

**PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD,
PART 4: CONSERVATION**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
**COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**
UNITED STATES SENATE
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PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD, PART 4: CONSERVATION

TUESDAY, MAY 13, 2025

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:03 p.m., in Room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman [presiding], Hoeven, Ernst, Hyde-Smith, Marshall, Tuberville, Justice, Thune, Moran, Klobuchar, Bennet, Durbin, Warnock, Welch, and Slotkin.

STATEMENT OF HON. BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Chairman BOOZMAN. Good afternoon and welcome. It is my privilege to call this hearing to order to discuss the importance of conservation to our Nation's producers. I would like to thank our witnesses for taking time away from your families and your work responsibilities to share your expertise with our Committee today.

When it comes to conservation, farmers and ranchers are at the forefront of this effort because their livelihoods depend on the health and sustainability of their lands. American producers' commitment to conservation while producing the food, fiber, and fuel our Nation needs benefits all Americans by providing clean water, clean air, healthy soils, and abundant wildlife habitat. Through reauthorization of the farm bill, Congress can play a role in supporting this commitment by improving the conservation programs implemented by USDA and investing in these initiatives.

The conservation needs of agriculture are diverse and unique to each producer and operation, and we must ensure that the farm bill supports the wide range of needs. Farm bill conservation programs are successful because they are locally led, voluntary, and incentive-driven, and this must continue in the next farm bill. We must not tie the hands of our producers by requiring the implementation of certain conservation practices in order to be eligible for other incentives like crop insurance.

The heavy hand of government does not know better than the individual producer regarding what resource concerns they need to address locally. Just looking at the producers here before us, we know that the needs of rice producers in the Arkansas Delta are not the same as what corn producers in Illinois or ranchers in Texas need. The Senate Republican framework released last year

highlighted many of these priorities and the need for this flexibility.

The framework made commonsense improvements to the conservation programs in the farm bill by streamlining their implementation and moving more decision-making to the states and local level. These improvements will save time and money for both producers and USDA. It has also supported the technical assistance that producers need to help implement and design conservation on their operation and embraced innovation through precision agriculture and the support of new conservation practices.

Finally, the framework also included the reinvestment of the unspent Inflation Reduction Act funds into existing conservation programs to ensure producers have access to these programs for generations to come.

Ranking Member Klobuchar has always been a strong champion of conservation programs at USDA. I look forward to working together to craft a strong Conservation Title while we work to pass a bipartisan farm bill this year. Our producers need certainty, not another one-year extension of the 2018 Farm Bill. I am confident the testimony provided by our witnesses today will prove invaluable as we write the farm bill, and I thank you again for your participation today.

Senator Klobuchar.

STATEMENT OF HON. KLOBUCHAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTA

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Well, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing today. Thank you to our witnesses who have come to share their perspectives. I have a lot of respect for them.

I will say that as we are working on this important buildup to what I hope will be a bipartisan farm bill, on the other side of the Capitol we have some cuts proposed to food assistance, well near \$300 billion, that could make it very difficult to do a farm bill. I continue to believe in the work of this Committee, and I hope that we will find a way through this.

I strongly support our work that we have done together on improvements to conservation. Conservation programs and their many supporters are a critical part of the broad bipartisan coalition needed for a farm bill. USDA voluntary conservation programs—and I emphasize voluntary—are open to producers across the country, big and small operations, row crop, livestock, and specialty crop farms. They assist farmers, ranchers, sportsmen, and many others to improve soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat. I have long championed these conservation programs and have seen how they can make farms more profitable and resilient while supporting the communities around them, wildlife hunters and fishers in my home State of Minnesota.

I have also led efforts to improve conservation programs, including with Leader Thune in the last farm bill, to increase the number of acres in the Conservation Reserve Program and to create a pilot program to study innovative approaches to improve soil health.

I want to thank USDA for reopening sign-up for CRP without major changes to the parts focused on wildlife that I have long championed and will continue to champion.

I am also looking forward to again joining with the Majority Leader this week to introduce an updated version of the Agriculture Innovation Act with the support of farmers and conservation groups. This is part of my commitment to ensure strong conservation initiatives are in place.

Since the last farm bill, Congress has made historic investments in voluntary conservation programs. Despite this investment, demand from farmers and conservationists continue to outpace available funding. It is my hope that there will still be an opportunity to create increased long-term funding for the USDA voluntary conservation programs in the farm bill baseline.

I am concerned about the recent loss of 2,400 employees from NRCS, the pauses in funding, the cuts to technical assistance, and a troubling budget proposal, which are pushing us in the wrong direction. Connecting farmers with voluntary conservation programs involves critical partnerships between USDA, local conservation districts, wildlife organizations, states, and businesses. These partnerships and NRCS staff in rural America are important for operating the programs that the farmers rely on.

Funding disruptions are unfortunately impacting these partners, and uncertainty has meant furloughs for many staff. I have heard from farmers across my state that they need certainty, the certainty of their USDA experts and partner organizations like the ones that are here today.

We are glad that some funds are slowly being released and programs like CRP reopened, and of course this needs to be a major part of any farm bill agreement for a future farm bill as we go forward. I look forward to hearing from all of you. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. We are going to now ask Senator Thune to introduce Mr. Tjeerdsma.

Senator THUNE. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me just say how much I appreciate both you and Senator Klobuchar and the leadership roles that you now have, and I look forward to working with both of you and with the Members of this Committee on a farm bill. As Senator Klobuchar pointed out, there are a number of things in the Conservation Title that we have worked together on through the years, and I hope that this farm bill is an example of how this place can still work in a way that gets the best farm policies in place for our farmers and ranchers and make sure that our ag economy is set up for success in this country and able to prosper.

I am very honored today, Mr. Chairman, to be able to introduce to this Committee Lynn Tjeerdsma. I have had the pleasure of knowing Lynn for a few decades now. He is from a small town of Platt, South Dakota, where he continues to run his family farm. I might add I have hunted pheasants a number of times on his place, and he practices what he preaches. The conservation practices that he employs on his farm are a great example, working lands, conservation, and how things ought to be done.

Lynn first came to work for me in the Senate in 2007 to help out on the 2008 Farm Bill. After the bill passed, he headed over to the

Farm Service Agency at USDA to serve as Assistant Deputy Administrator for Farm programs. I asked him back in 2011 to work with me on the next farm bill. He was with me not only for that one but for the subsequent farm bill after that until his retirement in 2019. We have worked together now on three farm bills.

He did not go far, however, and he continues his work in conservation, most recently becoming a member of the National Board of Directors of Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. I would say South Dakota's—and I would argue really the Nation's farmers and ranchers—are way better off today because of Lynn's knowledge and his contributions. There is not anybody that I have worked with who is more passionate about agriculture in this country and creating the right conditions for our farmers not only to thrive but to prosper. I am glad he has once again been given the opportunity to share his perspective with this Committee.

I would just say, as someone who has been working on these issues for a long time, there are certain, as we all know, policy matters that come before this Committee that are somewhat complicated, and there are not very many people I have known in my time here that can fully explain the Dairy Program or fully explain the Sugar Program or many of the other programs, particularly the counter cyclical programs in Title I, but Lynn can do that. He is incredibly knowledgeable, passionate, and well-versed, and I welcome, as always, his input and contributions to this farm bill, which I am confident under your leadership we are going to get done. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. We appreciate the Majority Leader being here. He is incredibly busy but is one of our most active Members.

Senator Hyde-Smith is going to introduce Mr. Blair.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I am really proud to introduce my friend Gary Blair, a fellow Mississippian. Mr. Gary Blair, it says Starkville, Mississippi, but we shared the hometown of Brookhaven, Mississippi, for a long time and watched each other's children grow up.

Gary serves as President of the National Association of Conservation Districts, which represents the 3,000 conservation districts across 57 states and territories along with their associations and 17,000 locally elected or appointed governing board members. Conservation districts were first established in 1937 as local units of government by state law, originally partnering with the Soil Conservation Service, which we know today as the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Gary is a 1981 graduate of Mississippi State University and recently retired after 36 years with Southern Ag Credit. He has also served as President of the Mississippi Forestry Association, the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts, and the Brookhaven Chamber of Commerce. He and his wife Johnna have a son, Jonathan, who proudly followed in his father's footsteps as a Mississippi State Bulldog.

Gary, thank you for representing our state so well, and I certainly look forward to a quick visit and your testimony today.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Next is Mr. Brad Doyle, a soybean, rice, and wheat farmer from Poinsett County, Arkansas. Brad is a passionate person about trade, scientific crop research, and plant breeding. He operates the Eagle Seed Company with his son and wife, Joyce. Joyce is with us today, who is also, like I say, certainly an active member of the business. Eagle Seed Company specializes in developing soybeans, rice, wheat, cereal, rye, food plots, and cover crops.

He serves on the State Board of Directors for Arkansas Farm Bureau and served as President and Chairman of the American Soybean Association. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Chad Ellis is the Chief Executive Officer of Texas Agricultural Land Trust. He has spent over 25 years implementing stewardship-focused management with producers but also on his own operation in Lohn, Texas. Chad is the past Chair of the Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and the Ecosystem Services Market Consortium and founding Chair of Trust In Beef Program. He earned his degree in wildlife management from Sul Ross State University and a graduate degree in animal science from Angelo State University. Again, thank you for being here.

Senator Durbin is going to introduce Mrs. Dwyer.

Senator DURBIN. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

This hearing on conservation has brought some wonderful talent and resources to the Committee room this afternoon, and one of them is my special guest, Mrs. Megan Dwyer, of Coal Valley, Illinois. A fourth-generation farmer, Megan, along with her husband Todd, run crop and livestock operations with their families in both Coal Valley and Geneseo. Megan also serves as Director of Conservation and Nutrient Stewardship for the Illinois Corn Growers, and her expertise in conservation makes her an especially valuable witness today.

In addition to her farming and conservation background, Megan also is a mother of four, and I am happy to see that she is joined by Hailey, one of her daughters, who is in the fourth grade and promises me that she is going to be in the fifth grade next year.

[Laughter.]

Senator DURBIN. She will be sharing her expertise with her mom with the Committee, just like she shared her knowledge with my staff and members of the Illinois delegation, farm groups, and many others on farm conservation practices.

I just want to close by making a book recommendation on the topic of conservation. Probably the most eye-opening experience in modern American history was the Great Dust Bowl. We have seen some pictures of it, we have heard about it, we have our impression of it. There is a book entitled *The Worst Hard Time*. The author is Tim Egan. It is just amazing. It tells a story in more detail and is more graphic than anything I have ever read on the subject.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing, and I thank Megan and Hailey for joining us today.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Senator Durbin. Thank all of you again for being here.

Mr. Blair, you are now recognized for your statement.

STATEMENT OF GARY BLAIR, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS, STARKVILLE, MISSISSIPPI

Mr. BLAIR. First of all, I want to thank my U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith.

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

With approximately 60 percent of our Nation's lands in private ownership, our ability to achieve landscape-scale conservation goals relies on the voluntary cooperation of millions of farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards who manage these lands every day. Our Nation's farmers and ranchers are land stewards at heart. They want to leave the land better than they found it, but they cannot do it alone. They need timely, high-quality technical assistance and conservation programs like EQIP and CSP to keep their lands healthy and productive.

Approximately 39 percent of our lands are farmlands, and 88 percent of our farmers are small to medium-size operations. Most have secondary sources of income so they can sustain their passion for working the lands. About 30 percent of these are new and beginning farmers.

I cannot overstate the level of expertise and capacity needed to serve our Nation's landowners and operators. Technical assistance is the foundation of our conservation delivery system, and cultivating relationships drives successful outcomes. Conservation is not just a transaction; it is a journey. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and we help ensure that conservation plans are tailored to address producers' unique environmental challenges, as well as economic realities.

During President Trump's previous Administration, Secretary Perdue assessed the NRCS's conservation workload, producer needs, and drive times to visit NRCS and conservation district offices where we are often co-located. They identified the optimal office locations and approved an 11,000 employee staffing cap at NRCS.

NACD is highly supportive of this approach in optimizing the staffing and offices, but we are concerned about the reported separation of almost 2,400 NRCS employees and the potential return to Fiscal Year 2020 onboard staffing levels. It has been NACD's consistent position that these staffing levels were insufficient to meet the producers' needs.

Today, NRCS has even a higher workload associated with the administration of the IRA funds. NACD is supportive of the efforts to streamline government-stewarded taxpayer dollars. We have been pleased with Chief Aubrey Bettencourt's leadership and collaboration on conservation workforce needs. Through our national and local partnership conservation districts, their state associations, the state agencies are standing by to support NRCS by contributing their expertise and financial resources to ensure we collectively meet producer needs across the country.

Demand for conservation is high. Farm bill programs have been constantly oversubscribed. In Fiscal Year 2024, IRA allowed NRCS to fund 80 percent more EQIP and CSP applications. This is still

only 43 percent of the \$8.7 billion requested by producers. Because of NACD's top priority to ensure IRA funds are integrated into the farm bill program, getting funding to producers to implement conservation practices remains a mutual priority, particularly given current economic challenges. We know Secretary Rollins understands this, and we were pleased to see that USDA will honor the existing contracts and expedite the release of payments. NACD hopes to see the pause on new obligations lifted, particularly for the new IRA-funded contracts with the producers.

American farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards are ready and eager to participate in conservation programs. They simply need certainty and tools to get it done. Maintaining strong investments in farm bill conservation programs, technical assistance, and supporting an efficient and skilled conservation workforce, and ensuring local presence in communities across this country allows us to fulfill our mutual commitment to delivering results for producers, taxpayers, and the land.

Thank you for your time today and continued support of locally led conservation.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Blair can be found on pages 30–34 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Mr. Doyle.

STATEMENT OF BRAD DOYLE, BOARD MEMBER AND PRODUCER, ARKANSAS FARM BUREAU, WEINER, ARKANSAS

Mr. DOYLE. Thank you, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee. It is an honor to be here this afternoon on behalf of Arkansas Farm Bureau and its 180,000 members. I would just like to say how incredibly proud we are of Chairman Boozman and his leadership. Mr. Chairman, thank you for all you do for Arkansas producers and American agriculture.

My name is Brad Doyle. I am a third-generation farmer in Poinsett County, Arkansas. Along with my wife, Joyce, and son, Cody, we farm rice, soybeans, and wheat. Our family business has been farming the land for over 100 years. We also run a seed business, a seed production resource that provides soybean, rice, corn, and wheat seed to farmers across the United States and Canada.

The United States is home to the most affordable, reliable, and abundant food supply in the world. Many of your constituents dedicate their lives to the land, providing the knowledge, labor, and financial investment necessary for the United States to remain a world leader in food and fiber production. In recognition of the risk and responsibility placed on American farmers, Congress has invested in agriculture for over 90 years.

The first farm programs created by Congress were a direct response to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. During another period of true crisis for production agriculture was in the mid-1980's. Congress passed the first unified farm bill that combined land retirement conservation programs with crop insurance and Commodity Support programs.

American row crop farmers are facing another historic breaking point. As this Committee has heard over the past several months, the current state of the U.S. agricultural economy reveals a wid-

ening and unsustainable gap between the prices farmers are paid for their products and the prices they must pay to produce them. Crop farmers like myself have been hit especially hard. According to USDA's farm sector income forecast, inflation adjustment crop cash receipts have declined since 2022 by \$67 billion, or 22 percent, while input costs for essentials like seed, chemicals, repairs, and taxes remain at near record levels.

Farmers today are caught between collapsing commodity pricing and stubbornly high production prices. Despite recent improvements in risk management tools like crop insurance and ad hoc government assistance, the disparity between prices received and prices paid has widened dramatically, threatening the financial viability of farms across the Nation. Unless structural changes are enacted through a modernized farm bill that provides commodity support that reflects the cost of production, enhanced risk management tools, meaningful investment in trade, and strengthened conservation support, the United States risks irreversible damage to its agricultural foundation.

The Conservation Title, the focus of today's hearing, provides financial and technical support for farmers and ranchers who voluntarily implement conservation practices. Let me give you an example. In 1985, my father-in-law saw a need to build the first reservoir on our family farm. He took 100 acres out of production. Fast forward to 2019—that is a correction in the record book. It should be 2019, not 2000, as is stated. Our family started plans to apply for an EQIP-funded project to build a second 45-acre reservoir on the opposite end of the farm to help with the irrigation pumping capacity while capturing rainwater in our area. It lessens the water burden on our aquifers that we rely on for irrigation. Remind you, I am in Poinsett County, number one rice-producing county in America.

The irrigation timing and management of excess water on a flat rice and soybean farm are critical to crop production. The reason our soils hold water well is they are very shallow and thin, and we get a great response from irrigation. The project that we started, it was completed in 2023 with a follow-up cover crop plan that we initiated through 2024. With limited funds available, it is critically important to formulate a plan, get on the waiting list, and follow the detailed criteria to follow the local NRCS support and fund such a large project.

The demand for these programs consistently outpaces available funding, leading to a need for more robust support in future farm bills. In the 2018 Farm Bill, conservation programs accounted for only seven percent of the total farm bill spending. As Congress works to develop the next farm bill, the inclusion of additional funds, namely those allocated to agriculture conservation and the Inflation Reduction Act would allow more producers to implement conservation practices, ensuring healthy farmland for generations to come.

With that, I will end my statement and want to thank you all for having me here today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Doyle can be found on pages 35–37 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Mr. Tjeerdsma.

STATEMENT OF LYNN TJEERDSMA, MEMBER, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, PHEASANTS FOREVER AND QUAIL FOREVER, PLATTE, SOUTH DAKOTA

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Majority Leader Senator Thune, I really appreciate the opportunity to be here, and I also appreciate, Senator Thune, the opportunity you gave me for 11 years of working with you on conservation programs and other programs. Also, I would like to say the pheasants on my farm do not look forward to your return. He is an excellent shot. I have experienced that myself, so a real sportsman and pleasure to hunt with and passionate about conservation programs, as are many of the Members of this Committee that I have worked with and members of the staff that I have worked with over the years on farm bills.

I am a farmer, rancher, retired public servant, and I currently serve on the Board of Directors for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, and it is a privilege to testify here today on behalf of the members, partners in the farming and ranching community.

Here is some numbers about Pheasants Forever, how important they are, and Quail Forever for conservation. Over 490,000 members, supporters, and partners, 750 local chapters that make up the Nation's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to upland habitat conservation. Since 1982, PF and QF have invested more than \$1 billion in 580,000 habitat projects benefiting 28.8 million acres, and that is an impact, and that is why we need the Conservation Title so this can continue.

We partner with thousands of private landowners, farm and ranch families, state and wildlife agencies, and federal partners at USDA. Each year, more than 480 PF and QF wildlife biologists and conservation professionals help producers plan and implement wildlife-friendly, economically viable conservation practices on their farms. I know this from personal experience. The voluntary, incentive-based, locally led conservation programs in the farm bill on my farm have protected the fragile acres, improved soil health, reduced erosion, and provided ample wildlife habitat, resulting in sporting opportunities for me, my son, grandsons, and friends. The technical assistance I have received, thanks to the farm bill and PF and QF biologists, has been invaluable in selecting the best practices and achieving my farming operation goals.

