

**Testimony for President Boening before House Committee on Agriculture-Subcommittee on  
Conservation, Research, and Biotechnology**

**“Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conversation, Sustaining Working Lands”**

**Russell Boening, President, Texas Farm Bureau Federation**

**June 5, 2025**

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

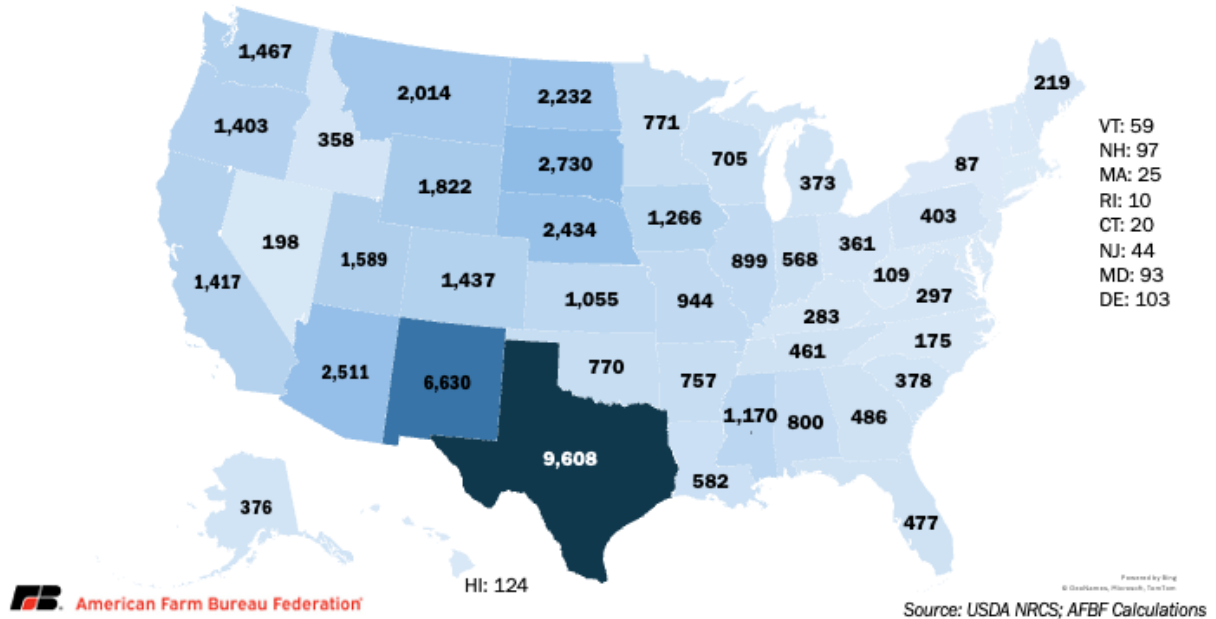
Voluntary conservation practices have become a cornerstone of modern agricultural operations, playing a crucial role in balancing productive farming with environmental stewardship. These practices allow farmers and ranchers to proactively manage their land in ways that protect soil health, conserve water,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

**Overview of Conservation Programs**

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

## Acres (in Thousands) Enrolled in NRCS Programs, FY2023

Including EQIP, CSP, RCPP, CRP, ACEP and Technical Assistance



Last year, the House Agriculture Committee passed the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024, led by Chairman G.T. Thompson. The Texas Farm Bureau appreciates the continued commitment that members of this subcommittee have in improving the function of conservation programs. Farmers rely on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to address natural resource concerns. Simply put—each of these programs are essential to achieving our sustainability mission.

### Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

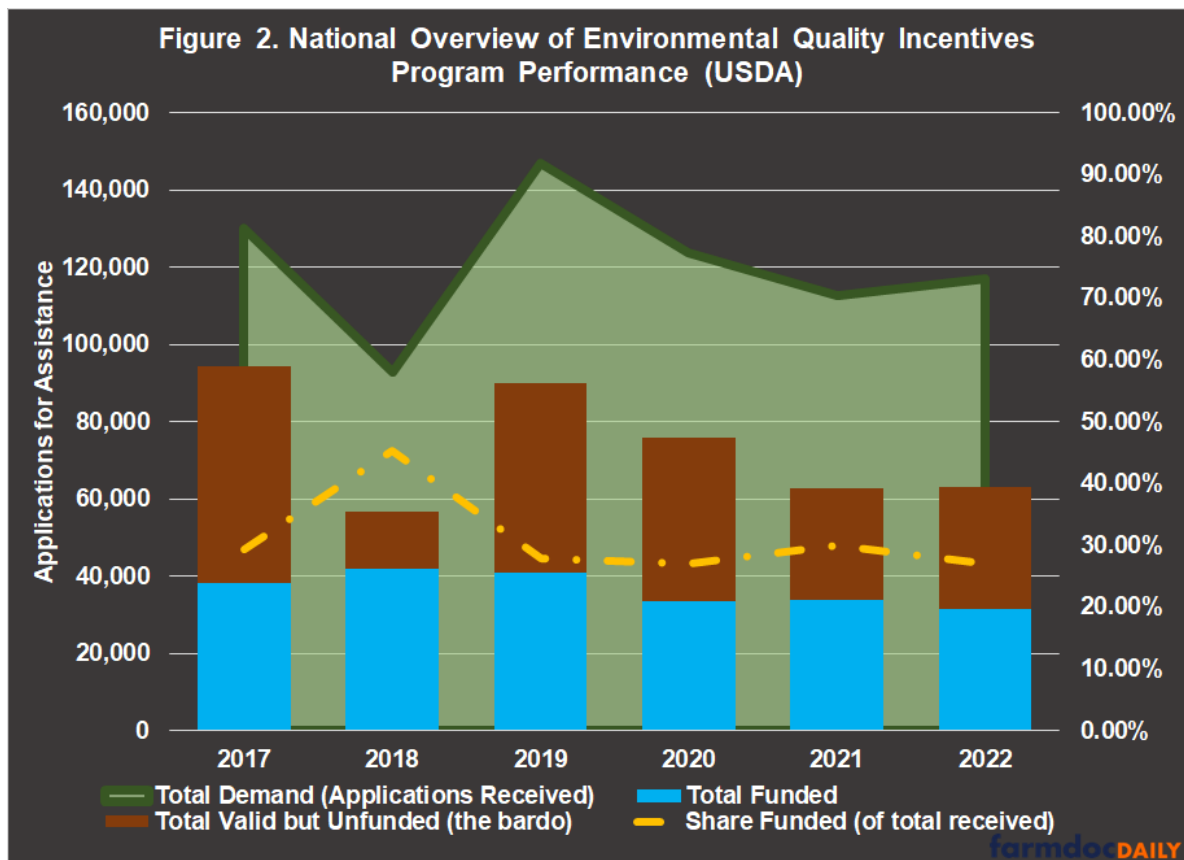
Since its inception, EQIP has consistently been one of the most popular conservation programs for farmers and ranchers. The program provides financial and technical assistance to producers for implementing conservation practices on their land that helps to improve water and air quality, conserving ground,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

As a working lands program, EQIP provides flexibility by adapting to a farmer's specific situation, offering a wide range of conservation options, supporting diverse producers, and allowing for customized planning and implementation timelines. This makes it a valuable tool for sustainable agriculture without forcing a one-size-fits-all approach. EQIP supports a wide variety of practices—from improving irrigation systems to managing livestock waste—so farmers can address the environmental challenges most relevant to their farms. With customizable

conservation plans, variable contract lengths, and multiple application periods throughout the year, farmers can adopt improvements at a pace and scale that works for them. Additionally, EQIP provides higher payment rates and priority support for beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers, making conservation more accessible and adaptable for a diverse range of producers. In Texas, the EQIP program has helped install terrace and waterway systems that reduce sediment loss and nutrient runoff, improve irrigation systems and water use efficiency, and maximize grazing systems - just to name a few.

