to make conservation programs more practical, accessible, modernized, and, really, that there is adequate funding for conservation programs, and I wholeheartedly agree.

I represent many farmers in farm country in Maryland, and I am the daughter of an Idaho potato farmer, and I understand the importance of responsible land stewardship. Our farmers and ranchers are not just producers, they are the best stewards of our land and resources, and programs promoting sustainable agriculture and conservation are vital for protecting our soil, water, and forests, while keeping farms productive for many generations to come.

Our Committee, as you know, has a unique opportunity and responsibility to strengthen these programs and invest in the future of our land, but, most importantly, of our people. And for over 200 years, and the reason I actually joined this Committee, is that the House Agriculture Committee has worked to feed the nation and support rural America, and it is always done through bipartisan cooperation, and I really believe in bipartisanship. This year has been a little bit different. I am a new freshman, and instead of uniting around farmers and conservation, unfortunately, ideology took a little bit of the front seat. I look forward to working across the aisle to strengthen USDA conservation programs and to support our farmers, but I believe we must acknowledge that this reconciliation bill needs to have some amendments so it does not leave these conservation practices behind.

So Marylanders have long been stewards of conservation, and they have worked hard to sustain their lands. I have spoken to all my five farm bureaus and advocacy groups, and one example of farm stewardship that they mentioned is the Mid-Atlantic Dairy Farmers Producing Tangible Results Through Climate-Smart Change. That is a mouthful. It is a project that is supported by USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program, RCPP, which we have been talking about, and this program really touches every quarter of my district and tracks air quality, energy, and feedstock impacts. I am just going to ask Mr. Boening really quickly, in your testimony, you mentioned the need to simplify the RCPP application process. What barriers are producers facing in RCPP, and what should our Committee consider when strengthening RCPP to help more farmers access these programs?

Mr. BOENING. Thank you, Congresswoman. Could you repeat the last part of your question, yes, about what the——

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. What barriers are you facing in RCPP, and what should we, as a Committee, really think about when strengthening this program to help more farmers access the program?

Mr. BOENING. I am not intricately familiar with RCPP. I mean, I know what it is. We don't use it that much in our area, but from what I understand, it goes back to the same thing about having technical assistance, having folks, boots-on-the-ground so to speak, locally that can help producers navigate it. That is from what I understand.

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. And if any other panelists want to add in.

Mr. MCLELAND. Yes. I might just add, to appreciate that question, just to go back to RCPP on the whole, it is an effective program. But one limitation from a partner standpoint is just as written right now, it is a commitment to move that program forward, and there are some administrative barriers and costs that come with that, that ultimately kind of slows the process down. And so, we want to be expeditious and get these resources into the hands of the growers that need them, and so there are some provisions that have been proposed that I think would really make that process much faster and smoother.

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. And I am happy. I am going to claim a little bit of time back, but I am going to give a little question and submit it, and so hopefully we can address that a little bit more.

Another thing that was mentioned is, one of my top concern with the reconciliation bill is its impact on key farm bill programs. And one of them is that most critical programs, from rural development interests to conservation, are at risk, including programs like the Forest Landowner Support program and, as we just spoke about, the Emergency Watershed Recovery Program under RSCC. If funding is cut through the reconciliation package for programs like this, how do you see these impacting long-term efforts of conservation, and does it make sense, and what do you think is the delay of splintering the farm bill through this reconciliation process? I am just really concerned. Any of you who can weigh in, maybe something?

[No response.]

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. Yes, I am just concerned about, as we look at all of these programs and we are looking at reconciliation, that we leave some of these priorities behind that are so very important. I am running out of time, but I will again submit this. I know it takes a little bit more to think about, but I know that 360 million acres of private working lands or forests are in the U.S. and I am just very concerned about how our reconciliation process might not——

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mrs. MCCLAIN DELANEY. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Tennessee for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROSE. Thank you, Chairman Lucas, and also, thank you to Ranking Member Tokuda for holding this hearing, and thank you to our witnesses for taking time to be with us here today.