The farm bill is a critical and practical conservation policy tool that benefits producers, rural communities, and the hunting and outdoor recreation economy, and I would like to say in my home State of South Dakota, pheasant hunting alone in 2023 provides \$281 million to the state's economy, over a quarter of a billion dollars just from pheasant hunting alone, which the pheasants are there because of the Conservation Title in the farm bill.

This is why we need to pass a five-year farm bill with strong investments in conservation practices and technical assistance to meet oversubscribed farmer and rancher demand. Incorporating unspent Inflation Reduction Act funding into the Conservation Title baseline is a necessary move that has bipartisan support in Congress.

We also need to shore up and improve the Conservation Reserve Program, which is one of the most essential farm bill programs for

America's soil, water, and wildlife producers. When I first left the farm in 1985 as CED, County Executive Director, in Moody County, South Dakota, we implemented the first farm bill, which was authorized in the first CRP program, which was authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill, and to see the program expand to what it is now and what it is doing is another reason I am here and saying how important the Conservation Title is. The CRP Improvement Act, led by Majority Leader Thune, Ranking Member Klobuchar, addresses many of the needs that we see now in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Another key program, the Voluntary Public Access Program, which supports America's hunting, heritage, and boosts rural recreation economies, Senators Bennet, Daines, and Marshall have introduced the VPA Improvement Act to maximize this program's economic benefits.

Among other priorities outlined in my testimony, we support full funding for EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program), Working Lands for Wildlife, which strengthen habitat and working landscapes while helping growers navigate regulatory and business pressures. These programs can be improved by the Agriculture Innovation Act, also led by Majority Leader Thune and Ranking Member Klobuchar. This bill will enable USDA to analyze and compile farm data, returning insights to growers on conservation benefits.

In closing, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today and for your consideration of these priorities. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tjeerdsma can be found on pages 38–47 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Mr. Ellis.

**STATEMENT OF CHAD ELLIS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
TEXAS AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

Mr. ELLIS. Good afternoon, Chairman Boozman and Members of the Committee. My name is Chad Ellis, the Executive Officer of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust and also the Vice President of Partnership of Rangeland Trust.

TALT was developed by producers for producers by our founding members of the Texas Farm Bureau, Texas Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, and Texas Wildlife Association, our three major grassroots landowner-led organizations. The leadership of these organizations were forward-thinking and realized that they needed a trusted source to help keep our working lands working and providing tools for land stewards for, you know, their heritage and legacy and providing food and economic stability for their communities. I am happy today to share with you we have helped empower over 70 families and over 300,000 acres across Texas.

I wish I was here, you know, really to provide good news, but I am here to really kind of share instead the reality of what faces our land stewards across Texas and across this Nation. In the last five years, we have seen over 18,000 farms and ranches lost in Texas. We are seeing an increase of 1,200 to 1,400 people moving to our state daily, an increase of a half a million people a year.

This nexus is really driving, you know, issues for us as land producers to how do we stay in business.

Texas A&M's research and the Texas land trends basically in 2007 to 2012 were showing that we were losing 49 acres a day. As I look, Mr. Chairman, on my watch, as I have been sitting here with this great group here, we have lost another 49 acres in Texas. We are losing over 1,000 acres a day in Texas of our working lands that are being basically converted into the last crop, the crop of concrete.

At TALT, we help landowners protect their legacies through voluntary conservation easements, but these tools are only possible because of the farm bill programs as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, which combine federal, private, and state funding to make conservation financially viable. These are not just conservation programs; they are National Security programs. They ensure that future generations of Americans have access to healthy food, clean water, open space. They keep private working lands productive and in the hands of the people that know them the best. That is my fellow ranchers, farmers, and private foresters.

As Congress works to reauthorize the farm bill, we urge you to maintain robust funding for our ASEP, ALE, and the RCPP programs so landowners can voluntarily protect their land while keeping it in production. This demand is seen at a demand that we have never seen before.

We also ask for you to eliminate the adjusted gross income limitations from ASEP, ALE, because compensation for the purchase of a conservation easement is not a subsidy but a conveyance of a private real property.

We also ask you to look at the Exempt Conservation Easement Program payments from future AGI, reduce administrative burdens that delay the project implementation and discourage participation. One viable tool that we have for streamlining implementation is through certified entities, which recognizes exceptional land trust and delegates authorities to these entities. Last, to support flexibility in these programs designed so that landowners and partners can effectively deliver these tools.

I want to leave you with this, Chairman. In Texas, in a year's time, we lose over 370,000 acres. That is equivalent to losing over 8½ Washington, DC's. If we were able to retain rainfall on those lands, it would fill approximately 180 billion water bottles, 180 billion water bottles. I think Lyndon B. Johnson stated it the best, "Soil and water conservation starts where the first raindrop falls." That is on a farmer, that is on a rancher, that is on a private forester. No land, no water, there is no future for our future agriculturalists like we have behind us, so we must keep our working lands working and providing for all Americans.

Thank you and God bless.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ellis can be found on pages 48–50 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Mrs. Dwyer.

STATEMENT OF MEGAN DWYER, DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION AND NUTRIENT STEWARDSHIP, ILLINOIS CORN GROWERS ASSOCIATION, COAL VALLEY, ILLINOIS

Mrs. DWYER. Good afternoon. It is an honor to be here today and an even greater honor to represent midwest farmers. Though some might call it multitasking madness, I come to you wearing several hats, fourth-generation farmer, certified crop advisor, ag professional, and mom. Our Illinois family farm grows corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and beef cattle. With my husband, we are raising the fifth generation. As you have heard, our oldest daughter is here with me today and will hopefully leave inspired.

We are here to discuss conservation, something I have devoted my professional career to. As the Director of Conservation and Nutrient Stewardship for Illinois Corn, I strive to ensure that policies and regulatory efforts are grounded in both science and common sense. My goal is to bridge the gap between farm fields and policy and make the complexities of conservation feel as relatable as baking chocolate chip cookies.

As NRCS celebrates 90 years, it is a good time to reflect. For decades, we have rightly focused on protecting our most vulnerable soils. I am here to ask us to think differently, to consider how programs can better protect our most productive soils.

When you hear Illinois, odds are you think of Chicago. The reality is, about 70 percent of Illinois is farmland. That is 24 million acres of cropland, about the size of nearly 1/3 of all U.S. cities combined. Our farm fields are a powerhouse of productivity, yet when it comes to federal conservation funding, we receive only a small fraction. From 2018 to 2022, Illinois received just 1.3 percent of EQIP funding. In comparison, Georgia received nearly three times that investment for 1/5 of the cropland.

In 2024, only 6.4 of the 21.5 million in EQIP funds Illinois received supported cropland conservation. Thanks to a strong collaboration with Senator Durbin's office, the Illinois Corn Growers Association and the Illinois Department of Ag were able to secure an additional \$15 million of traditional EQIP funds to address conservation priorities. This more than doubled the state's cropland EQIP budget, enabling targeted efforts to reduce nutrient loss and preserve topsoil. Those funds were contracted, but they highlighted the intense competition farmers face for Federal Conservation programs and the value of partnerships.

Meaningful progress requires financial investments, and securing sufficient funding to fully support a state like Illinois with its 24 million acres of farmland takes a creative and strategic approach that recognizes we cannot fix the problem overnight. One way to sustain this momentum is incorporating IRA conservation funds into the farm bill baseline. If we fail to deliver modernized effective programs, technical assistance, and meaningful funding to our farmers, we can expect more outcomes like the 2023 and 2024 dust storms in central Illinois that closed major interstates and caused loss of life. Our approach can make a difference between success and failure. Too often we zero in on one granular issue or promote a one-size-fits-all solution without stepping back to consider the broader path to success.

Now for the cookies. If I asked each of you to describe the perfect chocolate chip cookie, I would likely get 23 different answers. Some would say thin and crispy, some would say soft and chewy, maybe a few with nuts. Now imagine I told each of you to go bake your ideal cookie but did not give you a recipe. That is the challenge farmers face when trying to implement conservation practices. Even if I did give you all the same recipe, you would all get different results because no two ovens bake the same, just like no two farm fields respond the same way.

Successful conservation does not happen by accident. It requires a strong partnership, reliable funding, trusted local expertise, and flexibility. Accessible field offices for NRCS and FSA, along with well-staffed agencies like EPA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife, ensure we have boots on the ground and every tool in the conservation toolbox. Public-private partnerships amplify this effect, while a strong safety net and technical assistance help drive real adoption.

We could spend hours discussing the barriers, ranging from financial constraints, technical assistance, machinery, time, and the fact that over 70 percent of Illinois farmland is owned by someone other than the farm family tenant. I would prefer to focus on solutions. RCPP is one such solution, providing support that made Illinois corn's flagship initiative, Precision Conservation Management, possible. PCM is an economic-focused program that has proven we can far exceed the success of traditional conservation efforts by leveraging strategic private partnerships, providing boots on the ground, and allowing flexibility in implementation. The program's longstanding partnership with PepsiCo is just one example where leveraging public and private contributions generates \$1.50 going to farmers for every one federal dollar invested.

Success will not come from rebranding programs for working lands. We must design entirely new approaches that recognize the uniqueness of each acre and meet farmers where they are at. We must reevaluate practice standards and decide if close enough is acceptable to achieve greater scalability or if the pursuit of perfection will limit our progress. We must consider how federal crop insurance can be supportive by recognizing the risk-reducing benefits of conservation, covering the transition to new practices, and offering flexibility for innovative approaches like growing cover crops ahead of your cash crop.

Baby boomers currently own the majority of farmland across the United States, and within the next decade, their average age will reach 80. This puts us on the edge of a generational cliff. Without robust programs to help the next generation not only gain access to farmland, but also be economically equipped to adopt conservation practices, we risk losing our position as a global leader in production agriculture.

I appreciate your time today and look forward to answering any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Dwyer can be found on pages 51–58 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. A big thanks to all of our witnesses for being here today.

We will now begin with one round of five-minute questions per Member, and it is good to see Mike Conaway here, the former

Chair of House Agriculture. You have got two former Chairs that you worked with staring down at you, as they do with me every hearing.

For all of the witnesses, anybody that wants to speak up, can you talk about why the locally led model of conservation delivery supported by NRCS where decisions are left to the individual producer has been so successful and how we can get more decision-making to the state and local level?

Mr. DOYLE. I will go ahead and speak to that. I think, as mentioned in many of our speeches already, we are so different. Every farm is different. Even within a farm, we have so much variability in soil, topography, the way fields drain, so I think it is up to our local NRCS engineers and technicians to help farmers, you know, create and find solutions that work for that individual farm. Every field will be handled, you know, differently, so I think that individual look at projects going forward, one size fits all, is not the way to go. I think the way that it is right now is working for us. Our close involvement at the local level, we can go up there, speak to them in person, is extremely important to all of us.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Anybody else?

Mr. TJEERDSMA. I would just like to say, based on my personal experience with NRCS and also with the wildlife biologists that partner with Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, that partner with USDA, these programs are so complex, and farming has gotten so much more complex than it was when I started farming in 1972. Technical assistance is desperately needed. When you look at the cadre of conservation programs from CRP to ASEP to different ones, and Fish and Wildlife Service was mentioned as well, if we do not have the technical assistance that is available to us now, I think these conservation programs are going to go by the wayside simply because the farmers and ranchers are not going to be utilizing them.

You know, I cannot emphasize enough in this farm bill, based on my personal experience, how even though we realize we are in an atmosphere of budget cuts and needing to streamline and having spent a big part of my career at FSA, I understand how important that is, but there have got to be priorities, and technical assistance is one of those priorities. Also, the partnering with the wildlife biologists, Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, they come out to the farm, they work closely with the farmer, and strictly voluntarily, the farmer can say, I want to do this, this, and this—that is what I did—and set up a conservation plan. Thank you for the question, and it is really important.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Mr. BLAIR. I would also like to speak on behalf of the conservation districts who are housed within our local USDA service centers. We are right there working with them hand in hand every day, and we are not costing the Federal Government anything by the work that is being done by these local conservation district employees. Some of them are technicians, some of them are more administrative, but we are right there day to day working hand in hand with NRCS.

We are tied on the NRCS side to dollars for engineering. It is harder and harder to find qualified engineers that are willing to

come to work for NRCS on the pay scale that is being provided by the U.S. Government.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Mrs. Dwyer?

Mrs. DWYER. I would add, looking at this in two buckets on the capacity, we need staff that have the capacity to serve the number of farmers in their area, but more importantly, we need that trusted relationship. A farmer wants to know that the people they are working with not only understand the resource concerns of their local area but truly want to see them succeed and understand their concerns. You cannot have that when you have technical assistance that is 50, 100 miles away or just a few in a state.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good.

Mr. Doyle, in your testimony you mentioned a reservoir that was recently completed on your farm that utilized EQIP to complete the project. Tell us more about your experience working with NRCS and how important getting EQIP funding was to the financial viability of the project.

Mr. DOYLE. There is very limited funding available, but it is kind of like a waiting line. I think in my county alone there are about 2,000 acres of reservoirs, just for your knowledge. We water every crop that we grow in our county.

We started the planning and application process pre-COVID, around 2019. Went in, talked to the technicians, you know, developed a plan, what is the best place to put it on the farm. You also have to realize that that 45 acres will never be farmed again. We took it out of production for the long term, but it is going to ensure that we have the available water in the future. You know, whatever crop we grow is very important to us.

The process was extremely easy. It was very local. I think my county office is within 15 miles of our farm, so the accessibility to the technicians, the planners, the agents in the office was tremendous. We have a great staff at Poinsett County.

The follow-through was slowed due to COVID. There were some issues on supplying of the pipe, the underground pipe, the dirt work. The dirt work expenses, and fuel cost alone went up tremendously, so the funding for those projects does not go as far as it once did.

Then we wrapped up the project. We finally got to turn the pumps on last year. We followed that up with a cover crop plan to ensure the erosion was reduced on the farm and all of, you know, the soil health plan was in place because it is, you know, hopefully going to be there for the next generation or two on our farming operation. With that also, it helps our neighbors because we are not removing as much groundwater as we once did.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I mentioned that Leader Thune and I are continuing our work to make improvements to CRP and ensure that the USDA continues to offer the program and prioritize habitat. The CRP legislation we have worked on would improve access to grazing, provide more enrollment options for producers, and create certainty for the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement practice.

Mr. Tjeerdsma, I enjoyed our meeting earlier today. I know you have personal experience with CRP on your own farm. Can you ex-

plain how CRP can help both a farmer's bottom line and support wildlife and explain the importance of technical assistance from USDA or Pheasants Forever?

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Thank you very much for the question, Ranking Member Klobuchar. I cannot say enough, as I mentioned before, about how important technical assistance is. I will answer that question first because without it, we cannot get these practices on the ground.

As far as the Conservation Reserve Program, you know—and Chairman Boozman, I know how passionate you are about the Commodity Title and making sure that we have the concern that there is an economic assistance in this next farm bill for farmers. I would like to point out also just how the Conservation Title offers a safety net for farmers. On my own farm, I have taken the worst ground, the poorest ground that I have. We are not like the "I" states that have five feet of black loam soil. We have varied soil, we have some very good soils, and we have some very poor soils. I can take that poor ground—and I have done this over the years that I have farmed—and put that ground and roll that ground in CRP.

Just this last year, one piece of ground that I had rolled in CRP, I put 16 acres into CRP. What that did last year, it raised the average yield, the soybean yield on that piece of ground by at least 10 bushels to the acre. Plus, I got a CRP payment for those 16 acres that I placed there.

I think it is important that when we look at safety net for agriculture, we look at the CRP program and others, how we can take some of this land—and with the equipment that we have now, where we can pinpoint—I mean, I can look at a map coming off the combine, and I can see where the most productive ground is and target that ground and say, okay, we need to—this is not paying the bill, this is not paying for the inputs that I am putting on it.

With that, I would like to say personally, I know how important these programs are, how we can pinpoint, how we can target. CRP is no longer considered the—you know, we put the whole landscape in, the whole farm is. We need to stop thinking about that and think about how it can be effectively used as a pinpoint tool to help operations get a better bottom line. Thank you.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Thank you very much. I also mentioned the other bill that Senator Thune and I have. Could you quickly talk about how improved use of data that USDA collects strengthens ag research and makes it easier to figure out which conservation, just in 30 seconds here, because I have one more question?

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Sure. Thank you for that question as well. The Ag Data Bill is really important to me, having spent more than half my career at FSA. Knowing the wealth of information, I have also been involved extensively with NRCS and crop insurance and knowing there is so much information that USDA gathers.

Let me give you an example. I use cover crops on my farm, and there are so many different types of planting options when you put in a cover crop as far as the seed that you can use. There is also different planting methods. I have flown on my soybeans with an airplane. I have also drilled it in after we harvest. Those are kind

of guessing games, as far as what is going to work best where if we had ag data where USDA could coalesce this data and come up with, so I could look at what they say and say, okay, this is—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay.

Mr. TJEERDSMA [continuing]. going to work better on my land in this area, that is just an example of how that could work.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you.

Mrs. Dwyer, I mentioned the wide-ranging workforce reductions that are currently going on at NRCS and FSA and the proposed elimination of conservation technical assistance. I know in Minnesota NRCS has lost 40 employees between January and March. That was before the projected next round of staffing cuts nationally of 2,400 NRCS, 1,100 FSA. Mrs. Dwyer, how will fewer staff at local USDA offices impact the work that farmers do?

Mrs. DWYER. Thank you. It is a great question. As I mentioned before, it comes down to relationships and those trusted relationships, as well as the knowledge and the expertise in these areas. You know, I think to your specific question, it is a little too soon for us to see the full impacts, but I will say we know for sure that if we expect to see less staff in these offices with the archaic IT and systems that they are using, we are going to continue to see long lines, delays in enrollment, struggles and frustrations with the farmers showing up, looking to get service and that technical assistance. I also think that is an opportunity where partnerships can come in, things like—I mentioned I am a certified crop advisor. I have taken advantage of the recent MOU between NRCS and the CCAs to allow more of a streamlined path for some private sector to offer some additional support to help offices that were already struggling to provide enough TA to farmers.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Ernst.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar, and thanks to our panel of witnesses for being here today. We really appreciate your testimony and your willingness to visit with us about the importance of conservation.

I have the privilege of traveling all across Iowa, and I do not even have to travel river to river. I get it at home all the time. I come from a farm family. My hairstylist, I grew up with her husband who is a farmer. My dental hygienist the other day was giving me the lowdown. You know, her husband is a beginning farmer to the next community up, and so I hear a lot. Of course, this has been a big topic. We really need the farm bill done, and they want to know that the Title II conservation is also going to get completed.