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

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



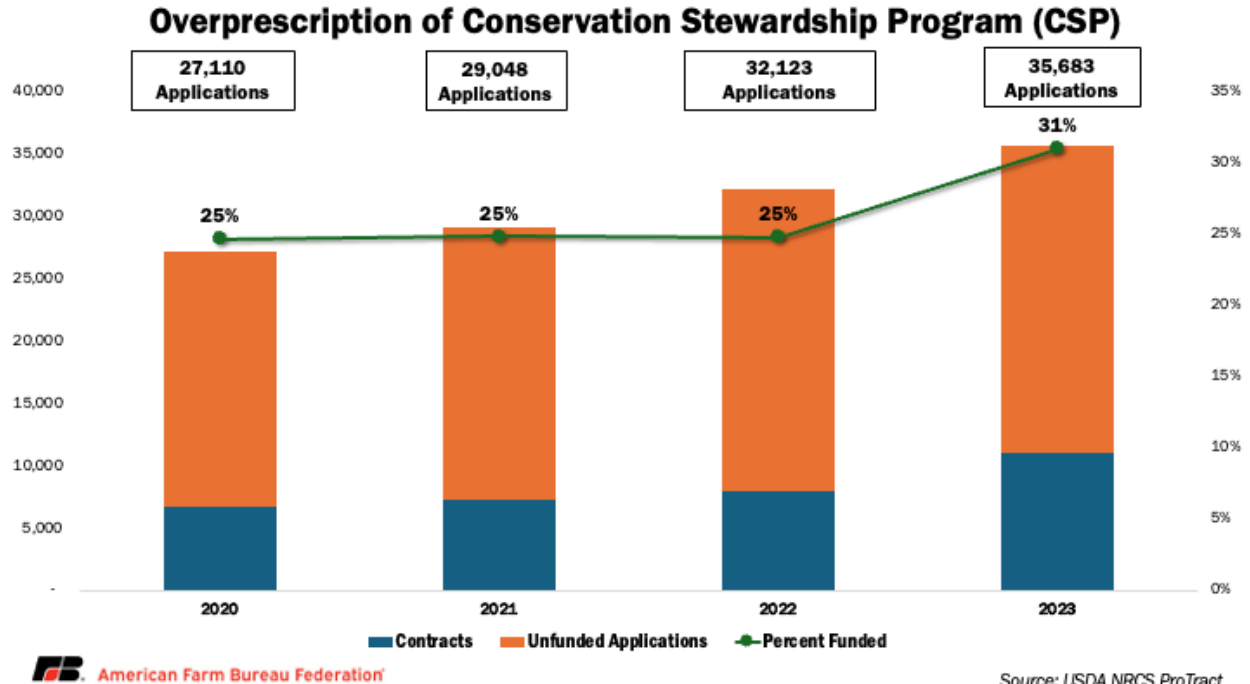
### **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**

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

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

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

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



### Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

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

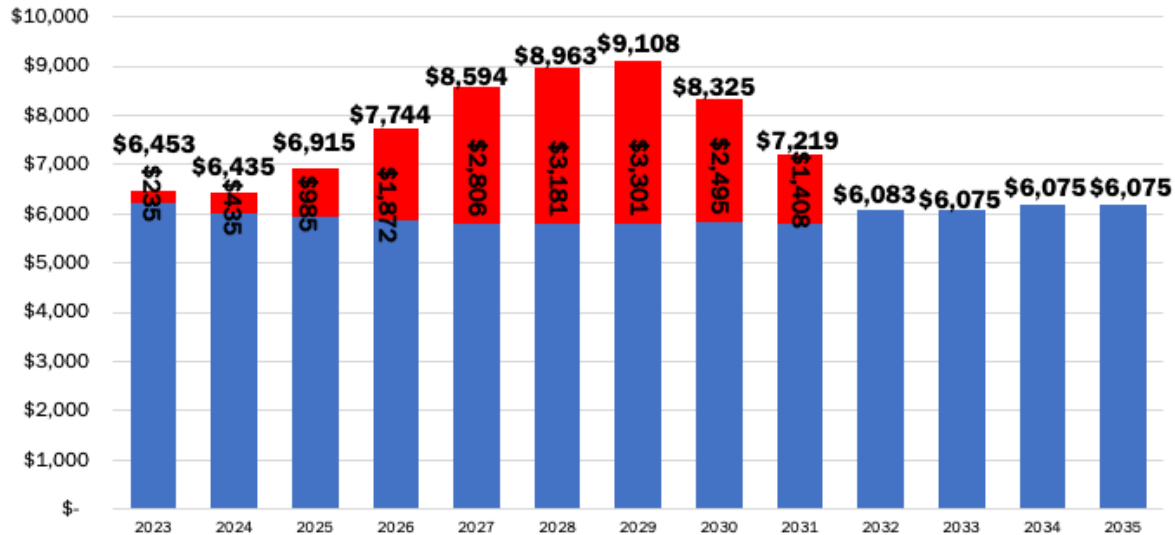
Farmers often face several challenges when participating in the RCPP, despite its collaborative and locally driven approach. One of the most common concerns is the complexity and length of the application process, which can be more time-consuming and confusing than other conservation programs due to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