I believe it is fitting to begin my remarks by praising my fellow Committee Members and Chairman Thompson for their work in passing our portion of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. This historic legislation redirects nearly $14 billion from the Inflation Reduction Act to critical farm bill conservation programs, securing permanent baseline funding. We still have plenty of work to do to pass a complete farm bill, but the One Big Beautiful Bill Act provided significant and long-overdue investments for our hardworking farmers in rural America.

As of 2022, 98 percent of the over 10,500 farms in Tennessee's 6th Congressional District are family farms. Today we have heard exceptional testimony advocating for working lands programs and urging Congress to refrain from allowing programs to retire productive and arable land. Mr. Boening, can you elaborate on the impact on family farms if working lands programs are not prioritized and if efforts to retire arable lands are not curbed?

Mr. BOENING. Well, I think it will force farmers out of business. That is what it will come down to, and it is very important that that we keep moving forward with our working lands, and the lands that are most productive need to be treated that way. And then when we look at things like CRP and we talked about doing the soil classification and those type of things, I think that is what it was intended for, and that is the route we need to go down.

Mr. ROSE. Thank you. I agree on that. And by the way, a special thank you to you. My sister, Redonna, who worked in Farm Bureau in Tennessee for many years, says hello and wanted me to say that. So I know you have a proud tradition as a fourth-generation farmer and it is good to have you, here and thank you for taking time from what no doubt is a busy schedule.

Mr. BOENING. Thank you, sir.

Mr. ROSE. Mr. Boening, staying with you, technical assistance accessibility from the NRCS for conservation programs has been an ongoing issue for years. The provisional changes in the Farm, Food and National Security Act address these changes on many levels. Can you explain in detail the urgency in passing these changes and what we will experience if adjustments to technical assistance are not prioritized?

Mr. BOENING. Well, thanks for the question, and it goes back to what we have been talking about. From what I have mentioned and several other people have mentioned, we need those folks that are locally based and that technical assistance because there are so many different environmental and conservation concerns. Issues vary from state to state, and having that technical assistance there at a local level to help those producers navigate what is best for their operation. What is best in south Texas may not be best in Tennessee, and I think we all know that. So that having those technical service providers as boots-on-the-ground locally just enhances the programs, and it makes them much more effective all across the board.

Mr. ROSE. Thank you. I couldn't agree more. Mr. Fink, between 2017 and 2022, Tennessee lost over 141,000 farming acres and nearly 6,900 farms. How can Congress utilize NRCS conservation programs to enhance environmental stewardship while also reversing the downward trend in production agriculture acres and operations?

Mr. FINK. One of the foremost priorities, of course, is the transfer of the IRA funding and providing more funding to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. That will enable more of those acres to remain in agriculture. And I would emphasize that it is not just the easement lands, it is that areas every farm that has lost makes another farm more vulnerable, so having one easement has a direct impact on other farms in the community. And then continuing the investment in these conservation practices, they are a part of what it means to keep farms viable. They are what makes the farms more resilient in the face of some of the weather that you have experienced. And I also want to congratulate your state for joining the ranks of so many other states and having one of those Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

Mr. ROSE. Absolutely, and I will just second that, very proud to see the General Assembly advance a plan there to provide those conservation easements. And I think it is an important first step, but, indeed, a first step in my view. We have to do more to protect our farmland, and it is a delicate issue because we don't want to intrude upon people's rights to do with their property as they see fit, but we do need to safeguard farmland. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back. The chair sees no one else seeking recognition to ask questions.

[No response.]

The CHAIRMAN. Before we adjourn today, I would like to invite the Ranking Member to share any closing comments she might have.