What they want to do, of course, we are talking about improving soil health, our water quality, and the long-term productivity, which some of you have addressed already. They face a lot of barriers with the rigid USDA standards. It really slows things down. I have reintroduced my Streamlining Conservation Practice Standards Act to modernize how USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service updates its technical standards, and that will serve as a guide for many of the Title II farm bill programs. The bill would update the agency's process to require a regular review of existing conservation practice standards. It would create a public process

for submitting and adopting new practices, and it would prioritize the integration of innovative tools like nutrient efficiency technologies. Biological fertilizer is one of those examples that is proven to improve plant growth.

Ultimately, the goal is simple. Let us cut the red tape. Let us keep standards science-based and flexible, very key, and help farmers get conservation tools in use faster.

I am really thankful that I have colleagues like Senator Durbin, Senator Marshall, and Senator Heinrich. They have also joined me in this effort as well. It is a good bipartisan product.

Mrs. Dwyer, I will start with you. You work at the Intersection of Production Agriculture and Innovation as a farmer and with the Illinois Corn Growers, so can you maybe talk a little bit about the delays in updating practice standards? Do these create a barrier for innovation, particularly when it comes to nutrient management and soil health?

Mrs. DWYER. Thank you. I love this question. You know, I think you brought it up on looking at how practice standards are developed today. Right now, NRCS defaults to land-grant universities. Unfortunately, in Illinois, they do not even default to University of Illinois. They are going outside of Illinois to look at what those mean. I think it is, first and foremost, how can we get some of that boots-on-the-ground information, whether it is through CIGs and other NRCS programs and private programs, and actually utilize that data? You know, we are concerned and we know that data drives decisions, so how can we take the boots-on-the-ground information, as well as knowing that farmers are natural innovators? They are going to adopt technologies and precision ag that is going to outpace what we see in some of these standards. Ensuring the technology keeps up for what is actually happening on the farm and why we can be more innovative and flexible is absolutely crucial if we want to see conservation scalable and adopted at the pace that we need to meet the goals of things like the nutrient loss reduction strategy.

Senator ERNST. Right, I love it. Thank you for that. I really appreciate your input and advocacy on that.

Mr. Blair, conservation districts are often at the frontline. We have already heard a little bit about that, but how could increased transparency and public engagement in the conservation practice standard process improve trust and effectiveness at a local level?

Mr. BLAIR. Trust is, you know, key, I think, in all of what we do. Making sure that the farmers and ranchers understand that they can trust not only the local conservation district, but also the NRCS employees in making sure the productivity of their soils are maximized in order to increase the amount of income that they can reach off their farms. It is very key, it is a very important part of what we are doing, and I look forward to learning more about your programs and getting those implemented.

Senator ERNST. Yes, wonderful. Just in closing, I think trust is a big part of this. We have all of these young men and women, or men and women my age even, that are out working across these offices. You come from communities like ours. We are all intertwined, we all know each other, and we trust that they are going

to do the best for our family farms and for our future generations. Our communities rely on that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Bennet.

Senator BENNET. Thank you very much, Chairman, for this important hearing. Thank you all for being here.

Mr. Ellis, I have a question for you. As I think you probably know, in Colorado, conservation easements protect a huge amount of land. We have three million acres of critical habitats, agricultural land, and scenic landscapes, but current valuation methods often emphasize lost development potential, failing to account for the ecological, wildlife, water quality, and landscape connectivity benefits these lands provide. I have heard from producers all over my state that we need a more accurate and practical and modern approach to these valuations, one that truly reflects the long-term value of conserved agricultural land.

I am sure you have had the benefit of thinking about this over the years. I would be curious about your recommendation for approaching easement valuation to ensure fair land assessments and support effective long-term conservation.

Mr. ELLIS. Yes, thank you, Senator Bennet. Yes, in fact, you know, I believe there are several reasons why we need to look at, you know, alternative methodologies. You know, first, conservation is about, you know, conserving ecological systems, so that includes, you know, raising and growing food and fiber. We should have a valuation system, you know, that is valuing conservation, not the elimination of development. I think unfortunately when we look at it today, while our conservation easements do limit, you know, the development, they should not be seen as an anti-development tool. They should really be seen as a conservation tool.

I think one of the things, Senator Bennet, that we must, you know, kind of be careful with is we kind of start thinking of ensuring alternative methodologies, that we do not create speculative markets that incentivize investors over farms and ranch families, so I think this, you know, methodology we really need to, you know, look at, be very careful.

I think it is really about stacking, right, and stacking value. Senator Bennet, I think of a great example is some of your work you have looked at of conservation easements on groundwater.

Senator BENNET. Right.

Mr. ELLIS. Right? If we think about it from that aspect where we help empower those farmers, ranchers on that groundwater easement, and then we stack a traditional conservation on, you know, a land surface type of easement, right, and then we start adding that extra value.

We also look at free markets and leveraging our public to private, and we have many markets of carbon markets, et cetera, where this can also layer in and also look at, you know, increased funding on carbon markets, especially with producers, especially one from the buyer side, right? We look on the buyer side, if that producer has a conservation easement, there is assurance on them that that investment is always going to be there long term.

Senator BENNET. I appreciate that, and thanks for acknowledging the groundwater conservation. That came from producers in

Colorado, that idea, and I think it makes a lot of sense. They understand that we are dealing with a fragile ecosystem here, that everybody rises and falls together in some sense, and we need to make sure that development is not necessarily always the answer, and preserving these watersheds often is, so I appreciate that.

Mr. Chairman, I have got one more quick question, I hope, for Mr. Blair. Thank you for being here.

In Colorado, farmers and ranchers are up against a lot, as they are all over the country, less water to work with, tough winters and soils that are quick to erode. Conservation looks different in every part of my state and all across the country. While federal programs can help provide tailored proactive support, these programs are stretched too thin, and this leaves too many producers without the technical assistance they need to prepare for drought, floods, and other environmental challenges.

I wonder, Mr. Blair, how NRCS can expand standalone technical assistance to ensure that farmers and ranchers can access site-specific conservation planning, regardless of their ability or even desire to enter into a federal program?

Mr. BLAIR. Thank you for that question, Senator. Colorado is one of my favorite states to spend some time in and enjoy—

Senator BENNET. Come back anytime.

Mr. BLAIR. You know, it is important, technical assistance, the work we do. Working together, not only with NRCS, but also with technical service providers within or across our states, help implement these programs and work together. We are doing that in just about every state across the Nation, working with our TSPs, our technical service providers, and those are people that are contract workers that work hand in hand with our conservation district and receive funds for the work that they are doing. There are ways to do that, the ways to continue to get the technical assistance to the producers and on the ground.

Senator BENNET. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My question also is for Mr. Blair. As you know, the Conservation Stewardship Program, CSP, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, EQIP, are very popular in Mississippi. One of the many benefits of these important working lands programs is that they allow private land to remain in production while farmers and ranchers implement various conservation practices.

These programs are a win-win. Farmers are seeing increased productivity on their land through the conservation practices they implement, which, of course, improves the soil, water, and overall environmental quality of the land they rely on to feed us.

A major change to CSP in the 2018 Farm Bill shifted it from a program limited by acres or annual enrollment to a program limited by total annual funding. While that does not sound like a major change, it has had a big impact on limiting future CSP enrollment. In the next farm bill, would you agree that Congress should invest in popular working land programs like CSP and EQIP? What are you hearing from any landowners who have applied for CSP or EQIP but have yet to be approved?

Mr. BLAIR. Definitely, Senator Hyde-Smith, those are two important programs to the Mississippi Delta and to Mississippi in general, and we are at times not receiving enough funding for CSP or EQIP across the Nation, so they are very important to continue to fund those. I know in Mississippi we have got a great state conservationist who will take money from any other state that does not want to utilize their money and put those conservation practices on the ground.

I am hearing the same thing you are hearing. Our farmers need more CSP money, and the recent changes in CSP has limited our Delta farmers in Mississippi, as well as those others across the state. They are both very vital, important programs, and NACD supports both of those to be funded fully and allow our farmers and producers to receive the benefits from both EQIP and CSP. Thank you.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you. Conservation Districts have been key partners in the construction and maintenance of flood control infrastructure through the USDA Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program. This important program has been utilized in Mississippi to help reduce flood, erosion, and sedimentation damage in various watersheds. As you highlighted in your testimony, maintaining this infrastructure is essential for protecting our citizens, communities, small businesses, and producers.

What are you hearing from your members in Mississippi about the need to construct and maintain critical water infrastructure? How can Congress better support that work?

Mr. BLAIR. Thank you again, Senator, for that question. Our Watershed Program is very key in Mississippi. We are number two to Oklahoma as far as the number of watersheds. I have a watershed lake on my property. It has been rehabbed once already. We have a number of our watersheds that were built in the 1960's that are needing some rehab work done on those, so funding for watersheds and watershed rehab is very key going forward.

We have a number of cities that have grown underneath these watersheds, and we need to make sure that those dams do not fail. We have already had dam failures across the Nation and in Mississippi, so it is very key.

We also have a lake, a reservoir in Mississippi that the dam failed in North Mississippi, Arkabutla Lake, and we need to get that levee rebuilt to protect our farmers across the northern part of the Mississippi Delta, so any action that you can take to help us with that, we would greatly appreciate it.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Great. My last question is for Mr. Tjeerdsma. In your testimony, you discussed the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and the long-term certainty it provides landowners. In my state, wetland easements are widely used in the Mississippi Delta, where several counties are seeing near-record enrollment. These easements play a key role in protecting critical wildlife habitat while creating long-term recreational and economic value for Mississippians. In the next farm bill, how can Congress reduce regulatory burdens in the Wetland Reserve Easement Program to enable it to enroll more landowners and build on its successes?

Mr. TJEERDSMA. I think, as Senator Ernst talked about with the bill that she and others have introduced—having spent more than half my career at USDA Farm Service Agency, I will say there is an obsession with process, and this is something that has really—you know, I would ask you as a Committee, and I think you are going on the right track, that is probably one of the biggest deterrents and why we need so much technical assistance is the complexity of the programs, the complexity of the sign-up process that we have to go through, whether it is one of the easement programs under ACEP. Sometimes throwing more money, making more money available is not always the answer. It is how can we make the program more workable? How can we make the sign-up process easier? Especially when we are looking at the reduction in cuts or reduction in staff, there has got to be a balance, and I think that balance is to simplify the sign-up process, and I hope this Committee can work on that. Thank you very much, excellent question.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Durbin.

Senator DURBIN. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Two years ago, my wife was visiting family and called me and told me something is happening on Interstate 55, which is just south of Springfield. She said we have been diverted, and I have to go through Taylorville, which is another 30, 40 miles. It must have been an accident. Well, there sure was. In May 2023 on Interstate 55 south of Springfield, there was a 72-vehicle pileup that took the lives of eight people. The reason? A dust storm. The University of Illinois recently completed a study that concluded the lack of ground cover and dry conditions were contributing to that.

Mrs. Dwyer, you and I probably discussed this before. You indicated Illinois ranks very low in conservation dollars sent in by USDA. We need more. Can you explain why we have so few?

Mrs. DWYER. I would love to know why we do not see the proportion of dollars we would like to see. As we have heard from some other panelists, I think it is also important to note that, especially in a state with the size of Illinois, it is not going to be dollars alone that fix this. It is the process.

We think about 22 million acres of corn and soybeans, yet we have about a million acres of cover crops. That leaves a glaring hole on what needs to happen, and the question is why. It is looking at this instead of focusing on the practice of cover crops, what is it going to take to assist a farmer in that transition and to holistically support that systems change?

We have members that have gone into NRCS and have been denied six years in a row for their EQIP application. It is a combination of the funding, the burdensome application process. You know, I am honestly shocked that they have gone in year after year, and now it is almost a joke, if you will, on is it going to be another year? How many years can I be denied in a row? It is figuring out how can we bring in federal dollars, partnering with some really good private partners that want to invest for similar goals and priorities, and then bringing in that technical assistance to help make this scalable with flexible programs.

Senator DURBIN. What I heard from Mr. Doyle was that the producer has to make the decision early on to take land out of production in the near and short term, understanding in the long term there is real value to the operation. Mrs. Dwyer, are we dealing with the commitment being there to move forward, but just the lack of resources making it?

Mrs. DWYER. Yes, it is a combination of things, and I think that for a state like Illinois, we need to be focused on what can we do for our working lands. It is going to be a really challenging sell to convince a farmer in central Illinois to take some of the most productive fertile ground out and put it into a program like a general CRP program that is going to remove that from production for 10 to 15 years. We need to look at how can we get practices like cover crops, strip-till, no-till to become the commonplace on those acres, and that is going to take the flexibility and innovative programs that we do not have today.

Senator DURBIN. One of the things I thought about when we discuss conservation is obviously what we are sending down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, or its new name. My question is, is there any measurement that you can rely on that suggests that we are doing the right thing in reducing runoff of soil and chemical runoff?

Mrs. DWYER. Yes, we are making progress. I think the other thing to consider is we are not trying to make this progress in a bubble. We are seeing excessive rainfall. We are seeing bigger, more intensive rainfall events, and that makes those goalposts move. We need to be thinking as well on what are we doing in terms of the additional flow, and how can we incorporate technology and different practices to ensure that nutrient application is happening at the right time, at the right place, at the right rate.

I would say one thing that we have yet to discuss today is there are really no programs outside of—Minnesota has a great program and example on cost-sharing and helping with equipment. If farmers cannot access the very costly capital improvements on some of this precision technology, it is going to be really hard to help us to truly meet those goals.

Senator DURBIN. Do you have any idea what our average productivity is in corn bushels per acre in Illinois?

Mrs. DWYER. Well, we do have the highest yielding county in the country. We can claim that.

Senator DURBIN. Which one is that?

Mrs. DWYER. McLean.

Senator DURBIN. That is what I thought. It has been that way for a long time.

Mrs. DWYER. It has.

Senator DURBIN. Do you have any idea what the production is in that acreage?

Mrs. DWYER. We are well over 200 bushels.

Senator DURBIN. Well over 200. You give reference here to peaking in 1950. The United States has lost nearly a quarter of its farmland, an average of 11,000 acres per day. Do you have any idea in previous years what the corn productivity was on any base acreage?

Mrs. DWYER. Oh, we have grown exponentially. I mean, for my great-grandfather and my grandfather, you know, if they would have saw 100 bushels, they would not have known what to do. Now most of the farmers, especially in central Illinois, if they see something less than 230, they are probably disappointed. We have doubled and in some cases approaching tripling what that productivity has accomplished.

Senator DURBIN. Do you believe there is still upside potential?

Mrs. DWYER. I do.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Justice.

Senator JUSTICE. Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you so much, and thank you all for being here. You know, it is really meaningful in my world for you to be here.

Now, let me just tell you this. I am an absolute soft-spoken but direct human being, you know? I have never wanted anything. I do not want anything for being here for me. With all that being said, I would tell you I am probably the most impatient guy in the room. I am the newest guy, you know?

Also, in regard to conservation, I would really surprise you by saying this, but there could be somebody in all these buildings here that have walked more miles in the woods or spent more time with a flyrod on a stream or absolutely followed and watched the discipline and the beauty of more bird dogs than I.

You know, with all that being said, in addition to that, I have worked on constant conservation projects on all of our lands in multiple, multiple states and loved every minute of it.

Now, the thing that I do not understand is just this. You know, I have the good fortune of being on the Energy Committee and the good fortune of being on the Ag Committee. We are just surrounded by great people. That is all there is to it.

Here is the deal. If you are this impatient guy and you truly have done a lot, a lot, a lot of this work and you know just how much the conservation programs that we have been able to do help us as farmers, help us with our waters, help us with our soil erosion, help us with all the wildlife that we have been able to create and help in every way. With all that being said, it touches all of our souls, absolutely every single one of you.

The bottom line of the whole thing is just as simple to me. Someway, somehow, not only the world, but we, right here in these great buildings, we have got to somehow, somehow realize that just in a very short order, we are going to be in an energy situation in this country that is not good. That is all there is to it. If we continue down the path of what we are doing with our farmers and ranchers, it is going to be a bad day.

With that being said, we are trying to get by constantly, constantly on funding a program with \$1 when it needs \$10. The magnitude of the \$10 in the scope of everything that is going on here is nothing. It is just absolutely a gnat on a dinosaur.

Why cannot we just see—I mean, I have always approached things from a business guy's standpoint. You best better take care of the important items. Why cannot we just see that someway, somehow, we have got to have energy, and we have got to have

food. With all that being said, why cannot we just take care of what we have to take care of?

You are doing unbelievable work. There are all kinds of folks here, especially this Chairman down here, who is really, really special, Leader Thune. Many, many people really special.

I could ask you 50 questions. I could ask you 5,000 questions. You could absolutely—you have to know that I was there, I think, when the Conservation Reserve Program started. You know, I have seen it. I have seen the great work you do. I have seen how you do work with three parts to an 85,000-part puzzle, and you still do it. You should be really, really proud.

Someway, somehow, we have got to wake up. We have got to wake up all across the board because we have got to stand up for what we got to have. Every single country in this world, no matter how big or how small, every single country, the more energy they have, the longer their people live and the healthier they are. We are going to have a meltdown on energy without any question. If we do not watch out, we are going to have a meltdown on our ag side as well.

We have got to wake up. We have got to wake up, America. That is all there is to it. I will do everything I can, but I am absolutely—I am too impatient to not get frustrated. You know, we have got to have a farm bill, and we have got to have the proper funding for conservation.

Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Senator Justice. Senator Slotkin.

Senator SLOTKIN. Goodness, I saw my seniors come in here, and I thought I was bumped.

First of all, I am sorry to be asking these questions so close to you that I can almost spit on you. I am sorry.

[Laughter.]

Senator SLOTKIN. I have been trying to get out of the way so you can make eye contact with those asking you questions. Thank you for being here, all of you.

I live on my family farm in Holly, Michigan. We lease all the land now to a soybean farmer. I want to thank you for what you do. We are big believers in Michigan on the conservation programs and on incentivizing farmers, so carrots, not sticks on conservation work. I think it is a win-win for everybody. They are completely oversubscribed and underfunded. We want more, more, more in all of those programs. Our farmers are big believers in them.

My question is, you know, I had a farmers townhall maybe about three weeks ago now, and they were talking to me about the loss of some USDA staff. I know that about 2,400 conservation staff have been relieved, and I am trying to get a sense of the impact. Anyone who wants to jump in. You know, farmers, as Senator Ernst said, they like to have the person they know to call and say what is happening, what is going on, and we are feeling like we are losing that. Can someone weigh in here on the impact?

Mr. DOYLE. I can speak to the State of Arkansas. Thank you for asking the question. I serve on the American Soybean Association with some wonderful Michigan farmers, and I know——

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes.

Mr. DOYLE [continuing]. you all do great work. The programs are oversubscribed. I believe Fiscal Year 2023, 25 percent of the projects that were applied for were funded, so a very small amount. The money is tight.

In the State of Arkansas, as I mentioned earlier, on our project, we had great access to them. You know, my theory is that they are very good at what they do, but they are just a few years from retirement. I do not see that younger class or the ability of students who go and get their sole degrees at universities or agronomy as standing up to replace them, so that probably scares me more.