### **Inflation Reduction Act in the Baseline Funding**

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) allocated an additional \$18.05 billion to USDA conservation programs, including EQIP, CSP and RCPP through FY2031. Currently, this IRA funding is temporary and does not alter the permanent baseline funding established by the 2018 Farm Bill. Once the IRA funds expire, these programs will revert to their original baseline funding levels, further limiting these program's capacity to meet ongoing conservation needs.

# How did **IRA** Supplement the **Baseline**?

\$ Millions



**AFBF** American Farm Bureau Federation

Source: AFBF Compilations, Congressional Budget Office, Senate Ag GDP

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

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act that passed the House last month infuses roughly \$11 billion in unspent IRA funding into the baseline for a variety of USDA conservation programs while also adding \$8 billion in additional baseline funding past the budget window of the IRA.

Incorporating the IRA funds into the baseline would ensure that these funds continue for conservation programs into perpetuity, subject only to Congressional reauthorization. This could represent a significant increase in the conservation title's available funding.

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

## **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**

Administered by FSA, CRP is a voluntary land retirement program that pays farmers to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that improve environmental health and quality. In return, participants receive annual rental payments and

cost-share assistance for establishing conservation practices. CRP helps reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, enhance wildlife habitat, and increase carbon sequestration. By taking marginal, highly erodible or at-risk farmland out of production, CRP supports long-term environmental sustainability while providing a stable income source for participating landowners. In 2024, Texas had roughly 2.2 million acres enrolled in CRP to protect highly erodible lands and enhance wildlife habitat.

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

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

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

Conversely, the scale would disincentive the enrollment of prime farmland. The enrollment of prime farmland in CRP has unintentionally created challenges for young farmers by reducing the availability of highly productive land for farming and entry into the agricultural sector. When prime farmland is taken out of production and enrolled in long-term CRP contracts, it limits opportunities for young and beginning farmers to access affordable, high-quality land needed to start or expand their operations. This can increase competition for the remaining farmland,

driving up land prices and rental rates, making it harder for new farmers to establish financially viable businesses. Additionally, with less prime land available, young farmers may be forced to work on lower-quality or more marginal acres, which can reduce their productivity and profitability. As a result, while CRP supports important conservation goals, it can also unintentionally hinder generational renewal and the long-term sustainability of the farming community.

### **Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program**

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

The 2018 Farm Bill established the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (FSCP) to address the significant threats posed by feral swine. With an estimated 5 million feral swine causing approximately \$1.6 billion in annual damages across just 13 states, the FSCP allocated a total of \$75 million over the life of the 2018 Farm Bill. While the FSCP has made significant strides in controlling feral swine populations, ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess its effectiveness. It is imperative that Congress continue to support this federal investment in wildlife management to protect agricultural resources and public health.

### **Additional Challenges in Executing Conservation Practices**

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

conservation programs and achieve meaningful environmental outcomes. Congress must invest in the TSPs that assist farmers in executing these practices.

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

### **Conclusion**

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