

Testimony  
on behalf of the  
**Hawaii Cattlemen's Council**  
and the  
**National Cattlemen's Beef Association**

with regard to  
“Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conservation, Sustaining Working Lands”  
submitted to the  
United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Agriculture  
Glenn Thompson, Chairman

submitted by  
  
**Nicole Galase**  
Executive Director  
Hawaii Cattlemen's Council

June 5, 2025  
Washington, DC



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

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

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

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

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

economic, and social sustainability of our operations, and it is through voluntary conservation programs that ranchers will continue to be a proud partner with the government to reach our environmental conservation goals.

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

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

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

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

Flexibility is key to ranchers' utilization of conservation programs. Ensuring that producers have the freedom to effectively manage their land goes beyond EQIP, stretching to other conservation programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP has the potential to provide significant environmental benefit but currently fails to maximize its value. Changes made in the 2018 Farm Bill limit our ability to effectively manage CRP acreage with grazing. Livestock graze mature, stagnate grasses and allow regrowth of green, carbon-capturing plants. If we allow more CRP grazing, we will promote more opportunities for beginning ranchers to graze animals responsibly and provide existing pastures with more rest and recovery during drought years. This

will be especially beneficial in areas where pasture is scarce and livestock production is rapidly dwindling like my home state of Hawaii. Cattle and other forms of livestock can be the sustainable solution to managing CRP without the negative impact on the ecosystem while also helping ranchers economically. HCC and NCBA support the CRP Grasslands pilot program, and hope to see a permanent authorization for this program included in a final Farm Bill. Grazing is a valuable tool in maximizing carbon sequestration but is not a tool that we are able to use on CRP acreage. This policy limits our ability to effectively manage our land. By allowing cattle to graze CRP acreage without a reduction in payment, we could greatly increase interest in CRP contracts, while simultaneously maximizing environmental value and economic benefit.

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

HCC is interested in participating in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program to direct funds to practices that will best address Hawaii's land issues. However, our colleagues currently utilizing the program shared that the application and reporting are cumbersome and laden with red-tape. For example, NRCS manages the RCPP through Conservation Desktop, which is a different platform than is used to manage EQIP and CSP contracts. This adds unnecessary

complexity and confusion. Staff are not well acquainted with how to conduct contract management through the new platform, leading to errors and delays. Modifications that should improve the project are also slow to get approval. This puts stress on organizations and increases administrative costs. If this program can be streamlined, organizations like HCC, who are the closest to our producers and can get funds directly to the boots on the ground doing the important work, will be better equipped to successfully implement an RCPP contract.

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

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

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

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

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