I think in Arkansas; the staffing issue is okay. There is talk about reduction.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes.

Mr. DOYLE. I am sure every county and state will be looked at and see if there needs to be changes.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. I got a little confused by my timing. Do I still have some timing left? The clock was doing some funky things. Am I okay? Okay. Sorry, guys.

The second question I have is on wetlands, okay? We are all supportive. Anyone in the conservation world cares about wetlands. We are big duck hunters in Michigan. We care about wetlands from a whole bunch of different angles, but a wet spot on a field is not a wetland. I say that as someone who has a proud wet spot in the field across the street from my house, which drives me absolutely crazy. It is not a wetland.

How do we get this right and conserve and protect what we need to protect but do not over-index to the point where a farmer is having to protect a wet spot in the field that has been there for 35 years? Anybody want to take a stab?

Mr. DOYLE. If I may also—

Senator SLOTKIN. Well, let me—

Mr. DOYLE. Yes, ma'am.

Senator SLOTKIN [continuing]. spread the love around here.

Sir, please go ahead.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Thanks for the question, Senator. Coming from South Dakota, the Prairie Pothole Region—

[Laughter.]

Mr. TJEERDSMA [continuing]. we have a lot of similar issues. Although I think the problem is better solved or better addressed now than it has been in the past, I think what we need to look at is having NRCS do additional wetland determinations because you are exactly right. You know, there are farmable wetlands. It is a complicated process as far as the determinations. I think a redetermination of wetlands would probably be an order that I think would help solve that problem.

Senator SLOTKIN. Great. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. You know, I just want to follow-up on that. If we are going to be re-looking at the wetlands, can we do that with a smaller rather than larger staff? Well, we cannot, right?

Yes, I mean, we are so, in Vermont, appreciative of the work that USDA has done. We are really concerned, as I think a lot of people are, and Senator Justice as well, about the staffing cuts because we had a staff aspirational level, and our actual numbers were a good

deal below that. Now, since the buyouts and the DOGE cuts, it has really been significantly compromised.

My experience with the USDA in Vermont is it is really efficient. You know, actually, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, what is so wonderful about it is, like, farmers trust you guys, and that trust is in short supply.

I guess you have been asked by others about the funding cuts, so I am not going to keep asking about it but just join my colleagues who are concerned about it and express my appreciation and admiration for the work that has been done.

With the loss of USDA, does anybody see a way forward where we can be successful doing the work that has to be done with significant reductions in staff? Mr. Blair, do you want to take a stab at that?

Mr. BLAIR. Yes, I would be glad to. Thank you, Senator Welch, for the question. We are concerned about it, but we are resilient, like all farmers and ranchers are. We feel like there is a way forward. We do need to keep our employees, as many as we can. We have lost employees through retirement and other programs. The terminations that occurred early on was key because those were a lot of upcoming new employees that had been trained and were well prepared for a long-term career in conservation—

Senator WELCH. Yes, you know, let me interrupt you. That is right. I do not think any of us here are against looking at any program, kicking the tires, how can we do it better, where can we reduce, where do we need some more resources? My observation is that it was a situation where folks came in and had a goal, and then a lot of notices were sent out to people terminating them from their jobs. It was in advance of taking a look at what the function was, how do you do it, and how can you do it better. I think there is some damage that has been done as a result of the way in which it rolled out.

Let us say that after the dust settles and it is settling now, there is a conclusion that in a lot of our state programs we have to, in fact, re-resource. I mean, Mr. Ellis, can you just describe how we would proceed to do that?

Mr. ELLIS. Yes, I mean, I think the key, Senator, is, you know, I am a half-glass-full type of person, right? I think it is about collaboration and partnerships, and we are going to have to rely on that to help our farmers and ranchers across to kind of reach some of that. I think a lot of this—

Senator WELCH. Well, you know, I just want to be candid. You are all half-full. Probably you are full-full. You cannot be in agriculture without being half-full, right? I mean, you have to disregard experience and continue to hope and show up. God bless you that you do that. At a certain point you have got to get concrete. You know, if we have lost 10 or 15 or 20 percent of the staff and we still have the same job or more, how are we going to proceed?

I guess I cannot ask for an answer on that, but is that a shared concern that you have? How do we put this back together again?

All right. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Senator?

Senator WELCH. Yes.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. I would like to say one thing.

Senator WELCH. Sure.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. When you talk about the staff shortage—I am here representing Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever.

Senator WELCH. Right.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. My whole career in Washington we talked about years ago, and it is still even more vital now, how do we leverage private entities, private funds with federal?

Senator WELCH. Right.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. I would like to use the example of Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever where we have the wildlife biologists. We have over 400 people, 370 or 80 I think that actually share with USDA. I think that is one path. We need to leverage private funds to help with the technical assistance and making sure we have money for the organizations that are doing that and even expand that so that we are not spending all federal dollars.

Senator WELCH. Right. Well, that is interesting because, of course, that is a model that is used with our National Park Service and in some cases with good effect. We cannot transfer all of the burden to the private sector——

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Right.

Senator WELCH [continuing]. and the philanthropic sector.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. I think if we leverage it——

Senator WELCH. Yes.

Mr. TJEERDSMA [continuing]. and do it partially——

Senator WELCH. Yes.

Mr. TJEERDSMA [continuing]. I think that would help.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much.

Mr. TJEERDSMA. Sure.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Have you got anything?

Senator KLOBUCHAR. No.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Well, thank you again to all of our witnesses and our Committee Members for their participation. As always, we appreciate my staff, Senator Klobuchar's staff for making these things happen.

The record will remain open for five business days. With that, today's hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:36 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MAY 13, 2025



National Association of Conservation Districts

May 13, 2025

Testimony of Mr. Gary Blair

President, National Association of Conservation Districts

Senate Agriculture Committee

“Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation”

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee. Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the impact of locally led conservation on individual landowners, local communities, and American agriculture and forestry.

My name is Gary Blair. I serve as the President of National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), as well as the board of the Carroll County Soil and Water Conservation District which represents my home community of Carrollton, MS. I formerly served as the president of the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts and Mississippi Forestry Association. Along with my wife, Johnna, I am a managing member of Blair Legacy Tree Farm and retired from Southern AgCredit following 36 years of service to agriculture in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Texas. My son, Jonathan, and I are proud graduates of Mississippi State University.

NACD represents the 3,000 conservation districts in every state and 7 territories, their associations, and 17,000 locally elected or appointed governing board members. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law. They were first established in 1937 as the local, on-the-ground partner to the Soil Conservation Service (now the NRCS). Today, there are nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the U.S. and its territories, each governed by a locally elected or appointed board.

Voluntary, Locally-Led, Incentive Based Conservation

America’s conservation delivery system has always put farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards first. Since the 1930s, we have recognized that effective conservation must be voluntary, incentive-based, economical, and engage the landowners and community members who best understand their unique natural resource concerns and economic needs.

There is no “one size fits all” solution to conservation, nor can programs be top down or mandatory. Local leadership, local priorities, and local decision making are at the heart of America’s working lands conservation delivery system. Conservation districts help ensure that conservation programs remain locally led and that solutions are tailored to address the unique environmental challenges and economic realities faced by individual communities.

America’s producers are land stewards at heart. They want to leave their land better than they found it for the next generation but can’t accomplish this alone. Producers need access to timely



National Association of Conservation Districts

and high-quality technical assistance, as well as programs like EQIP and CSP that help them invest in the health and productivity of their lands.

Approximately 60% of our nation's lands are in private ownership and 39% is classified as farmland. Achieving landscape scale conservation goals – whether cultivating productive agricultural lands, enhancing soil health, supporting wildlife habitat and biodiversity, improving air or water quality – requires the voluntary cooperation of the millions of farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards who manage these lands every day.

I can't overstate the level of service and capacity needed to conduct effective producer outreach, education, and technical assistance needed to ensure the health and productivity of our nation's lands. A core strength of our conservation delivery system is the partnership between federal, state and local governments. NRCS and conservation districts are often collocated in local offices, which strengthens the local partnership and makes it more convenient for producers to understand and access federal, state, and local conservation resources.

NRCS and conservation districts work directly with landowners to assess resource concerns, develop conservation plans, and implement practices tailored to the unique needs of each operation. This hands-on support allows producers to access not only financial assistance, but also trusted, science-based advice from professionals who understand both federal programs and local conditions.

We are often asked how the conservation partnership can continue to enhance customer service and strengthen technical assistance. If you asked our conservation districts, they could share hundreds of best practices. But what's most important to remember is that there are no shortcuts when it comes to working with producers. Success depends on building trust, delivering strong technical expertise, and helping producers explore a range of solutions tailored to their land. In the end, our work is as much about cultivating relationships as it is about providing the highest quality technical assistance.

Approximately 88% of farms are small to medium size operations. The majority of these producers require secondary jobs and sources of income to sustain their passion for working the land. About 30% are new farmers. Working with these producers takes time. Providing technical assistance and helping them access funding for conservation practices isn't a transaction, it's a journey. Producers know we are there to work with them through the conservation planning process, monitor outcomes, and help them adjust management practices and systems as their needs or environment changes.

Technical assistance is the foundation of our conservation delivery system, while Farm Bill conservation programs are critical to help producers implement conservation practices. TA funding provides for effective conservation planning, successful delivery of conservation programs throughout the U.S and its territories, as well as the development of a robust conservation workforce through training and partnerships.



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Conservation Workforce & Resources

During President Trump's previous administration, Secretary Purdue undertook a data driven effort to assess the appropriate servicing locations for USDA offices and the staffing levels necessary to meet the customer and natural resource needs. Through this analysis, optimal office locations were identified and NRCS was granted a staffing level of 11,000 employees with most of those to be on the frontlines of producer service.

This determination was data driven, based on conservation needs and strategic points for service delivery outlined in the 2018 Farm Bill conservation title. Those same programs are in existence today and continuing at their 2023 funding level, the highest annual funding level in the bill.

NACD was pleased to see increased staffing levels in field offices and bright, talented staff working alongside conservation district employees across the country. Today, however, we are concerned about the reported separation of approximately 2,400 NRCS employees and the possibility of future staff reductions at NRCS through early retirements, voluntary separation incentives, and reductions-in-force.

Conservation districts are already observing the loss of institutional knowledge and minimal succession planning impacting the quality and timeliness of technical assistance to producers at a time when demand for assistance is at an all-time high. Certainly, there have been staff reductions in the past to align agencies with each administration's priorities and goals. NACD supports efforts that will improve and create a more efficient government, while continuing to meet producers' needs. However, it has been our consistent position that NRCS's FY2020 on-board staffing levels were insufficient to meet the demands for conservation planning and implementation of Farm Bill programs.

We are deeply concerned about a return to those on-board staffing levels. Today, NRCS has an even higher workload associated with the administration of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding. NACD's top Farm Bill priority is to ensure those funds are integrated into Farm Bill conservation programs.

Although reduced staffing levels are a serious concern, I would emphasize that NACD has been highly supportive of NRCS's data driven approach to assessing workload and producer needs to inform staffing levels and office locations. Since she's been on board, Chief Aubrey Bettencourt has shown strong leadership. We are pleased with the level of collaboration with the Chief and her staff, as well as coordination on workforce needs as we support NRCS partners through this time of transition.

The core partners of the conservation delivery system – which includes NRCS, NACD, National Association of Conservation District Employees (NCDEA), National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), and National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils (NARC&DC) – are standing by to provide the support needed to continue to meet producer needs and service levels. Our core conservation delivery system is a unique partnership that aligns federal, state, and local conservation resources. Each partner –



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from NRCS, local conservation districts, and their state associations and agencies – contributes expertise and financial resources to support producers across the country.

For example, NACD has worked in partnership with NRCS to administer its Technical Assistance Grant program since 2018. This program has provided approximately \$16M each year to conservation districts, state and territory associations, and local entities like resource conservation development councils (RC&Ds). Funding is used to hire local staff in priority geographies that demonstrate the greatest staffing needs. Since 2018, grant funded positions have provided technical assistance to producers in 56 states and territories. They have benefited their communities in many ways, including the design of conservation practices benefitting 6.75M acres and support enrolling over 107,750 producers in EQIP and CSP. Grantees have contributed over \$23 million in match using state and local resources.

Farm Bill & Inflation Reduction Act Funding

Voluntary, incentive based, and locally led Farm Bill conservation programs have long been cost-effective tools for helping landowners improve the health and productivity of their lands. At a time when producers are facing extreme challenges from the farm economy and weather impacts, conservation helps increase the resilience of their lands and has economic benefits for individual producers.

In partnership with the Soil Health Institute and NRCS, NACD assessed 30 farms and the economics of soil health management systems across a range of crop types, soil types, geographies, weather patterns and more. In addition to improving soil health and increasing on-farm resilience and efficiency, implementation of conservation systems:

- Increased net farm income by an average of \$65/acre
- Increased yield for 42% of farms growing corn, 32% of farms growing soybeans, and 35% of farms growing other crops
- Reduced input costs

Demand for conservation is high and Farm Bill programs have been consistently oversubscribed. Even with Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding, program demand exceeds available funding. In FY2024, for example, NRCS received nearly 163,000 EQIP and CSP applications requesting \$8.7 billion; they were able to fund approximately 60,000 applications valued at \$3.7 billion. IRA funding allowed NRCS to fund 80% more than they would've otherwise been able to, but still only 43% of requests.

Financial assistance offered through conservation programs is an investment in producers' lands, as well as benefiting the local communities with the results (reduced erosion, cleaner water, etc.) of implementing conservation systems and practices. NACD's top Farm Bill priority is to integrate the IRA investments into the Farm Bill conservation programs without any sideboards. We strongly urge Congress to negotiate a bipartisan Farm Bill this year. NACD has been highly



National Association of Conservation Districts

supportive of the House markup released last year and encourages Congress to re-visit and build on that language.

In March 2025, NACD issued a survey to our members to understand the impacts of executive actions on local communities. We received nearly 500 responses, including from every state. One of the top concerns is the potential erosion of trust in the conservation delivery system as a result of funding freezes and payments. We know that Secretary Rollins understands this and puts “Farmers First.” We were pleased to see USDA honor existing contracts and obligations with producers and expedite the release of payments. The recent release of IRA payments, for grants or cooperative agreements, with partners, such as conservation districts, has also improved our ability to re-hire or retain local staffing and programs.

Getting funding to local communities to apply conservation to the landscape remains a mutual priority. NACD hopes to see the pause on new obligations lifted, particularly for new IRA funded contracts with producers, as well as Congressional language that retains IRA funding in the conservation title.

We’re nearing the end of spring and producers are developing long-term plans and budgets for their operations. Producers need certainty. The time to act is now. In Arkansas, for example, one conservation district reported \$1.2M in preapproved contracts covering 1,400 acres that are on hold. Another conservation district in Arkansas reported poultry producers being behind on the implementation of several practices, such as cross-fencing for rotational grazing, livestock water needs such as pipelines, tanks, water wells, and ponds, and forest stand improvement/tree site prep activities.

Closing

My family’s tree farm includes many practices using technical assistance from NRCS including terraces, overflow pipes and tile drainage along with planting of pine seedlings using funds from EQIP. These practices could not have been installed without the assistance of NRCS and USDA. My farm also has a watershed lake that was built using the technical and engineering provided by NRCS. These practices provide reduced or no soil erosion and clear water that leaves my farm and ends up in the Mississippi River and the Gulf of America.

I, along with my fellow farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards, rely on flexible conservation programs that allow us to address our unique natural resource concerns and the technical and financial support of NRCS and conservation districts. America’s farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards are ready and eager to participate in conservation programs. They simply need certainty and tools to get it done.

Maintaining strong investments in Farm Bill conservation programs and technical assistance, supporting an efficient and technically skilled conservation workforce, and ensuring local presence in communities across the country allows us to deliver on our mutual commitment to delivering results for producers, taxpayers, and the land. Thank you for your time and continued support of locally led conservation.



May 9, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition
& Forestry
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition
& Forestry
425 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Brad Doyle Opening Statement

Dear Chairman Boozman & Ranking Member Klobuchar:

Thank you, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee.

It is an honor to be here this afternoon. On behalf of Arkansas Farm Bureau, and its over 180,000 members, I would like to say how incredibly proud we are of Chairman Boozman and his leadership. Mr. Chairman, thank you for all you do for Arkansas producers, and American agriculture.

My name is Brad Doyle. I am a third-generation farmer in Poinsett County, Arkansas. Along with my wife Joyce, we farm rice, soybeans, and wheat. Our family has been farming this land for over 100 years. We also run our family business, Eagle Seed, a seed production resource that provides soybean, rice, corn, and wheat seed to farmers across the U.S. and Canada.

The United States is home to the most affordable, reliable, and abundant food supply in the world. Many of your constituents dedicate their lives to the land, providing the knowledge, labor, and financial investment necessary for the United States to remain a world leader in food and fiber production.

In recognition of the risk and responsibility placed on American farmers, Congress has invested in agriculture for over 90 years. The first farm programs created by Congress were a direct response to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. During another period of true crisis for production agriculture in the mid-1980s, Congress passed the first unified farm bill that combined land retirement conservation programs with crop insurance and commodity support programs. American row crop farmers are facing another historic breaking point.



As this Committee has heard over the past several months, the current state of the U.S. agricultural economy reveals a widening and unsustainable gap between the prices farmers are paid for their products and the prices they must pay to produce them.

Crop farmers, like me, have been hit especially hard. According to USDA's Farm Sector Income Forecast, inflation-adjusted crop cash receipts have declined since 2022 by \$67 billion — or 22%, while input costs for essentials like seed, chemicals, repairs, and taxes remain at near record levels.

Farmers today are caught between collapsing commodity prices and stubbornly high production costs. Despite recent improvements in risk management tools like crop insurance and ad hoc government assistance, the disparity between prices received and prices paid has widened dramatically, threatening the financial viability of farms across the nation.

Unless structural changes are enacted — through a modernized farm bill that provides commodity support that reflects the cost of production, enhanced risk management tools, meaningful investment in trade and strengthened conservation support — the United States risks irreversible damage to its agricultural foundation.

The conservation title, the focus of today's hearing, provides financial and technical support for farmers and ranchers who voluntarily implement conservation practices.

Let me give you an example.

In 1985, Joyce's father saw a need to build the first reservoir on the farm, where he took 100 acres out of production. In 2019, Joyce and her brothers started plans to apply for an EQIP funded project to build another 45-acre reservoir on the opposite end of the farm to help with irrigation pumping capacity. Irrigation timing and the management of excess water on a flat rice and soybean farm are critical to crop production.

The project was completed in 2023 with a cover crop plan in place for 2024.

With limited funds available, it is critically important to formulate a plan, get on the waiting list, and follow the detailed criteria to allow the local NRCS office to support and fund such a project.

