



Statement by

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And partner in Schohr Ranch, a family farm in Gridley, California

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Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

“Supporting Careers in Conservation: Workforce Training, Education, and Job Opportunities”

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Good afternoon, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for hosting this hearing today recognizing the importance of “Supporting Careers in Conservation.” I am pleased to be here to offer testimony before the Subcommittee.

My name is Tracy Schohr and I am here today in 3 capacities –

I am a University of California Cooperative Extension Livestock and Natural Resources Advisor serving three counties in Northern California – Butte, Plumas, and Sierra, which happens to be within Rep. LaMalfa’s congressional district. My role as a cooperative extension advisor is to conduct research and bring science-based information into the hands of ranchers, land managers, and community members.

Secondly, I am a managing partner of Schohr Ranch, a 5th generation family farm that grows rice, walnuts, and raises cattle.

Lastly, and most importantly, I am a product of career technical education. I grew up as an active member in the West Gridley 4-H Club and Gridley FFA. Mr. Dillabo’s & Mr. Risso’s high school agricultural classes exposed to me livestock grazing management, genetics, agricultural business management, and plant identification - giving me the building blocks necessary for my career.

After attending California State University, Chico, I worked in the policy arena where I had the opportunity to build bridges between the environmental community and ranchers. This inspiring work led me to go back to college to earn a Master’s in Horticulture and Agronomy at University

of California, Davis so that I could become a cooperative extension advisor, also known as an extension agent in other states.

I chose this career path because, farmers and ranchers, along with land management agencies, need a trained workforce that can help them meet contemporary and emerging issues. Climate resiliency, wildfire mitigation, drought, producing a safe, abundant, and affordable food supply, all require a workforce that is highly trained.

Congress needs to support programs that train the next generation for exciting careers in conservation. How can this be accomplished...

1. Make investments where it counts, examples I am passionate about include:

4-H Youth Development that was created by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 as part of a federal-state-local partnership and the land-grant university system. In California, 4-H Youth Development is in both urban and rural areas – bringing hands-on, experiential learning in areas such as agriculture, STEM, robotics, computer coding, and natural resources management, to name a few. 4-H members build confidence and leadership skills and are exposed to a variety of potential careers.

Another is the National FFA Program federally funded under Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. FFA programs across the nation are training the future workforce in every spectrum of careers in sustainable agriculture - data science, natural resources conservation and forest health, while building professional development skills such as public speaking, critical thinking, and research.

These two programs expose youth of all backgrounds and ethnicities to the breadth of careers in conservation.

2. Support continued investments in research and extension funding. I am proud to be part of the Land Grant partnership that was developed between states and the federal government with the 1862 Morrill Act, the 1887 Hatch Act and the previously mentioned 1914 Smith-Lever Act.

For over 130 years extension agents have conducted research and outreach important to our local communities at the intersection of long-term agricultural sustainability and public good benefits such as clean water, healthy soils, working rangelands, resilient forests and wildlife conservation.

My colleagues and I work and live in the communities we serve and have formed long-standing and trusted relationships. Cooperative extension is a boundary spanning organization working with diverse stakeholders such as, tribal, environmental, agricultural, and all levels of government.

As an extension advisor, I help ranchers overcome challenges they face on topics such as animal health, irrigated pasture, predators, regulatory compliance, applying for federal farm bill programs and managing landscapes in the aftermath of the 2018

Camp Fire, the 2019 Walker Fire, the 2020 North Complex Fire, and the 2021 Dixie Fire. I personally led research on fire implications including the first study on water quality post Camp Fire that informed downstream ranchers that water flowing through their private landscapes was safe for cattle to drink. Last week I launched a research project, working closely with ranchers and the Plumas National Forest. We are using GPS collars on cows to investigate how catastrophic fires that burn dense forests change landscape vegetation, which impacts livestock grazing. Data collected from the GPS collars will inform future post-fire grazing practices.

When disaster strikes, ranchers and emergency services call on cooperative extension. During the North Complex Fires when the Plumas Sheriff Department and Animal Control needed help evacuating cattle, they knew I had strong relationships in the community and could quickly call on people to bring their personal cattle trailers to help move a large herd out of harm's way. During the Dixie Fire, for weeks, I worked with Incident Command Teams serving as a liaison to ranchers needing to move, care and treat animals behind evacuation lines. I mention this because it is a prime example of how cooperative extension advisors are valued members of the community and that our relationships are grounded in trust. It is what makes us effective in all aspects of our work.

For three generations – my grandfather, dad, and brother - have called on our local extension agents on issues such as rice disease, water management, and invasive weeds. Our family has immense trust with UC's Cooperative Extension services, which provides critical advice that helps us improve our multi-generational family farm. Our family farm also lends our fields to UC for research trials, where the results help our entire industry, the environment, and, in the case of our rice crops, improves the sushi rice you eat!

- 3. We must train and educate a workforce that is adapting to our changing environment** – weeds, pests, drought, and the aftermath from catastrophic fires. We must train on the evolution of land management, including the need to actively manage our forests, recognize that grazing can be a sustainable land management tool, and look at agriculture as a solution - not the problem. Lastly, we must train a workforce skilled in emerging technology that can assist with conservation and farming needs. For example, there is exciting work being done to consider ways to put artificial intelligence tools to work on the farm reducing pesticide use and to help decipher copious amounts of data to minimize nitrogen applications, improving agricultural sustainability while maintaining productivity.

Conclusion

In closing, the demand and future job opportunities are endless...

Reflecting back to the family farm, we are working with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff with conservation careers to implement Farm Bill programs for irrigation efficiency, soil health, pollinators, air quality and wildlife habitat.

There is a need for a skilled workforce to put money on the ground managing our forests to create more fire resilient landscapes. UC Cooperative Extension is actively working to build and train this workforce, but there is a strong need to make sure that USDA programs continue to be funded. This will ensure that there will be resources to train the next generation of conservation professionals who can assist farmers to stay at the cutting edge of research and farm practices.

The federal investment into the Smith-Lever Act, for example, is one way the federal government through the USDA provides critical “people power” and research talent to enable states to connect local issues with the power of university research. This federal investment in cooperative extension is heavily leveraged by state, county, and local support – a high return on the federal government’s investment.

There is a strong need for additional funding to be provided to ensure that our nation will have a conservation workforce that can serve agricultural needs into the future. For example, there is a need to hire more researchers like myself, who work hand-in-hand with farmers, ranchers, and natural resource managers, who benefit from cooperative extension - to make conservation happen, while supporting healthy landscapes, protecting watersheds, and enhancing profitable agricultural businesses.

As the Committee writes that next Farm Bill, I encourage Congress to continue to invest in the programs that support the creation of a strong conservation workforce. Doing so will help to ensure farmers and ranchers and the agriculture sector can continue to thrive and provide food for our nation using sustainable management practices. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I am happy to answer any questions.