Ms. TOKUDA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much to our panel of witnesses for a robust and very, I believe, productive conversation. Some of the things that we definitely heard was increasing investments in conservation programs are something we can all 100 percent agree on. We cannot fund enough, especially given that the demand often and quite frankly, outpaces the resources that we are able to put toward it. But just as important as the money is the technical assistance and support, especially for farmers in rural, under-served communities, just like my home State of Hawaii. We need to make sure those farmers, ranchers, and producers have access to that kind of support and technical assistance so that they can actually have access to these resources and increasing, not slashing or even steadily decreasing. Support for programs like the conservation technical assistance, CTA program, is absolutely critical. This not only increases access, but it makes sure that the support and solutions are local, and that is something that we have also heard that as being very important today.

We have heard a lot of talk today about flexibility, but I believe another important word is *stability*. It is very important that we understand that farmers, ranchers, and producers need to be able to rely on something, and oftentimes, that is the NRCS staff. And so when we take a look at the closures in offices, the reduction in staffing and funding, the impact will be felt across the board from our small farmers to our large producers as well.

And in the case of Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities, now called the AMP initiative, you have 14,000 farmers and ranchers and $3 billion in awarded funding left in limbo, and for many farmers, they have been left with receipts in hand. Too many have had to fire employees, abandon projects that would have been lifelines for their operations, and as Rep. Vasquez talked about with his Honor Farmers Contract Act, farmers and ranchers don't want us to be flexible with their funds and deliverables once it has been awarded and a contract signed. Stability is being true to our word, and that is something we also need to live up to in this building.

And so I truly thank you for this robust conversation, and I look forward to future ones as well. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady yields back. I recognize myself for much time as I might consume for a closing set of comments.

It is a pleasure, my friends, to be back here and have the honor of chairing the Committee with jurisdiction over not just biotechnology and research, but conservation. I have lived my entire tenure in Congress, and now being the longest-serving Member of the Agriculture Committee, focused on conservation issues: how to preserve the soil, the water, the air, how to make sure that these wonderful assets that were given to us by our predecessors, how we make sure that those assets pass on to our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, so that this nation can enjoy the things that we have. We started out in this great nation, as all legislative bodies do, with glorious intentions: the Homestead Act, a classic example of an effort to give every individual who wanted to work hard enough the ability to settle on 160 acres of land, to create their own legacy, their own future, and to feed the nation and the world, a legacy that was designed for the Midwest, which didn't work quite so well in different soil and different climate types.

My home county had 14,000 people in the 1930 Census, as I have told many of you, and after the bad economic decisions of Congress and the Federal Government, and the Federal Reserve System and the Great Depression, and, it so happens, the Dust Bowl, and the drought of the 1930s, my home county has now made it back to 3,400 people. But the things that we have done since then, policy-wise, have made a huge difference, whether it is the upstream flood control dams or the educational practices on conservation and efficiently using our resources, or the money we have invested on ag research to make precision agriculture possible.

This Committee, this Subcommittee, while we have a variety of opinions and perspectives about how to implement those policies, have historically worked together. Our battles in passing farm bills, while we disagree sometimes by region, or crop, or perspective, we come together in this Subcommittee and this Committee, and we fight our battles on the floor with those who may not understand the issues that we have discussed in our hearings, and in our field trips, and in our work together, and from our constituents.

I simply challenge all my friends, Congress is changing, this Committee is changing, but the principles of how the Agriculture Committee works, whether it is conservation or the other practices, still have to stand. We have to come together to move as a common group when we get to the farm bill. And whether it is fleshing out what is not done in budget reconciliation, the Big Beautiful Bill, or whatever the process may be, we have to come together and work as a team and build on the efforts of all of our predecessors, of all parties' persuasions and regions.

With that, thank you, witnesses, for an outstanding set of testimony, a willingness to answer in the most precise and straightforward way you possibly can, a variety of questions from us. This discussion will continue as the work of this Subcommittee and this body continues, but never forget our common goal for the good of the American people, and with that, this Subcommittee is adjourned.

Under the Rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional material and supplementary written questions for witnesses to any question posed by a Member.