The demand for these programs consistently outpaces available funding, leading to a need for more robust support in future farm bills. In the 2018 farm bill, conservation programs accounted for only 7% of the total farm bill spending. As Congress works to develop the next farm bill, the inclusion of additional funds, namely those allocated to agriculture conservation in the Inflation



Reduction Act would allow more producers to implement conservation practices ensuring healthy farmland for generations to come.

Finally, it is critically important that our Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Services offices remain open and available to meet the needs of your constituents. These centers provide essential programs and support that American farmers and ranchers rely on daily.

American farm families urgently need durable, forward-looking policy solutions, like updating reference prices in ARC and PLC to reflect today's actual production costs; expanding crop insurance options that better protect against margin loss; increasing funding for working lands conservation programs like EQIP and CSP; and modernizing disaster assistance to deliver timely, predictable relief. These actions are not just policy upgrades — they are necessary investments in the long-term profitability, resilience, and future of American agriculture.

Again, it is an honor to be before you this afternoon, and I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brad Doyle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brad Doyle
Arkansas Producer
Arkansas Farm Bureau Board Member



Prepared Testimony of:

Mr. Lynn Tjeerdsma
Member, Board of Directors
Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
& Forestry**

“Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation”

May 13, 2025

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Lynn Tjeerdsma. I am a farmer, rancher, and retired public servant, and I currently serve on the Board of Directors for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever (PF & QF). It is a privilege to testify today on behalf of PF & QF's members, partners, and the hundreds of farming and ranching families we work with every day.

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever make up the nation's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to upland habitat conservation. With more than 490,000 members, supporters, and partners and over 750 local chapters, we are dedicated to the protection of America's uplands through habitat improvement, public access, education, and advocacy. Our unique grassroots model empowers local communities to drive conservation efforts, raising and spending funds locally to deliver measurable results on the ground. Since its creation in 1982, PF & QF (also known as "The Habitat Organization") has dedicated more than \$1 billion to 580,000 habitat projects benefiting 28.8 million acres.

We work in partnership with thousands of private landowners, farm and ranch families, state wildlife agencies, and federal partners like the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA). Each year, our team of more than 480 wildlife biologists and conservation professionals, many of whom are co-located in USDA field offices, help producers plan and implement conservation practices that are both wildlife-friendly and economically viable.

Most of this work has been made possible by programs supported by the farm bill's conservation title. These voluntary, incentive-based, locally led programs are essential to our mission and to the future of working lands and habitat conservation in America.

I know this from personal experience. Farm bill conservation programs have improved the sustainability of my farming operation, protected my fragile acres, improved my soil's health, and reduced wind and water erosion on the landscape. In addition, they have provided ample wildlife habitat, resulting in sporting opportunities for me, my son, and grandsons. The technical assistance I have received thanks to the farm bill has also proven invaluable in choosing the best practices for my operation and achieving my goals.

Having both overseen the Conservation Reserve Program and other Farm Service Agency conservation programs while Assistant Deputy Administrator and drafted legislative text for conservation programs while working on farm bills in the office of Senator John Thune, I strived to "practice what I preached". I've installed multiple conservation practices under multiple programs on my land, so I could prove to myself and others that they really do work as intended. Without a doubt, I know conservation can successfully complement crop and livestock production, which is why it is critical to have a robust conservation title in the next farm bill.

PF & QF view the farm bill not only as critical conservation policy, but as a practical tool that benefits producers, rural communities, and the hunting and outdoor recreation economy. The policies you shape here have real, lasting impacts on the land and the lives of the people who

steward it. With this in mind, I would like to highlight some of the key perspectives on conservation raised by our members, volunteers, staff, and farmer and rancher partners.

Voluntary and locally led conservation is key and must continue in the next farm bill

The success of farm bill conservation programs lies in their voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led structure. Producers trust these programs because they are rooted in science, respect private property rights, and are designed to be flexible. Continued investment in conservation planning and technical assistance is essential for this trust and success to continue. Strengthening partnerships with state wildlife agencies, conservation districts, and local communities will multiply impact and improve the farm bill's outcomes.

A five-year farm bill with meaningful investments in conservation is critical

It will be no surprise to this committee that a top priority today for PF & QF is to pass a bipartisan, comprehensive, five-year farm bill with meaningful investments in conservation as soon as possible.

The 2018 Farm Bill expired over a year and a half ago, at a time when America's agricultural producers are facing increasing market uncertainties, supply chain expectations, and land development pressures. Farmers and ranchers are working without an adequate safety net and with looming questions about how they will manage and fund the essential activities that will modernize their operations and make them more resilient.

Although many of the conservation programs funded through Title II of the 2018 Farm Bill have long-term authorization, others, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP), are dependent upon passage of a new farm bill to guarantee they can continue. Landowners enrolled in these programs likewise depend on the certainty of their contracts and the ability to plan and make land use decisions at the appropriate time of year.

In addition, these conservation programs are extremely popular and perennially oversubscribed. In 2020 and 2022, roughly three out of every four farmers who applied to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) were turned away due to a lack of funding. Even with the historic investments in working lands conservation made possible through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA), demand for these programs far outpaces supply. Although PF & QF recognize current objectives to shrink the federal deficit and cut spending, we urge this committee to incorporate the remaining IRA funding into the conservation title baseline to meet demand. This move has strong bipartisan support, as shown in both House and Senate farm bill proposals during the 118th Congress. Now is not the time to shortchange our farmers and ranchers.

Further, PF & QF are concerned about recent proposals to drastically reduce the amount of Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding available for agricultural producers to help implement conservation practices on their operations. America's farmers are famous for wanting "a hand up, not a handout." Few things better embody this concept, and the efficient and effective use of the taxpayer's dollar, than the ability for *any* producer to walk into their local

USDA Service Center and receive expert assistance at no-cost from NRCS staff or from an affiliate or technical assistance provider, such as Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. This committee, through the farm bill and other authorities, should do everything possible to ensure America's producers can continue to receive technical assistance. This will ensure resiliency for our nation's lands and wildlife, agricultural operations, food supply, and rural communities.

Robust voluntary conservation programs not only help farmers and ranchers manage profitable agricultural operations today, but they also support the anticipated generational transfer of 360 million acres of farm and ranchland by 2030. These programs, and the technical assistance offered through NRCS, help experienced and new producers alike to reduce risk, ensure stable incomes, and assist with the large-scale capital expenditures needed to steward their agricultural operations well into the 21st century.

PF & QF sincerely appreciate the work this committee and your partners on the House Agriculture Committee have done to prepare for a new, bipartisan farm bill, and we understand the political and policy challenges that have prevented a new farm bill from moving forward. I strongly urge the committee to move a farm bill through the committee as soon as possible, and PF & QF stand ready to assist however possible.

The Conservation Reserve Program is part of the farm—and wildlife—safety net

Now in its 40th year, CRP remains one of the most effective conservation tools available to farmers, ranchers, and landowners. CRP provides voluntary incentives to shift environmentally sensitive acres into conservation cover, improving soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat, usually for 10-15 years at a time. It is a foundational piece of rural America's environmental and economic landscape.

Just as importantly, CRP serves as a key component of the farm safety net, particularly in times of economic uncertainty, market volatility, and extreme weather. For many producers, CRP provides a stable, predictable income stream that complements land in active crop production, providing risk management and resilience against commodity price swings, increased input costs, and nature's unpredictability, helping to sustain operations during challenging times.

The program also plays a vital role during times of drought and natural disaster. Emergency haying and grazing provisions under CRP offer critical forage resources when pasture and feed supplies are strained. These flexibilities support livestock producers and rural communities when they need it most, without compromising long-term conservation goals.

For many wildlife species living in agricultural landscapes, thriving populations depend on the voluntary conservation efforts of farmers, ranchers, and landowners. The grassland, wetland, and forest ecosystems created and enhanced through CRP have provided essential habitat for pheasants, quail, pollinators, deer, waterfowl, songbirds, and other wildlife on and among working landscapes. This can be a boon to hunters and other wildlife enthusiasts, who can track the rise and fall of their favorite species to the number of CRP acres enrolled in a given area. Whether on a pivot corner beyond the reach of irrigation, on highly erodible soils, a stream buffer, or other agricultural lands, the perennial cover created through CRP can provide the

essential nesting, brooding, escape, and winter habitat needed to sustain and even grow a wildlife population.

Despite CRP's clear value, recent years have shown a troubling decline in enrollment in the General and Continuous signups. Complicated application processes, uncompetitive rental rates in certain regions, and inconsistent management have deterred participation, even among producers who support the program's goals and have interest in participating. For CRP to be successful, it must better reflect local market conditions and provide flexible, producer-friendly tools to encourage broader adoption.

That's why we strongly support the CRP Improvement Act, led by Majority Leader Thune and Ranking Member Klobuchar, which modernizes the program to meet today's conservation and economic needs. The bill would bolster CRP by improving access to grazing, maximizing enrollment options for producers, and addressing implementation issues under the 2018 Farm Bill. Importantly, the bill would restore cost-share for required mid-contract management activities, provide cost-share for grazing infrastructure, and permanently establish the highly successful State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative under Continuous CRP. Finally, the bill would increase annual payment limitations to account for inflationary and rising land value pressures. These payment limits have not been adjusted since CRP was originally created in 1985.

We also encourage policies that incentivize the enrollment of marginal lands, such as highly erodible acres or areas less suitable for crop production, where CRP delivers the greatest conservation and economic return for farmers. Tailoring incentives and rental rates to encourage enrollment of these marginal and environmentally sensitive acres ensures that CRP will remain a smart, efficient investment in our working lands. Elements of the Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot (SHIPP) could also be incorporated into nationwide implementation of CRP to strengthen the program's role as part of the farm safety net.

CRP works. With thoughtful improvements and strong Congressional support, it will continue to deliver conservation results, economic resilience, and wildlife benefits across rural America.

The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program supports farmers, hunters, and rural economies

Another key component of the farm bill's conservation title is the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, or VPA-HIP. This program provides grants to states and tribal governments to provide incentives and protections to private landowners who voluntarily open their lands to the public for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation while simultaneously supporting habitat conservation. Access to quality habitat remains one of the top barriers to hunter participation, simultaneously straining our nation's hunting heritage and the American system of wildlife conservation funding, which depends on hunters and anglers for sustained funding. VPA-HIP directly addresses this issue, opening millions of acres of private land to the public and strengthening the ties between working lands and outdoor recreation.

The economic benefits of VPA-HIP are real and measurable. Hunting and fishing on these lands generate billions in consumer spending, support rural tourism, and create jobs in small

communities. In states with robust access programs, such as South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, we've seen increased license sales, expanded habitat stewardship, and thriving rural economies; local initiatives, such as the Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition in South Dakota and Nebraska Community Access Partnership, have formed to capitalize on the promise of more birds and more hunters for their communities. A 2021 study by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies found that local economies received an average of \$8.13 in economic activity for every \$1 invested through VPA-HIP. This rural spending is a key component of the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy, which generates over 5 million quality, high-paying jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

We strongly support the VPA Improvement Act, led by bipartisan Senators Bennet, Daines, and Marshall, which would triple funding for the program from \$50 million to \$150 million in the next farm bill. This investment is not only a win for hunters and anglers, but also a win for farmers, landowners, small businesses, and rural vitality.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Working Lands for Wildlife benefit agricultural operations and the broader landscape

Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) empower producers to integrate conservation into their active operations by offering cost-share and management incentive payments. The practices offered through EQIP not only improve wildlife habitat but also enhance soil health, boost water quality, and increase resilience to drought and flooding.

One of the most effective models within EQIP is Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), a partnership between USDA and conservation organizations like Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. WLFW uses a science-based, landscape-scale approach to target conservation practices in areas where they will provide the greatest benefit for both agricultural producers and high-priority wildlife species.

For the northern bobwhite quail, WLFW has been a game changer. Once one of the most abundant upland game birds in the country, bobwhite populations have declined drastically due to habitat loss and landscape fragmentation. Through WLFW, EQIP provides targeted financial and technical assistance to help landowners implement habitat-friendly practices, such as prescribed fire, native grass and forb establishment, and edge feathering, that not only benefit quail but also improve grazing systems, pollinator habitat, and soil productivity.

In the West, WLFW's private lands conservation efforts played an important role in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2015 decision that both the Greater sage-grouse and the Bi-state sage grouse were not warranted for listing under the ESA. That's because of WLFW's innovative approach that provides regulatory predictability to landowners, ensuring that no matter the legal status of a wildlife species on their property, they can keep their working lands working with an NRCS conservation plan in place.

PF & QF's biologists, precision agriculture specialists, prescribed fire specialists, and other field positions are proud to work alongside NRCS field staff to assist landowners in developing conservation plans under EQIP and WLFW that are tailored to their unique landscapes and

operations. This approach demonstrates how conservation and production can go hand-in-hand when programs are voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led.

We urge the Committee to maintain strong funding for EQIP, including ensuring that at least 10% of EQIP funding goes towards wildlife practices, and to continue supporting targeted initiatives like Working Lands for Wildlife. These programs help producers manage working lands in a way that benefits both their operations and the broader landscape.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program provides certainty against development pressures

Through voluntary conservation easements, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners protect native grasslands, wetlands, and agricultural working lands that are critical to both wildlife and rural economies. PF & QF strongly support continued investment in ACEP, as these easements provide long-term conservation certainty while keeping land in private ownership and agricultural use. They are especially valuable for protecting intact prairies, wetlands, and other habitats that are increasingly at risk from development or conversion.

Voluntary grassland easements, like those enrolled under the Grasslands of Special Significance option, have proven to be a highly effective tool for conserving large tracts of native rangeland in areas like the Great Plains, where these landscapes support not only pheasants, quail, and other wildlife, but also livestock operations and rural livelihoods. These working landscapes are increasingly threatened by fragmentation and land-use changes. ACEP provides a mechanism for landowners to conserve them while continuing traditional uses like grazing.

Likewise, wetland easements provide critical benefits for wildlife, water quality, and flood mitigation. By restoring and permanently protecting wetlands, ACEP helps conserve some of the most productive ecosystems in North America.

As with EQIP and CSP mentioned above, the demand for voluntary easements routinely exceeds available funding. We encourage the Committee to support robust funding and streamlined implementation of ACEP, while maintaining its voluntary, producer-focused framework. Continued support for these easements ensures that high-priority habitats can be protected for the long term, benefiting wildlife, water, and working farms and ranches alike.

Public-private partnerships scale conservation through collaboration

Delivering conservation on working lands through strong public-private partnerships is extraordinarily effective. PF & QF have long believed that conservation is most successful when it's local, collaborative, and rooted in relationships between producers, agencies, and trusted partners.

Our Farm Bill Biologist Program exemplifies this model. With trained wildlife biologists in USDA Service Centers across the country, we provide boots-on-the-ground technical assistance to producers interested in implementing conservation practices. These biologists work side-by-side

with NRCS and FSA staff to help producers navigate conservation programs, develop conservation plans that reflect their goals, and implement practices that are both effective and operationally practical.

This collaborative model strengthens USDA's capacity, increases enrollment in conservation programs, and ensures outcomes are both locally relevant and scientifically sound. Many of our biologist positions are supported through partnerships with state agencies, conservation districts, and other nonprofit organizations, showcasing the power of cooperation in advancing shared goals.

Additionally, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) continues to be a powerful mechanism for leveraging private investment and local expertise to achieve large-scale resource conservation. Through RCPP, we're able to work hand-in-hand with producers, conservation districts, state agencies, and commodity groups to implement targeted, results-driven projects that are grounded in science and tailored to local needs. These partnerships allow us to address resource concerns at scale, while respecting the voluntary, incentive-based framework producers value.

These public-private partnerships would also benefit from better data management and utilization to further inform land use decisions and implementation of conservation practices, as well as to make it possible to measure and report on outcomes. That is why PF & QF support the Agriculture Innovation Act, led by Majority Leader Thune and Ranking Member Klobuchar. This bill would enable USDA to use, in a manner that protects producer privacy, the data it collects from farmers to return to growers a better understanding of the benefits of conservation, whether near-term soil health gains or longer-term resiliency.

We urge the Committee to continue its support for public-private partnerships, including strong funding for RCPP. Success depends not only on program funding, but on having trusted professionals working in local communities who can build trusted relationships, guide producers through the process, and ensure conservation practices are implemented efficiently and effectively, in a way that works for the land and the grower's bottom line.

Conclusion

The farm bill conservation title is an investment in rural America's future. It supports farmers and ranchers, enhances biodiversity, and helps safeguard the natural resources that sustain our agricultural economy.

On behalf of Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, I want to thank the Committee for its longstanding bipartisan support of conservation. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the next farm bill strengthens these vital programs for the benefit of wildlife, producers, and the public alike.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

Appendix: PF & QF CRP Priorities

Key Principles

- **Increase acres enrolled in CRP and put the program on a trajectory toward historical enrollment levels in priority landscapes** at both the state and national level.
- **Maintain the statutory requirement to ensure an equitable balance** among the conservation purposes of soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife habitat.
- **Keep perennial cover and long-term contracts (10+ years) as the core function of CRP to ensure soil, water, and wildlife benefits continue.**
- **Ensure robust enrollment for all signup types.**

Rental Rates

- **Restore and increase rental rates to promote enrollment and fairly compensate landowners for enrolled land.** The 2018 Farm Bill reduced rental rates to 85% and 90% for General and Continuous signups, respectively, resulting in decreased interest and loss of acres in the program.
- **Within General CRP only, encourage enrollment of marginal lands by increasing rental rates for less productive soils.** Currently, rental rates are weighted based on the productivity of the soils in the contract, with less productive soils receiving lower rental rates. Increasing rates for these soils will better incentivize enrollment of marginal lands in the General signup.
- **Within Continuous CRP (including CREP), restore rental rates to 100% of the county average rental rate.** The practices in Continuous signup are focused on environmentally sensitive lands, and rental rates should be set in a way that fairly compensates producers for enrolling these lands in high priority practices and initiatives.
- **Increase entity limitation on annual rental payments to \$125,000 per year to account for changes in land value, inflation, and other economic factors.** The current entity limitation of \$50,000 per year has not changed since CRP was first authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill.

Cost-Share, Incentives, and Management Requirements

- **Maintain, at a minimum, the existing statutory levels for cost-share and incentive rates** to ensure the established cover provides the multiple resource benefits and habitat benefits for which it was enrolled. Cost-share for establishment of cover is currently authorized for 50% of the cost of the practice, with Continuous CRP contracts receiving an additional practice incentive payment of up to 50% of the practice cost and a signing incentive payment of 32.5% of the first year's rental payment.
- **Continue to require necessary management of cover where needed** to ensure soil, water, and wildlife benefits continue for the length of the contract, including for reenrollments. Incorporate state and regional recommendations for eligible mid-contract management activities and criteria for cover management.

- **Restore cost-share for required mid-contract management activities**, including for contracts enrolled under the 2018 Farm Bill. The authority was removed late in negotiations for the 2018 Farm Bill without knowledge or support from the conservation community.

