

Rep. Juan Ciscomani Testimony
House Agriculture Committee, 2023 Member Day
Wednesday December 6th, 2023

As prepared for Delivery:

Thank you, Chairman Thompson and House Agriculture Committee members, for allowing me to testify before you today.

I come before the committee today to testify in support of my bipartisan bill, H.R. 6497, the Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act of 2023, and, more broadly, to advocate for more drought mitigation assistance in the upcoming Farm Bill.

I represent several rural areas with a large agriculture presence in Southern Arizona, including Cochise County, Graham County, Greenlee County, and Pinal County. Arizona farmers provide Americans with lettuce, nuts, cotton, and other essential goods year-round, thanks to our unique climate. Our farmers and ranchers have repeatedly proven themselves to be resilient despite the uncertainties they face due to the unpredictable nature of the water resources and wildfires in the region. They lead the way in conservation efforts and consistently supply our communities with the food we need, but their resiliency depends on our watersheds' resiliency.

As we continue to face a historic drought in the West, more communities are turning to the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program, also known as the PL-566 program, to find solutions to the various issues accompanying extreme drought.

While the PL-566 program has had great success in assisting agricultural communities in addressing natural disasters, only about 21 percent of the program's funds have gone to Western states.

The Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act of 2023, which I introduced with some of my fellow Western colleagues Representatives Hageman, Flood, Pettersen, Neguse, and Caraveo, aims to provide parity for Western states by making some commonsense modifications to the PL-566 program.

Specifically, our bill would encourage Western participation in this program by making drought resilience an explicit purpose of the program; consolidating the planning of one or more sub-watersheds; and including Irrigation Districts as Local Organizations, making them clearly eligible for assistance under the law.

Further, the bill would pull back bureaucratic red tape and empower local water experts by giving state conservationists more discretion to oversee watershed plans; simplifying planning requirements for natural infrastructure project components; and encouraging interagency coordination. In short, The Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act will make the PL-566 program work for the West.

As the committee continues to work on reauthorizing the Farm Bill, I urge the inclusion of provisions from the Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act.

Additionally, Mr. Chairman, I want to underscore how important programs in the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill are for my constituents. Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, the Conservation Stewardship Program, and the Conservation Reserve Program all serve as a critical resource for agriculturalists looking to be good stewards of their most precious natural resource: water.

In the past few months, I have visited agriculture stakeholders from all walks of life in Southeastern Arizona. From these visits, I have become keenly aware of what is at stake here: the next generation of agriculture producers. At a farmers listening session I held a few months ago, I heard from Sarah Ogilvie (Oh-gull-vee), a pistachio entrepreneur and rancher in Benson, Arizona.

Sarah is passionate about agriculture and traces her passion back to her childhood, bouncing across her small family ranch, checking waters, and dropping salts with her father. Like many Arizona farmers, she was taught the value of water from a very young age.

While Sarah looks fondly on her agricultural roots and believes the agriculture industry is, in her words, “not just a job, but a way of life,” she was moved to tears when discussing the future challenges she and her family will have to face as the drought persists.

Sarah and her husband Andrew are still farming and ranching, despite these challenges, so they can teach their children the importance of caring for the land and animals. Still, she admits it is difficult to remain hopeful about the future of agriculture in Arizona.

When we discuss agriculture resilience, we must also discuss the human component -- the mental health and well-being of America's farmers. It is no surprise that our farmers, ranchers and producers have face a unique set of challenges, whether it's the growing cost of goods, supply chain issues, or a number of other unprecedented issues brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, younger generations are less and less interested in taking on family farms. To keep our food supply chain stable, America needs to retain young agriculturalists like Sarah and Andrew. Only [9 percent of farmers](#) are under 35 years old with the average age being 58. As we discuss industry resiliency, we must remember the human element that behind it all – the farmers, ranchers and producers who feed and fuel the world.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for hearing my testimony, and I look forward to working with you all to ensure this Farm Bill works for the West.