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation Research and Biotechnology is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:59 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[Material submitted for inclusion in the record follows:]

SUBMITTED LETTER BY HON. GLENN THOMPSON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM PENNSYLVANIA; ON BEHALF OF ANDREW W. LAVIGNE, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AMERICAN SEED TRADE ASSOCIATION

June 5, 2025

Hon. FRANK D. LUCAS,
Chairman,
Subcommittee on Conservation, Research and Biotechnology,
House Committee on Agriculture,
Washington, D.C.;

Hon. JILL N. TOKUDA,
Ranking Minority Member,
Subcommittee on Conservation, Research and Biotechnology,
House Committee on Agriculture,
Washington, D.C.;

Hon. JAMES R. BAIRD,
Vice Chair,
Subcommittee on Conservation, Research and Biotechnology,
House Committee on Agriculture,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Chairman Lucas, Vice Chair Baird and Ranking Member Tokuda:

Thank you for holding the hearing today focused on supporting farmers, strengthening conservation and sustaining working lands. Voluntary farm bill conservation programs provide farmers, ranchers and foresters with a variety of approaches to incorporating or expanding conservation practices on their agricultural operations. A variety of program types, as included in past farm bills, is important to allow individuals to undertake conservation practices appropriate to their operation, local geography and conservation goals. One of those programs is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

CRP offers agricultural producers another form of risk management for their operation, in addition to the conservation and environmental benefits. By enrolling environmentally sensitive or marginal production land into CRP, producers can balance their overall operation, producing crops and livestock on the most productive acreage and voluntarily enrolling the sensitive land into CRP. CRP not only supports local communities through the environmental benefits, improving water quality, air quality and wildlife habitat and potentially generating revenue through increased hunting and fishing opportunities and through those industries and conservation experts that support practice adoption.

Members of the American Seed Trade Association support the continued reauthorization of CRP and providing agricultural producers with the opportunity to enroll acreage each year.

Over the last 2 years, enrollment in CRP has been included in annual farm bill extensions, but long term planning and management of the program provides certainty to farmers, program managers, and the industries supporting conservation practice adoption. We urge Congress to continue work on farm bill reauthorization, including continuation of annual enrollments in CRP.

Sincerely,

A. W. LaVigne

ANDREW W. LAVIGNE,
President & CEO.

SUBMITTED QUESTIONS

Questions Submitted by Hon. Sharice Davids, a Representative in Congress from Kansas

Response from Nicole K. Galase, Managing Director, Hawaii Cattlemen's Council; on behalf of National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Question 1. According to the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, in my state the Natural Resource Conversation Service (NRCS) field offices have lost almost ⅓ of their workforce to deferred resignations. There are now 18 offices in Kansas without a full-time NRCS employee. Your testimony refers to the importance of local NRCS offices. How will reducing NRCS field office staffing impact the ability of producers to access technical assistance and farm bill conservation programs?

Answer. The NRCS field offices were already understaffed, and reducing this force will mean less resources for producers to pull on. It means longer wait times, less knowledge in the office, and less access to the conservation programs that producers often need assistance with. People and relationships are a key part of agriculture, and will less people to connect with, ranchers will have less access to key funding that keeps our food system going.

Question 2. Your testimony refers to the importance of specific conservation solutions that meet the needs of local communities. I frequently hear from producers in my state about the unique conditions they face and how solutions that work in other regions do not fit their needs. How do you believe NRCS can do a better job of supporting region-specific conservation practices?

Answer. This is especially relevant in Hawaii, where we have higher costs of goods and more transportation issues to worry about. When standards are based on the continental needs, it leaves Hawaii producers with less options that work for them on an island state with tropical climates. NRCS can do a better job of supporting region-specific practices by having enough people on the ground to learn about those specific needs. Often, these practices [are] more cost effective because they match the region. Ranchers are keen to do things in the most efficient and effective way, and NRCS could learn a lot by listening to the needs of ranchers through field visits and consideration of amendments to practice standards.

○