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

- **Maintain the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement initiative in Continuous CRP.** In 2019, USDA made an administrative decision to move SAFE to General signup, which significantly reduced the interest in and impact of SAFE enrollments. This decision has since been reversed administratively, but it is critical that SAFE remain as part of Continuous CRP in the future.
- **Restore the waiver authority to exclude acreage enrolled under SAFE and other Continuous practices from the 25 percent county acreage cap.**

Haying and Grazing

- **Promote grazing over haying as a tool for management and enhancement of CRP cover by providing cost-share for establishment of grazing infrastructure**, including fencing and water distribution, if grazing is included in the approved conservation plan. This may include boundary fencing when the land is enrolled without adequate fencing. This cost-share should not prohibit or negatively impact the producer's ability to reenroll in CRP.
- **Restore limits on emergency haying to no more than 50% of contract acres each year and ensure appropriate restrictions remain in place during and after the primary nesting season for emergency and non-emergency haying.** Current policy allows the entire contract to be harvested in an emergency each year after the primary nesting season with no payment reduction.

Grassland CRP

- **Improve Grassland CRP to better target lands at risk of conversion and high-quality habitat**, including prioritizing enrollment of expiring CRP acres.
- **Provide additional cost-share authority on lands enrolled in Grassland CRP** for establishment and management of the vegetative cover to increase forage quality and environmental benefits.

Written Testimony**Submitted to**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
May 13, 2025 Hearing**

Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation**Submitted by Chad Ellis**

**Chief Executive Officer, Texas Agricultural Land Trust
Vice Chair, Partnership of Rangeland Trusts**

Chairman Boozman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a written statement on behalf of Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) and Partnership of Rangeland Trusts (PORT).

I am Chad Ellis Chief Executive Officer of Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT), an accredited statewide land trust created by landowners for landowners. I also serve as Vice Chair of the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts, which represents nine land trusts across twelve states in the West that focus exclusively on conserving working farms and ranches, and productive agricultural lands. Together, we help empower over 2,000 families that steward 3.2 million acres of working land that produce food and fiber, sustain rural communities, and provide clean air and water for all Americans.

In Texas, we are predominantly a privately owned state supporting over 139 million acres of working lands or 81% of the state's total land area. These lands are the backbone of our state's economy and a key contributor to our nation's food, fiber, and water security. Texas working lands are under increasing land conversion (i.e., non-agricultural development) pressure driven by unprecedented economic and population growth. According to Texas Land Trends, Texas loses 1,023 acres every day or 373,395 acres of working lands each year – about half the size of Rhode Island - primarily due to fragmentation, development, buildout of infrastructure including energy infrastructure and data centers and generational transition. Most of this loss occurs near urban areas, where agricultural lands are most productive and under the greatest pressure. Additionally, Texas has lost over 18,000 farms and ranches in the last five years. Socioeconomic trends are exacerbating the threats to agricultural lands. Over 40% of the nation's working land is owned by people over 65, so up to 370 million acres could be sold. And while many young people are interested in getting started in agricultural, the challenge of finding affordable land is keeping too many of them from starting successful ag businesses. The average appraised market value in Texas rose 55% since 2017, from \$1951/acre to \$3,021/acre, and 505% from \$499/acre in 1997.

This trend is not unique to Texas. Nationally, American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat data shows that the U.S. lost or compromised 11 million acres of agricultural land between 2001

and 2016. That's equivalent to losing more than 2,000 acres every day. This report shows that, if this trend continues, another 18.4 million acres will be converted between 2016 and 2040 – an area nearly the size of South Carolina.

At TALT, we work with landowners to keep working lands working, intact, and in production, forever through voluntary conservation easements. These are legal agreements that restrict future development, while keeping land in private ownership and agricultural use. They are one of the most effective tools we have to address land loss, maintain rural economies, and support long-term food and fiber production.

However, these tools are only accessible to many landowners because of Farm Bill conservation programs like the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). These programs leverage federal investments with private and state resources to make conservation financially viable for farmers and ranchers.

In Texas, our easement projects have protected working lands that support beef cattle, sheep and goat operations, native prairies, timberlands, and wildlife habitat. Over 77 billion gallons of water are conserved on TALT held conservation easements annually. The rainwater that falls on these productive working lands is replenishing our groundwater, our aquifers, and ultimately providing the drinking water we rely on every day. That's the kind of return on investment Farm Bill programs make possible.

These are not just conservation programs, they're national security programs. They ensure that future generations of Americans have access to healthy food, clean water, and open space. They keep private working lands productive and in the hands of the people who know them best—ranchers, farmers, and foresters.

Supporting landowners in the stewardship of working lands is crucial to conserving healthy ecosystems, fostering resilient communities, and ensuring sustainable natural resources for generations. Ultimately, the future conservation of working lands is directly linked to private landowners who strategically steward these properties.

As Congress works to reauthorize the Farm Bill, we urge you to:

- Maintain robust funding for ACEP/ALE and RCPP, so landowners can voluntarily protect their land while keeping it in production (the demand for easements are at all-time high);
- Eliminate Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations from ACEP/ALE because compensation for the purchase of a conservation easement is not a subsidy payment but a conveyance of private real property right;
- Exempt conservation program payments from future AGI calculations. Payments made through ACEP or any other federally administered conservation programs should be excluded from AGI calculations used to determine eligibility to participate in Farm Bill programs;

- Reduce administrative burdens that delay project implementation and discourage participation, one valuable tool for streamlining implementation is through certified entities which recognizes exceptional land trusts and delegates authority to these entities;
- Support flexibility in program design, so that landowners and partners can effectively deliver these tools.

Chairman Boozman, your leadership on this Committee and your understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing working lands are deeply appreciated. Thank you again for the opportunity to share this testimony, and for your continued support of private land conservation.

Supplemental Resource: Key Trends Impacting Texas Working Lands

Land Use and Change:

- Texas lost nearly 3.7 million acres of working lands to non-agricultural uses between 1997 and 2022, including 1.8 million acres in the last five years.
- Grazing lands have declined by 6.7 million acres since 1997.
- Infrastructure expansion—especially for energy and data centers—continues to drive land use change.

Population Growth:

- Texas is home to 8 of the 15 fastest-growing U.S. cities.
- Between 1997 and 2022, Texas population increased 55%, from 19M to 30M—over 1,100 new residents per day.
- 88% of growth occurred in the top 25 highest-growth counties.

Land Values:

- Average market value rose 55% since 2017 (from \$1,951 to \$3,021/acre).
- Since 1997, land values increased by 505%.

Ownership Patterns:

- Texas lost over 18,000 agricultural operations in the last five years.
- Average ownership size increased from 509 to 541 acres (2017–2022).
- 60% of operations are under 100 acres but make up only 3% of working lands.
- More than 1,000 operations over 2,000 acres were lost between 2017 and 2022.
- Aging landowners (65+) will drive the largest transfer of land wealth in U.S. history within the next decade.

Testimony of Megan Dwyer

Farmer from Coal Valley, Illinois &
Director of Conservation and Nutrient Stewardship,
IL Corn Growers Association

Before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

“Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation”

May 13, 2025

Good afternoon. It's an honor to be here today and an even greater honor to represent Midwest farmers—though some might call it multitasking madness. I come to you wearing several hats: 4th generation farmer, certified crop advisor, ag professional, and mom.

Our Illinois family farm grows corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and beef cattle, and with my husband, we're raising the fifth generation. In fact, our oldest daughter is here with me today - hopefully feeling inspired.

We're discussing conservation today, something I've devoted my professional career to. As the Director of Conservation and Nutrient Stewardship for IL Corn, I strive to ensure that policies and regulatory efforts are grounded in both science and common sense. My goal is to bridge the gap between farm fields and policy, and to make the complexities of conservation feel as relatable as baking chocolate chip cookies.

As the NRCS celebrates 90 years, it's a good time to reflect. For decades, we've rightly focused on protecting our most vulnerable soils. I'm here to ask us to think differently, to consider how programs can better protect our most productive soils. When I think about vulnerable soils versus productive soils, I'm reminded of this quote on the original Agriculture Building on the quad of the University of Illinois - our land grant university: "The wealth of Illinois is in her soil and her strength lies in its intelligent development." Let us protect this wealth with the most intelligent and intentional efforts we can muster.

Since peaking in 1950, the United States has lost nearly a quarter of its farmland—an average of 11,000 acres every day¹. This isn't marginal land being paved over. Much of what's disappearing is some of the most productive, high-value agricultural ground in the country—land that consistently delivers strong yields and underpins the economic viability of American agriculture. American Farmland Trust warns that if current trends continue, we could lose an additional 18.4 million acres by 2040². For farmers, that represents a serious threat to our ability to meet growing demand while maintaining efficiency and profitability.

In production agriculture, we rely on a foundation of high-quality soils, reliable water, and favorable climates to sustain yields and manage input costs. As urban sprawl, infrastructure expansion, and fragmentation push into our best growing regions, we're losing more than just acres—we're losing operational efficiency.

Conserving our most productive agricultural acres is essential if we want to stay competitive in global markets and continue feeding and fueling a growing population. These lands deliver more output with fewer inputs and are better positioned to adapt to economic pressures, policy shifts, and weather extremes. Without deliberate efforts to protect and manage these critical resources, farm families will face increased land prices, reduced margins, and greater pressure to overwork marginal land.

¹ <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsagscitech.2c00250>

² https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/AFT_FUT2040_AbundantFuture_ExecutiveSummary.pdf

In production agriculture, we've long felt the pressure of competing land uses—residential sprawl, industrial development, and energy projects. As these interests expand into prime agricultural land, the competition for space is becoming more intense and more costly for farmers trying to grow food, manage inputs efficiently, and plan for the next generation.

When you heard I'm from "Illinois," odds are you thought of Chicago. But the reality is that about 70 percent of Illinois is farmland. That's 24 million acres of cropland—about the size of nearly one-third of all U.S. cities combined. Our farm fields are a powerhouse of productivity, yet when it comes to federal conservation funding, we receive only a small fraction. From 2018 to 2022, Illinois received just 1.31 percent of EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) funding—in comparison, Georgia received nearly three times that investment for one-fifth of the cropland.

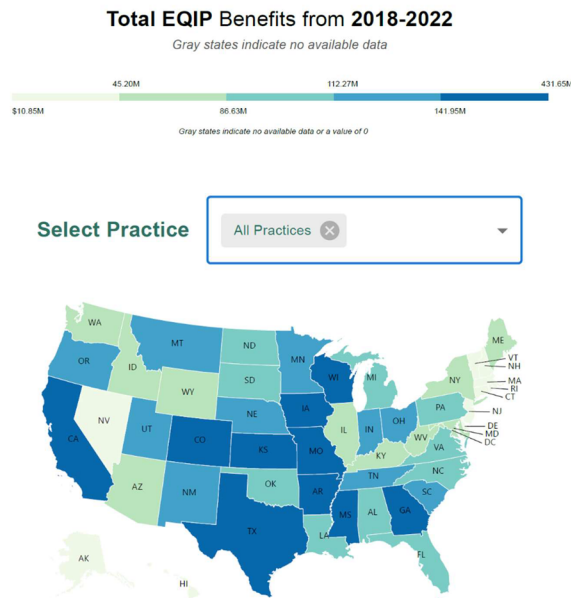


Image 1: <https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/eqip>

In 2024, only \$6.4 million of the \$21.5 million in EQIP funds Illinois received supported cropland conservation. Of that, less than \$600,000 reached beginning farmers. Thanks to strong collaboration with Senator Durbin's office, the Illinois Corn Growers Association and the Illinois Department of Agriculture were able to secure an additional \$15 million of traditional EQIP

funds to address conservation priorities. This more than doubled the state's cropland EQIP budget, enabling targeted efforts to reduce nutrient loss and preserve topsoil.

While those funds were contracted, it provides an example of the competition farmers face when trying to sign up for federal conservation programs and the role partnerships play in securing funding. While meaningful progress requires financial investment, it's important to recognize that securing sufficient funding to fully support a state like Illinois—with its 24 million acres of farmland—takes a creative and strategic approach that recognizes we can't fix the problem overnight. One way to sustain this momentum is to incorporate IRA conservation funds into the Farm Bill baseline.

Continuing to view conservation programs through a 90-year-old lens is like picturing today's farmers as the storybook version of Old McDonald—rather than the innovative, tech-savvy professionals they truly are. It's time to modernize our approach to conservation and create programs that empower farmers to protect their most valuable and finite resource with flexible and scalable solutions. If we fail to deliver effective programs, technical assistance, and meaningful funding to our farmers we can expect more outcomes like the 2023 and 2024 dust storms in central Illinois that closed major interstates and caused loss of life.

Our approach can make the difference between success and failure. Too often, we zero in on one granular issue or promote a one-size-fits-all solution, without stepping back to consider the broader path to success.

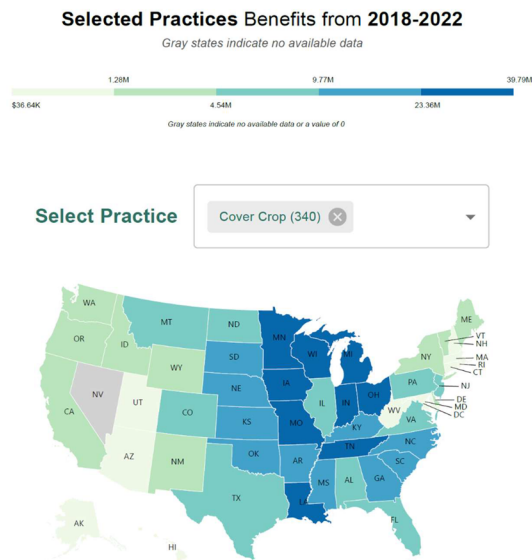


Image 2: <https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/eqip>

We know that cover crops deliver multiple co-benefits: they improve water infiltration, build soil resiliency, provide valuable livestock forage, and help reduce nutrient loss through runoff. Yet despite this, only 1.1 percent of EQIP funding in Illinois has gone to the USDA-NRCS Cover Crop 340 practice. This isn't just a funding gap—it's a design flaw.

Rigid practice standards and burdensome contracting processes don't support practical implementation on the ground. Illinois has a singular cover crop practice standard, even though the state stretches 390 miles north to south and spans USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 5a to 7b. That's a vast range of climatic and agronomic conditions—and Illinois farmers are expected to fit into this one-size-fits-all model. Similar challenges can be found in other regions, like the Bootheel of Missouri, or even across different crops. Managing corn and soybeans, for example, requires distinct approaches, but these differences often go unrecognized in current standards.

Practice standards should offer a clear framework, but they must also be flexible enough to accommodate regional realities and proven management practices. If we want conservation to work for production agriculture, especially in a state as diverse as Illinois, we need to modernize both the funding priorities and the structural design of the program.

Now for the connection between conservation and cookies: if I asked each of you to describe the perfect chocolate chip cookie, I'd likely get 23 different answers. Some would say thin and crispy, others soft and chewy, maybe a few with nuts. Now imagine I told each of you to go bake your ideal cookie—but didn't give you a recipe. That's the challenge farmers face when trying to implement conservation practices. And even if I did give you the same recipe, you'd all still get different results—because no two ovens bake the same, just like no two farm fields respond the same way.

Successful conservation doesn't happen by accident, it requires strong partnerships, reliable funding, local expertise, and flexibility. Trusted, accessible field offices for NRCS and FSA, along with well-staffed agencies like EPA and USFWS, ensure we have boots on the ground and every tool in the conservation toolbox ready to go. Public-private partnerships amplify impact, while a strong safety net and practical technical assistance help drive real adoption. To sustain this momentum, IRA conservation investments must be included in the Farm Bill baseline.

We could spend hours discussing barriers—ranging from financial constraints to technical assistance, machinery, time, and the fact that over 70 percent of Illinois farmland is owned by someone other than the farm family tenant—but I'd prefer to focus on solutions.

RCPP is one such solution, providing the support that made IL Corn's flagship initiative, Precision Conservation Management, possible. PCM is an economics-focused program that has proven we can far exceed the success of traditional conservation efforts by leveraging strategic private partnerships, providing boots on the ground, and allowing flexibility in implementation. The program's long-standing partnership with PepsiCo is just one example where leveraging public and private contributions generates \$1.50 going to farmers for every \$1.00 of federal funds invested.

IL Corn has successfully leveraged RCPPs to drive meaningful conservation work across the state. RCPP allows us to build powerful partnerships—between farmers, conservation groups, private businesses, and local agencies—that tackle our most pressing environmental challenges. These partnerships bring national resources directly to Illinois fields. From improving soil health to protecting water quality in priority watersheds, RCPP helps us deliver locally led, results-driven conservation. With continued support and collaboration, Illinois is demonstrating that strategic partnerships can drive meaningful impact. After its beginning in Illinois, PCM has now expanded into Nebraska, Kentucky, and Missouri, showing the broader potential of this approach.

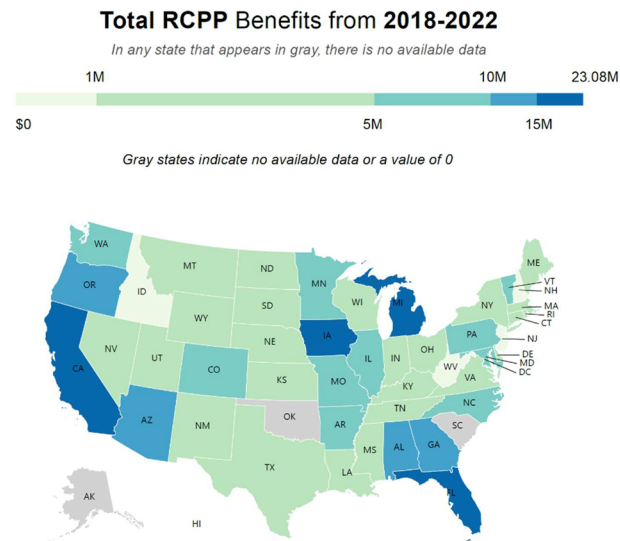


Image 3: <https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/rcpp>

Regarding funding, we have a limited but significant opportunity to drive meaningful change. Advocating for IRA funds to be incorporated into the conservation funding baseline in the upcoming Farm Bill is essential. This would enhance technical assistance, strengthen partnerships, and most importantly, deliver direct support to farmers—empowering them to make lasting, on-the-ground improvements. *Image 4 (next page)* illustrates the positive impact of the previous infusion of IRA funds in Illinois—a story that reflects similar successes across many other states.

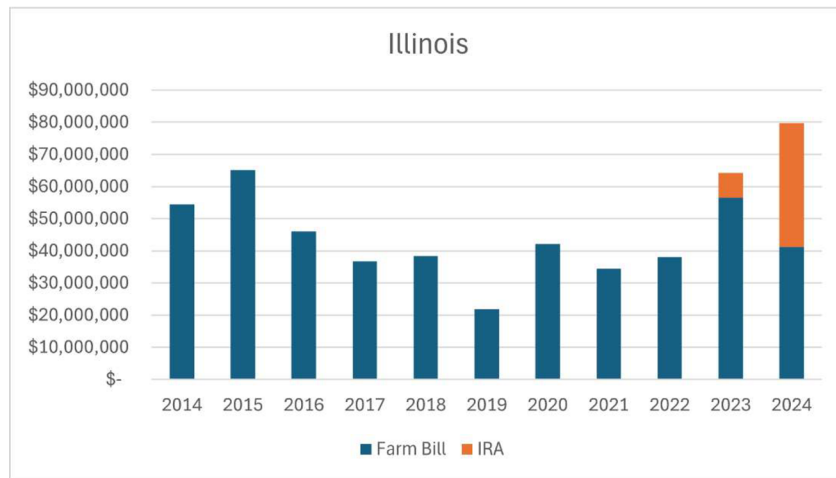


image 4

Once funding and program feasibility are addressed, a critical need remains: trusted, local technical assistance. Today's farmers operate state-of-the-art equipment from their tractor cabs, but personal relationships still matter. They don't want to talk to an AI generated voice and they don't want self-service from a computer. Farmers want a knowledgeable, trusted expert who understands local resource concerns and can dedicate time to their individual needs. To make this a reality, we need well-staffed local offices—places where providers aren't buried in paperwork but instead run efficient programs that allow time for meaningful interaction with the farmers they serve. This is another area where strong partnerships make a difference. One example is the recent MOU between NRCS and Certified Crop Advisors (CCAs), which I've had the opportunity to experience firsthand. This agreement streamlines the process for CCAs to become Technical Service Providers, helping to relieve the burden on overextended local offices.

To truly accelerate conservation adoption, we must align financial incentives with on-the-ground practices. This is where crop insurance can play a pivotal role. We must consider how Federal Crop Insurance can support in-field conservation by recognizing the risk-reducing benefits of conservation, covering the transition to new practices, and offering flexibility for innovative approaches like growing cover crops for seed ahead of cash crops.

The historic rainfall of 2019 caused unprecedented planting delays across the U.S., leading to record-high prevent plant claims and highlighting the vulnerability of our agricultural system to extreme weather. In response, a 2022 analysis examined the impact of two common conservation practices, cover crops and no-till, across six major row crop states. The findings were clear: these

practices reduced the odds ratio by 24 percent³. This kind of research underscores what many farmers already know—conservation not only protects the environment but also reduces production risk.

A 2023 study by the University of Illinois *farmdoc* team further strengthened the case. After analyzing six years of data comparing fields with and without a history of cover crop use, they found that cover crops did not increase yield risk in corn. In fact, yields were higher in the lowest-performing 5 percent of fields, suggesting that cover crops can help buffer against the worst outcomes and reduce downside yield risk⁴.

These findings make it clear: conservation practices lower risk. It's time for federal crop insurance to reflect that reality. Recognizing these practices would not only support farmer profitability and resilience but also reduce indemnity costs and save taxpayer dollars.

Baby boomers currently own the majority of farmland across the United States, and within the next decade, their average age will reach 80. This puts us on the edge of a generational cliff. Without robust programs to help the next generation gain access to farmland and be economically equipped to adopt conservation practices, we risk losing our position as the global leader in production agriculture. Success won't come from just increasing program capacity or rebranding programs for working lands – we must design entirely new approaches that recognize the uniqueness of each acre and meet farmers where they are. We must reevaluate practice standards and decide not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. This reevaluation will allow us to achieve greater scalability and adoption of effective conservation practices and better support farmers' operations, their families, and our rural communities.

I appreciate your time today and look forward to answering any questions.

³ <https://foodandagpolicy.org/homepage/focus-areas/agriculture-data/conservation-and-crop-insurance-research-pilot/>

⁴ <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2023/10/yield-and-yield-risks-of-cover-crops-in-east-central-illinois.html>

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

MAY 13, 2025

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation
 May 13, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Gary Blair

Senator John Hoeven

1. As you mention in your testimony, one of American agriculture's greatest strengths is the nature of its diversity. North to south, east to west, agriculture looks very different across the country. This can often lead to challenges in trying to adopt one-size-fits-all policies.

a. Can you describe the importance of keeping conservation programs flexible, and the hazards of one-size-fits-all initiatives?

One size fits all initiatives typically fail because they are top-down and do not reflect the realities on the ground. America's landscapes are incredibly diverse, as are the operations that manage them. Programming or policy that works well in one region can easily create unnecessary burdens or inefficiencies in another, or worse, create economic disincentives that discourage participation altogether.

Locally led conservation is based on the principle that landowners know their land best. This has been the strength of our shared relationship with state conservation agencies and NRCS for over 90 years. Through local leadership, we provide the agriculture producers with technical support, resources, and programs that work for them. In order to drive long-term adoption at scale, landowners and community members must have access to technical and financial assistance and be key decision makers. Keeping conservation programs flexible is essential for not only helping achieve landowners' stewardship goals, but for supporting the economic viability of working lands and advancing long-term stewardship.

b. Do you agree that farm bill conservation programs should be voluntary, farmer-friendly, and focus on locally led projects?

The locally led, voluntary, incentive-based model has endured because it works. It allows for conservation programs to be tailored to local needs and priorities. It gives producers the flexibility to adopt conservation plans and practices that align with their specific stewardship and economic goals. For conservation to be durable, it must support – not compete with – landowners' and communities' economic needs.

The voluntary, locally led framework also enables landscape scale conservation, which aligns efforts across larger geographic areas. Rather than addressing natural resource concerns in isolation, this approach aligns resources and stakeholders to achieve broader ecological and economic outcomes.

The NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) program is an excellent example. It sets science-based, outcomes driven goals and coordinates efforts with landowners and partners across entire ecosystems or biomes.

With 60% of our nation's land in private ownership, success at this scale depends on voluntary participation, incentives, and collaboration across boundaries. This can only happen when landowners see conservation as a win-win – good for the land and good for their livelihoods.

Senator Tommy Tuberville

1. *Feral swine are destroying land and crops in Alabama and across the Southeast. We were making good progress on eradicating these pigs through the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program from the 2018 Farm Bill. However, the program is currently non-existent as it is an orphan program from the 2018 Farm Bill without baseline spending. The program has not been funded since September 30, 2024.*

Can you speak the importance of feral swine eradication programs to farmers and landowners across the Southeast?

According to USDA, feral swine can be found in at least 35 states and territories, including Guam, and cause \$1.5 billion in damage and control costs each year. Of this, at least \$800 million is due to direct agricultural damage. With a gestation period of around 114 days, early reproductive age (as early as 6 months), breeding frequency and litter size, unchecked feral swine populations result in exponential growth.

Feral swine cause significant damage to agricultural lands, native ecosystems and water quality, while also posing serious risks to livestock and public health. The success of the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Program depends on the trusted, community-based partnerships led by conservation districts, their associations, or state agencies. Eradication efforts are also most successful when locally led, engaging landowners and stakeholders in developing and implementing voluntary solutions that work best for their communities.

Landowners participating in the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (FSCP) reported a positive trend toward fewer feral swine. As reported in the USDA NRCS preliminary report, for example, respondents from the Georgia FSCP reported a substantial decline in yield loss in corn from 65 percent to 14 percent in 2019 and 2021. Likewise, those corn growers among the Florida FSCP respondents who received support from USDA APHIS Wildlife Services reported a 38 percent reduction in crop acres lost due to feral swine. Mississippi respondents saw an average reduction of 85 hours per month in their time dealing with feral swine removal, saving them an average of \$2,000. Many producers credit the program with saving their farm. Billions in crop revenue have been protected.

NACD supports *S.1207, the Feral Swine Eradication Act*. Resources must be made available to communities to implement strategies that eradicate and mitigate the impacts of feral swine across

all landscapes. NACD supports ongoing coordination between USDA agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), while implementing lessons learned and refined strategies that improve long-term outcomes. Conservation districts are vital implementation partners for these efforts, bringing on-the-ground knowledge, relationships with local producers, and experience with targeted conservation planning.

Senator Raphael Warnock

1. *In your testimony, you shared the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) concerns about changes to staffing levels and structure at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).¹*

- a. ***How has the current structure of NRCS's offices facilitated NACD's conservation work and outreach efforts?***

Conservation districts have been partners with the NRCS since 1937. During the Dust Bowl era, it became clear that conservation efforts needed to be locally led and tailored to the specific needs of the land, as well the people who steward it. That framework of voluntary, locally led, incentive-based conservation endures today. With 3,000 conservation districts across the country, we serve as a critical bridge between local landowners and federal conservation programs.

Many conservation districts are collocated with NRCS partners at local field offices across the country, working side-by-side to build trust, provide technical assistance, and deliver federal, state, and local conservation programs. This structure ensures NRCS and federal programs remain responsive to local priorities and effective in addressing their resource concerns.

Conservation districts also play a key role in Local Working Groups (LWG), where priorities for conservation resources are set. LWGs ensure that federal resources align to local conservation priorities and economic goals.

NRCS's decentralized staffing and office structure ensures that federal staff are embedded in local communities, helping to build trust-based partnerships with landowners, community organizations, and local and state agencies. Together, we are able to deliver conservation programs that are scientifically sound, locally led, and economically viable.

¹ *Testimony of Mr. Gary Blair, National Association of Conservation Districts (May 13, 2025), https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/49affc0-ac4e-3022-51cf-f2895a23ebfb/Testimony_Blair_05.13.20251.pdf.*

b. How would reported proposals² to restructure NRCS affect NACD's conservation work and outreach efforts?

NACD is concerned about potential office closures, which can put a strain on the conservation delivery system (both on producers and technical assistance providers, including conservation districts). Potential office closures can put a strain on producers, sometimes adding an hour to their drive times to get to the next closest office. Longer drive times to conduct business means less time dedicated to their operations or conservation.

Conversely, office closures also put a strain on the technical assistance providers. NRCS and conservation district jobs are not office jobs – they're most effective when they're in the field, assessing the lands and impact of practices. The further we move the office from producers, the longer it takes for technical staff to reach their operation and reduce the effective field time for whatever the conservation needs to be addressed with the producer.

The combination of cutting staff and closing offices could have major impacts on the timeliness and quality of technical assistance. However, I would note that NACD has been highly supportive of NRCS's data driven approach to assessing workload and producer needs, which informs optimal staffing levels and office locations. We continue to encourage USDA to continue utilizing this approach to ensure that producers across the country are able to receive the technical assistance they need and deserve. As USDA moves forward, they should explore all options available to reduce overhead costs while maintaining local points of service that efficiently deliver conservation at the "farm-ranch-forest gate."

c. How would additional NRCS staffing cuts affect NACD's conservation work and outreach efforts?

There has been pressure on our locally led conservation delivery system for many years. NACD is concerned about the reported loss of over 2,400 employees and the possibility of future staff reductions. NRCS staffing cuts can impact the broader technical assistance workforce and result in service gaps in local communities across the country.

Demand for conservation and technical assistance is at an all-time high. While conservation districts and their associations remain committed to supporting partners and producers, they may lack the capacity and local resources to fill federal gaps. Even if conservation districts can hire available talent, we are concerned that it would still result in "status quo" capacity in the field.

NACD is also concerned about the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise. We need to continue to build capacity, as well as develop and train the next generation workforce to ensure we can meet producers' needs in the long-term. Conservation technical assistance remains a

² Chris Clayton, *Plan Would Slash Local FSA Offices*, Progressive Farmers (Apr. 15, 2025), <https://www.dtnpf.com/agriculture/web/ag/columns/washington-insider/article/2025/04/15/report-fsa-nrcs-face-deep-cuts-white>.

critical tool that ensures producers continue to receive assistance, regardless of their participation in a farm bill program.

Senator Peter Welch

1. *Conservation Districts are essential partners in delivering locally-led conservation incentives. They work closely with NRCS to assess environmental challenges and identify tailored solutions, recognizing that each community's needs are different. In Vermont, NRCS and Conservation Districts share the same local office, allowing for close collaboration. However, with declining NRCS staffing, I'm concerned that NRCS will rely on Conservation Districts to step up to fill USDA gaps. Inherently, this is not possible as Conservation Districts do not have the authority to fulfill government functions, like signing contracts with farmers. I'm worried that without the proper staff at NRCS, Conservation Districts will struggle to effectively meet farmers' needs.*

What kind of challenges do you anticipate Conservation Districts facing with reduced NRCS staffing levels?

NRCS plays a key role in the locally led conservation delivery system, alongside conservation districts, their associations, and state agencies. Administration of federally funded conservation technical assistance and farm bill programs remain critically important tools that provide support to the millions of landowners and producers across the country. Beyond delivering the program funding, NRCS provides science-based technical services and support to producers in tailoring conservation to their unique agriculture operation and resources. As agriculture technology continues to expand and at an accelerated rate, these trained technical specialists will be more critical than ever to our conservation partnership.

NRCS is responsible for several inherently governmental functions and a lack of capacity can create bottlenecks in service. Conservation districts across the country have expressed concerns about a loss of engineering and archaeological (cultural resources) capacity, as well as for certification of practices. However, we know that NRCS shares the same concerns about service bottlenecks resulting from lack of capacity.

We have full confidence that Chief Bettencourt wants to get back to the job of continuing the long history of locally-led, voluntary, incentive-based conservation that this Committee expects. Through their strategic workforce planning initiatives and data-driven staffing approaches, we understand they are carefully assessing and mitigating these potential bottlenecks and performing strategic workforce planning to ensure that work can continue without major impacts to producers.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. *I understand that there is an interest in the private sector replacing the technical assistance and support that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides to farmers. Can you speak to the unique benefits that farmers gain from interacting with NRCS staff who have long been part of their communities? In your view, are private representatives able to offer the same, specialized level of service?*

Partnerships are key to driving conservation outcomes across our nation's landscape. The private sector plays a valuable and complementary role to NRCS, as it can help scale innovation and build resilient supply chains. However, the private sector cannot replace the core technical and financial assistance that NRCS provides.

NRCS has long partnered with conservation districts, technical service providers (TSPs), certified crop consultants, and other private-sector partners to help deliver conservation programs. These partnerships remain important and NACD supports efforts to streamline and strengthen the TSP program so that producers have improved access to technical assistance. However, TSPs and private consultants are intended to complement, not replace, our federal partners.

NRCS and conservation district employees are trusted members of their communities. They build strong relationships with producers and ensure that federal programs remain locally led and responsive to community needs. Unlike many private TA providers, NRCS offers free technical assistance to all producers, regardless of farm size, market participation, or geography. In contrast, TSPs often charge for their services, which can limit access for small or resource-constrained operations, especially those managing marginal lands.

The private sector plays a critical role in advancing sustainability, but their priorities are often shaped by supply chain demands, cost-efficiency, and corporate priorities. This can lead to a focus on high-value or high-volume operations, with less support for edge of field practices or conservation on marginal or sensitive lands (e.g., riparian buffers or wetlands) that are vital to water quality and wildlife, but may not align with market demands or incentives. In contrast, NRCS plays a broader, longer-term role that includes support for landscape scale conservation, habitat and wildlife resilience, watershed rehabilitation, and other conservation initiatives that benefit communities as a whole.

An over-reliance on the private sector can shift conservation from a successful locally led model that prioritizes landowner needs to top-down, supply chain driven priorities. NRCS ensures that programs remain locally led, science based, and accessible to producers and communities across the country.

2. *I was concerned to see that the President's FY26 budget proposes cuts to NRCS watershed programs, which are especially vital in California. Can you share how these programs benefit communities who live around watersheds?*

NRCS watershed programs play a vital role in delivering critical infrastructure and conservation benefits to local communities across the country. By investing in healthy watersheds, NRCS help

protect public safety, improve water quality, recharge groundwater resources, provide healthy forests and ecosystems, ensure sufficient irrigation, and more. These programs provide important technical and financial assistance that help communities build resilience, maintain aging infrastructure, and recover from natural disasters like floods and wildfire.

In California, where communities face a complex mix of drought, wildfires, and ongoing natural resource challenges (e.g., invasive species, biodiversity loss, soil degradation), watershed programs are incredibly important. They help protect lives and property by reducing flood risks, stabilizing vulnerable streambanks, and improving water quality. In the aftermath of wildfires, for example, the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program has been crucial in removing debris, repairing damaged drainage systems, and preventing further erosion and flooding.

Across the country, conservation districts are key partners in watershed planning and management. Their work supports water conservation, which is urgently needed in the west, and enhances water quality, habitat, and working lands.

3. *Are there specific areas of expertise that you anticipate NRCS may lose due to staffing cuts that are particularly crucial to California? How will that impact California farmers?*

It is our understanding that the recent NRCS staffing cuts are largely driven by voluntary participation in the deferred resignation program. A wide range of positions across the country have been impacted. While conservation districts highlighted specific concerns about the loss of engineers and archaeologists (cultural resources), the overall reduction in field staff has strained capacity. All field positions, whether an engineer, soil conservationist, technician or farm bill assistant, play a key role in delivering quality and timely services to producers.

As stated in my testimony, it has been NACD's consistent position that NRCS' FY2020 on-board staffing levels were insufficient to meet the demands for conservation planning and implementation of Farm Bill programs. We are deeply concerned about a return to those on-board levels, especially given that NRCS has an even higher workload today.

4. *The disruptions in USDA conservation funding this year are causing uncertainty for farmers and their conservation partners. While a recent court ruling has provided some relief, I remain concerned by disruptions to partnership programs, and the status of future funding for conservation programs. What is the impact of funding pauses for multi-year projects and how do funding disruptions and uncertainty affect the trust and rapport established between farmers, conservationists, and USDA?*

Since the recent court ruling was issued, it is our understanding that USDA continues to issue payments for existing contracts, grants, and agreements. Impacts of the funding pause have varied at the organizational level. Initially, several conservation districts and associations had to furlough or lay off employees due to the lack of cash flow. In this case, resumption of payments has improved cash flow and their ability to re-hire or retain local staffing and programs. This may have caused some delays, but programs are ongoing. Other grants or programs with

significant matching contributions may have been able to sustain the pause in payments by utilizing those other funding sources (e.g., state, private, or philanthropic funds).

Pauses in payments had more significant impacts on producers who were anticipating reimbursements or payments for conservation practices and contracts. Their bills were still due and we heard reports of many having to take out interest bearing loans. When NACD surveyed its 3,000 members, it received responses from all 50 states. Loss of trust in the locally led conservation delivery system was the top concern.

Secretary Rollins' "Farmer First" initiative will help ensure that producers are at the forefront, which we believe helps restore trust in our shared conservation delivery system. We know that getting funding to producers and local communities to apply conservation to the landscape remains a mutual priority.

Demand for conservation is high and Farm Bill programs have been consistently oversubscribed. Producers continue to report submitting EQIP applications multiple times without receiving funding. NACD hopes to see the pause on new obligations lifted, particularly for new IRA funded contracts with producers.

The financial assistance offered through conservation farm bill programs are investments in our nation's lands, supporting their long-term resilience and economic viability. NACD's top Farm Bill priority is to integrate IRA investments into the conservation title without any sideboards. We have been highly supportive of the House markup and encourage the Senate to retain these investments in conservation.

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation
 May 13, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Brad Doyle

Senator Tommy Tuberville

1. Feral swine are destroying land and crops in Alabama and across the Southeast. We were making good progress on eradicating these pigs through the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program from the 2018 Farm Bill. However, the program is currently non-existent as it is an orphan program from the 2018 Farm Bill without baseline spending. The program has not been funded since September 30, 2024. Can you speak to the importance of feral swine eradication programs to farmers and landowners across the Southeast?

Brad Doyle Response: Feral swine eradication programs are a critical investment for protecting agricultural productivity, rural economies, and natural resources across the Southeast. In Arkansas alone, USDA APHIS estimates the feral swine population at over 652,000 animals, with annual losses to row crop farmers exceeding \$33 million and losses to livestock producers topping \$46 million. These invasive animals cause extensive damage to crops, pastureland, fencing, and water systems, and they pose a serious threat of disease transmission to both livestock and wildlife.

Through the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill, Arkansas received \$3.4 million in federal assistance to support coordinated control efforts. This funding supported trapping, monitoring, and outreach—providing measurable results and relief for impacted producers.

Without continued federal support, states and producers are left without the tools they need to manage this growing problem. Reauthorizing and funding feral swine eradication efforts must be a priority in the next farm bill to protect agricultural viability and rural resilience throughout the Southeast.

2. Farmers like yourself and across the country are struggling to survive. Input costs are up across the board, combined with skyrocketing inflation and interest rates. The farm economy is terrible.
 - a. Will you be able to stay in business and farm another crop if we don't increase reference prices and strengthen the farm safety net?

Brad Doyle Response: Yes, we will be able to farm another crop next year. We also have a family business, Eagle Seed, a seed production resource that provides soybean, rice, corn, and wheat seed to farmers across the U.S. and Canada.

Unfortunately, many producers across Arkansas and the country aren't in the same position. Without an increase in reference prices and a strengthened farm safety net, I fear that a significant number of farmers will face hard decisions—some may have to liquidate assets just to make it through another season, while others may be forced to leave farming altogether.

b. How essential is an increase in reference prices?

Brad Doyle Response: Federal commodity programs are meaningless without an increase in reference prices. Current reference prices were established based upon the cost of production in 2012 and no longer provide an adequate safety net for our farmers. Reference prices are below break-even prices. In fact, even when actual commodity prices are higher than the reference prices and fail to trigger a payment, farmers are failing to cover their cost of production. This is why the system of passing 5-year farm bills was developed. It provides stability and certainty for farmers and their lenders but also creates the opportunity to revisit and revise the programs to adapt to the ever-changing farm economy.

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation

May 13, 2025

Questions for the Record

Mr. Lynn Tjeerdsma

Senator Michael Bennet

1. In Colorado, farmers and ranchers manage over 30 million acres of land—and a lot of that is in areas facing growing threats from drought and wildfires. Programs like EQIP and CRP aren't just about conservation; they're key to helping producers stay afloat. These tools give farmers a way to manage climate risks while keeping their operations running and providing financial stability.

How would you suggest we strengthen conservation tools to ensure they remain reliable as part of the farm safety net?

In Colorado and across the West, the threats of drought and wildfire are persistent realities. That's why it's so important to treat conservation tools, particularly the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), as integral parts of the farm safety net.

CRP provides landowners with financial stability, especially on acres that are marginal, erosion-prone, or difficult to farm in dry or otherwise adverse conditions. It helps maintain the economic viability of operations while simultaneously improving soil health, protecting water quality, and providing habitat for wildlife. Despite CRP's clear value, recent years have shown a troubling decline in enrollment in the General and Continuous signups. Since 2007, Colorado's enrollment in these signups has fallen from 2.5 million acres to half that in 2025. To ensure CRP remains a reliable option for producers facing today's challenges, several improvements are needed.

First, we must make CRP more competitive and responsive by strengthening incentives and rental rates for enrolling marginal lands, where conservation value is high, but crop productivity is low. Targeting these acres ensures we conserve the most vulnerable land without reducing productive capacity on working farms and ranches. Additionally, it's important that CRP continues to provide emergency options in times of crisis. Allowing for timely and efficient emergency forage use—such as haying and grazing during drought or wildfire recovery—makes CRP more relevant and responsive to producers who are balancing conservation goals with operational needs.

Another critical improvement is ensuring that CRP's payment limitations are in line with its role in the safety net. Currently, the entity payment limit for CRP is \$50,000. This number has been unchanged since CRP was first authorized in 1985 and is well below comparable limits in other farm programs. Increasing this cap to \$125,000, as proposed in the CRP Improvement Act, would allow more producers to fully utilize the program. This update would bring CRP into better alignment with other farm safety net tools and reflect the modern scale of land management in much of the West.

Practices and initiatives like State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) further demonstrate how CRP can deliver high-value conservation and wildlife benefits while supporting producer stability. Colorado currently has three such projects: Lesser-Prairie Chicken SAFE, Western Slope Grouse Conservation SAFE, and Colorado Upland Bird SAFE. Enhancing and expanding access to these locally driven options is essential to achieving both environmental and economic outcomes.

At its core, CRP, as with other conservation programs, is about risk management for the land, for the producer, and for the communities that depend on both. A strengthened CRP, supported through a bipartisan farm bill, can continue to be a cornerstone of resilience in the face of increasingly difficult agricultural conditions.

Farm bill conservation programs not only provide economic benefits to farmers, ranchers, and landowners enrolled in contracts, they also generate significant economic activity in rural areas by creating demand for local contractors, seed suppliers, agronomists, and conservation professionals. Furthermore, hunting, fishing, and wildlife-based recreation, which depend on quality habitat, bring tourism dollars into rural communities, supporting small businesses. From 2019 to 2024, NRCS has committed over \$462 million to financial assistance (FA) contracts with Colorado farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners under EQIP, CSP, and ACEP, and more than \$72 million in public-private partnerships for conservation under RCPP. Since the 2018 Farm Bill was passed, investments in these programs in Colorado alone are producing a net return on investment of at least \$1.75 for every federal dollar spent, adding \$94 billion per year to gross state product (GSP), supporting at least 1,200 jobs annually.¹

Senator Raphael Warnock

1. As you know, the 2018 Farm Bill included new funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) conservation programs that help farmers protect our environment, wildlife, and communities. In Georgia, these critical, voluntary programs continue to be oversubscribed.²

- a. What are the benefits of the Farm Bill's conservation programs?

Farm bill conservation programs provide a wide array of benefits to farmers, ranchers, wildlife, and rural communities. These programs are voluntary, incentive-based tools that empower producers to implement conservation practices tailored to their specific land, goals, and local resource concerns. Conservation programs have been instrumental in restoring millions of acres

¹ *USDA conservation programs support farmers, jobs and the economy in Colorado*, The Nature Conservancy (2025), https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/FarmBillConservationPrograms_EconomicResearchAnalysisFinal.pdf

² *USDA Conservation Programs: Nationally Valued, Locally Driven, and Oversubscribed*, Bipartisan Policy Center (2023), <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Conservation-Programs-Infographic.pdf>.

of high-quality habitat for upland birds, waterfowl, pollinators, and other wildlife. In Georgia and across the Southeast, farm bill investments have helped bring back habitat for species like northern bobwhite quail by supporting practices like prescribed burning, native grass restoration, and early successional forest management. These efforts benefit not only target species but also support biodiversity and ecosystem health.

Farm bill programs also generate economic activity in rural areas by creating demand for local contractors, seed suppliers, agronomists, and conservation professionals. Hunting, fishing, and wildlife-based recreation, which depend on quality habitat, bring tourism dollars into rural communities, supporting small businesses. Since the 2018 Farm Bill was passed, investments in EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and RCPP alone are producing a net return on investment of at least \$1.58 for every federal dollar spent, adding \$3.4 billion per year to GDP, supporting at least 46,000 jobs annually.³

- b. How would passing a bipartisan, comprehensive, five-year Farm Bill support these conservation programs?

Passing a bipartisan, comprehensive, five-year farm bill is essential to sustaining and strengthening the conservation programs that farmers, ranchers, and landowners rely on. These programs work best when they are predictable, stable, and robustly funded, all of which can only be provided by a long-term farm bill reauthorization. A five-year farm bill importantly allows for timely updates and improvements to program structure and delivery that are not accomplished in a farm bill extension or other vehicle.

While many of the conservation programs funded through the farm bill's conservation title have authorization through 2031, two highly successful and popular programs will not have authority or funding to continue future enrollments after September 30, 2025: the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The future of these programs is dependent on the ability of Congress to pass a new farm bill.

Without statutory authority, FSA will be unable to enroll additional acres under the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative in CRP. This includes the Georgia Native Pine Savanna Habitat Restoration SAFE, which targets expiring acres enrolled in tree practices to help establish and maintain pine savanna habitat for northern bobwhite and other grassland-forb-shrub species that are in decline.

Following passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, the Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources received a \$1.9 million grant through VPA-HIP to expand and enhance their Wildlife Management Area Public Access Program. Without a full five-year farm bill, GA DNR's access program would be left without critical resources to ensure this highly popular program can continue to deliver the same level of public access and economic benefits.

³ *Farm Bill Conservation Programs: An Economic Analysis*, The Nature Conservancy (2025), https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/FarmBillConservationPrograms_EconomicResearchAnalysisFinal.pdf

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation
 May 13, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Chad Ellis

Senator John Hoeven

1. I appreciated your comments about the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, or RCPP. Importantly, RCPP focuses on locally led projects, recognizing that those on the ground have the greatest understanding of the situation and resources needed. This bottom-up approach, along with leveraging federal dollars with local investment, is a smart and fiscally responsible way to deliver programs and achieve results.

How can we build off the success of partnership-driven programs, like RCPP, to further leverage federal resources with private investment?

To build on the success of partnership-driven programs like RCPP, we should expand the role of certified entities and trusted local partners in delivering conservation programs. These entities are geographically, relationally, and operationally closest to the landowners and are best positioned to deploy federal resources in a timely, targeted, and fiscally responsible way.

While RCPP provides a strong foundation, scaling this model through programs like the Certified Entity framework within the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program, which empowers USDA NRCS to delegate authority to qualified local entities that understand the community's cultural nuances and operational needs. This approach honors the locally led spirit of conservation, while improving program efficiency and reducing federal administrative burdens.

Expanding Certified Entity authorities to include project evaluation, selection, and long-term agreement administration would allow local organizations, those that landowners already trust, to manage conservation delivery with integrity and transparency. Doing so not only enhances conservation outcomes on working lands, but also leverages private investment, streamlines delivery, and reduces overall federal expenditures. Scaling this model is a practical, fiscally responsible way to advance agricultural viability, natural resource stewardship, and rural resilience.

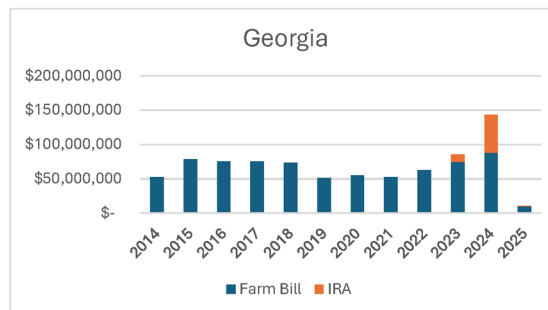
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation
 May 13, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mrs. Megan Dwyer

Senator Raphael Warnock

- 1. As you know, the Inflation Reduction Act included boosts in funding for many of USDA’s conservation programs.¹ However, reporting has found that USDA has frozen some of this funding for farmers.²**

- a. How have farmers benefited from the Inflation Reduction Act’s boosts to USDA conservation program funding?**

Funds from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have helped alleviate the backlog in already oversubscribed conservation programs and have allowed more new applicants to receive funding. As I shared in my testimony, in Illinois, IRA funding nearly doubled our NRCS EQIP and CSP allocations. Below, you can see how IRA investments have positively impacted your state’s EQIP and CSP programs. Additionally, these funds created opportunities to launch new and innovative conservation projects. Ensuring these funds are incorporated into the Farm Bill’s conservation funding baseline is essential to maintaining the current momentum in conservation adoption.



¹ Biden-Harris Administration Announces Availability of Inflation Reduction Act Funding for Climate-Smart Agriculture Nationwide, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Feb. 13, 2023), <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2023/02/13/biden-harris-administration-announces-availability-inflation-reduction-act-funding-climate-smart>.

² P.J. Huffstutter and Leah Douglas, *USDA Freezes Farmer Funding for Some Programs, Conservation Contracts* (Feb. 8, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/usda-freezes-farmer-funding-some-programs-conservation-contracts-2025-02-08>.

b. How do these federal funding freezes affect a farmer's ability to plan for the crop year and manage financial risk?

While farmers are natural innovators, their decisions are made well in advance. Key input purchases such as seed, fertilizer, and crop protection products often occur 6 to 9 months ahead of planting. Major capital investments like equipment may require years of planning. Funding freezes after contracts have been signed is not only poor practice but can place significant financial strain on family farms. In today's challenging farm economy, producers must be especially deliberate about every decision and its financial implications. Any disruption to financial or technical conservation support risks causing farmers to forgo practices that enhance resilience, soil health, water quality, and broader environmental outcomes. These setbacks may be temporary or they could erode trust and delay progress for years to come. In addition, many of these program dollars were implemented through partnerships, where trusted partners played a key role. These partners, having leveraged their established relationships, could now face undue scrutiny as a result. Ensuring the federal government makes good on its promises to farmers is essential.

Senator Peter Welch

- 1. Producers in Vermont, and across the country, rely on conservation programs to protect land, water, and wildlife. Last year, Vermont was awarded a \$10.7 million grant through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to advance conservation efforts through public-private partnerships. Of this amount, approximately \$2 million has been released for technical assistance. However, the remaining funding, intended for direct contracts with farmers to implement conservation practices, remains frozen. The Trump administration has instructed NRCS to not enter new contracts, despite the funding already being allocated for this purpose.**

Ms. Dwyer, you've leveraged RCPP to deliver locally led conservation efforts. Why is it critical that NRCS be allowed to issue new contracts under RCPP?

While I can't speak to the specifics of the RCPP program in Vermont, in Illinois, IL Corn has successfully partnered with NRCS to contract producers to adopt new conservation practices most notably, cover crops that likely would not have been implemented without the funding provided through the RCPP grant. Perhaps most importantly, one of the key strengths of RCPP is its ability to leverage partnerships. Many NRCS field offices lack the capacity to manage administrative burdens and provide the level of technical assistance needed. RCPP allows trusted partners to fill that gap, using their relationships to bring farmers into the office and engage them in conservation.

RCPP is also a valuable tool for launching innovative programs. IL Corn used RCPP funding to initiate our flagship Precision Conservation Management (PCM) program, which evaluates and shares the economic returns of various conservation practices. Since its launch, PCM has renewed its RCPP funding, expanded its network of partners, and

now operates in four states, covering hundreds of thousands of acres. Not only has this program shed light on the economic pillar of sustainability but has resulted in 1.16 million pounds of NO₃-N loss reductions, 188,234 pounds of phosphorus loss reductions, and 280,533 tons of sediment retained in 2024 in the Illinois fields enrolled in PCM.

Senator Adam Schiff

- 1. One can think of on-farm conservation as part of the farm safety net, such that practices that are good for the land and the soil protect against major climate or weather events. Can you describe how farms that implement positive conservation practices are more resilient to unexpected weather events?**

The sustained use of conservation practices offers numerous benefits, including improved soil health, enhanced water quality, and greater resilience to extreme weather events. In 2019, record early-season rainfall led to widespread prevent plant acres across the country, with nearly 20 million acres left unplanted. In response, a 2022 analysis (citation provided in submitted written testimony) evaluated the impact of two common conservation practices cover crops and no-till across six major row crop states. The findings were compelling: these practices reduced the odds ratio of prevent plant by 24 percent. The study confirmed what many farmers had already observed in their own fields, these practices improve water infiltration, helping excess moisture drain from the soil. Additionally, the living roots and shoots of cover crops helped draw moisture from the soil profile, accelerating field drying and enabling timely planting. This research reinforces what many farmers already know firsthand: conservation practices not only protect natural resources but also reduce production risk.

A 2023 study by the University of Illinois farmdoc team further strengthened the case. After analyzing six years of data comparing fields with and without a history of cover crop use, they found that cover crops did not increase yield risk in corn. In fact, yields were higher in the lowest-performing 5 percent of fields, suggesting that cover crops can help buffer against the worst outcomes and reduce downside yield risk.

Improved soil health also enhances a field's ability to withstand drought by creating conditions that help plants better tolerate stress. Conservation practices such as cover cropping and no-till farming increase organic matter, which improves soil structure and water-holding capacity. This means more moisture is retained in the root zone during dry periods, allowing crops to access water for longer. Additionally, healthier soils support deeper root systems and more active soil biology, both of which contribute to improved nutrient uptake and plant resilience under drought stress.

We now have the opportunity to use actuarially sound data to ensure that the risk-reducing benefits of conservation practices are recognized in programs like Federal Crop Insurance. It is essential that family farmers have access to a robust safety net, one that not only anticipates emerging threats but also acknowledges and rewards proactive practices that reduce risk and enhance production stability. In addition, recognizing the risk reduction of these practices in agriculture lending would be a beneficial step in

helping provide farmers the needed liquidity and assurances to implement practices and successfully transition to more sustainable systems.

2. Can you speak to whether and how NRCS technical assistance has been essential for you and your peers in implementing conservation practices?

Unfortunately, NRCS technical assistance in Illinois has waned over time. To be successful, farmers do have a critical need for good technical assistance, but the demand for assistance far outweighs the NRCS's capacity to provide it. By and large our experience, alongside the anecdotal description from many farmers, is that NRCS's role (at least in Illinois) is more administrative as opposed to true technical assistance. As a result, groups like the IL Corn Growers Association (via the Precision Conservation Management program), other commodity organizations, and independent farmer-led grassroots conservation efforts have launched their own efforts to fill this void. However, we understand that other states do not have the same ecosystem of nongovernmental organizations to provide TA, leading to a patchwork of inconsistent levels of technical assistance, leaving some farmers with fewer resources to navigate complex federal programs and with less access to the benefits of conservation measures.

Historically, the process for private Technical Service Providers (TSPs) to gain approval has been challenging. However, the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between NRCS and the Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) marks a positive step forward. This agreement enables trained agronomy professionals, who already serve as trusted advisors, to more seamlessly provide supplemental technical assistance to NRCS offices. Continuing to utilize private service providers to fill unmet farmer needs will allow more conservation practices to be deployed and more farmers to be successful.

Farmers are seeking technical assistance not just to navigate the complexity of program applications and requirements, but also—in some cases—are willing to fully fund the implementation of conservation projects themselves, provided they receive high-quality technical guidance. This includes support in areas such as project design, engineering, establishment, and best management practices, tailored to their unique resource concerns and goals to ensure success on their own acres.