

Good morning, Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, distinguished members,

I would like to begin by thanking you for allowing me to testify on behalf of H.R. 839, introduced by Representative Arrington, and to share my story here today. My name is Bryan Baker. I live in the West Texas Panhandle in a small town called Sudan, TX, and I am a fourth-generation cotton farmer. I have lived in Sudan my entire life, except for the few years I spent at Texas Tech University, where I received a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Economics and Applied Sciences. After graduating from Texas Tech, I moved back home and started farming with my dad and granddad. I farm around 3,500 acres and still farm some land that my great granddad broke out of the shortgrass prairie of blue grama and buffalo grass in the early 1900s. I am very proud to be still able to work that land. I have two step kids, Libby and Austin, and I am very proud to be a part of their lives.

In addition to being a farmer, I also serve on several boards, including the board of directors for Texas Producers Cooperative Gin (TPC), where I have been the board president since 2016. TPC represents 492 patron farmers, and I am their voice today as well. TPC has several businesses to serve its farmers, helping them remain competitive in today's challenging economic environment. It consists of two cotton ginning plants — one located in Sudan, TX, and the other in Amherst, TX. TPC owns an insurance company that serves its patrons at two locations. The first in Sudan and the other in Littlefield, TX. TPC has a fertilizer and chemical sales division that is fully staffed with agronomic advisors to provide the latest information on use rates and the efficacy of products on the market. This best-in-class agronomy enables our patrons to make informed decisions for their fields and crops, becoming outstanding stewards of their land. TPC also features a fully stocked farm supply store, a tire repair and sales division, a mechanic shop, a fuel sales division, and even a barber shop.

TPC employs 43 full-time employees, and we add 48 seasonal employees during our cotton harvest time, who provide the labor for the cotton ginning plants. Many of these seasonal employees are lower-income individuals and are dependent on this seasonal work, which for several makes up the majority of their annual income. This seasonal work typically happens between October and late January.

TPC, on average, returns \$2.0-\$2.5 million to our patrons in the form of a dividend, based on the profit of the various businesses. Most of that profit is coming from local cotton ginning plants processing our patrons' cotton. Most of these funds, which are returned to the producers, remain in our local community and are the lifeblood of our area. When farmers thrive, the local economy thrives.

The footprint of the TPC's patrons extends approximately 60 miles in all directions from Sudan, with a large portion falling into the Biden Administration's 30x30 land acquisition plan. As shown in the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved a plan that would use taxpayer money to acquire an estimated 700,000 acres of West Texas land. It is clear how this overreach by the Federal Government and its intended land grab would be detrimental to Texas farmers and ranchers, in addition to our entire local economy.

If some or all these 700,000 acres are removed from farming production, an area roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island, it will cause a ripple effect that will be irreversible, as these acres will be permanently removed from production. This ripple effect will not only be devastating to the farmers and employees of Texas Producers Cooperative, but also to many other local businesses, including banks, grocery stores, and restaurants.

Local schools, the heartbeat of these small towns, will also be impacted. Sudan Independent School District, a National Blue Ribbon School, is one of the schools that fall under this land grab. Sudan ISD has one of the largest school districts in the South Plains and covers approximately 583 square miles. There are currently around 450 students, 46 teachers, and 79 total staff employed. According to Scott Harrell, Sudan ISD Superintendent, Sudan ISD has an annual revenue of \$7,362,385 and spends approximately \$17,000 per student. This school's annual revenue can be broken down by source as follows: 76.3% from local property taxes, 19.9% from state funds, and 3.8% from Federal funds. There are three counties inside the school district: Lamb, Bailey, and Cochran counties.

The total tax base value for all three counties within the school district is \$644,662,980, which serves as the basis for all calculations used by the TEA (Texas Education Agency) to determine the compressed tax rate. Two taxes are assessed: M&O (Maintenance and Operations), which covers the maintenance and daily operations of the school, and I&S (Interests and Sinking), which is used to pay off any bond loans. On the I&S side, this tax is based solely on the taxable value within the school district. If this land is converted into government-owned property and removed from the tax roll, the school has no choice but to raise the I&S tax rate to make the yearly bond payment. This burden then falls on the remaining farms and ranches outside of the targeted area but still within the school district. The Agricultural Property Valuation of the portion of the Sudan School District in each county is broken down as follows:

- Lamb County: \$54.8 million
- Bailey County: \$80.7 million
- Cochran County: \$9.5 million

With 700,000 acres potentially being vacated from private landowners and taxpayers, there will be multiple economic losses, including a reduction in the number of teachers, bus drivers, and staff, as fewer children will be available to be picked up in these acres and fewer children will be enrolled in local schools. After all, there would be nobody left to live and farm on these lost acres.

The Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge, as of today, comprises of 6,440 acres, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The proposed 30x30 plan aims to deliver conservation of up to 700,000 acres, an over 10,000% increase of acreage compared to the current refuge land area. In my opinion, the Muleshoe Wildlife Refuge, as it stands today, is understaffed and undermanaged, and likely will get worse if its size were to increase by 10,000%.

When the Interior Department announced the expansion of this National Wildlife Refuge, it claimed that the plans were developed, informed, and ultimately supported by input from local landowners through a public process. To my knowledge, Sudan ISD, Texas Producers Cooperative, I, nor any of my fellow farmers and ranchers, were ever contacted or asked for input. On the contrary, there have been multiple town hall meetings on this proposal after the plan was finalized and made public, and the overwhelming majority of the people who attended these meetings have been strongly opposed to this expansion.

Since the Muleshoe Wildlife Refuge was established in 1935 by an executive order from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, conservationists and farmers have co-existed through multiple National Resources Conservation Services {NRCS} programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program {CRP} and Environmental Quality Incentives Program {EQIP}. Farmers and ranchers are amazing stewards of the land and many of us, including myself, are avid outdoors men. I have fishing licenses in 4 states and hunting licenses in 3 states, so I appreciate the outdoors, and I do appreciate the work that U.S. Fish and Wildlife does to preserve these resources for generations to come. I am not against conservation programs that make sense, but I am against those like the Muleshoe plan that will cause economic devastation to an entire region and permanently alter the way of life for the hundreds of families that call this place home.

My family has called Sudan home for over 100 years, so there is an emotional aspect to this expansion for me. My mother taught 4<sup>th</sup> grade for 40 years in Sudan and my sister has taught 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in Sudan for 20 years. I have two nephews, Cal and Nick, who attend Sudan ISD today and I am fighting for them to always have a place to come back to and be able to call it home. Congressman Arrington is from Plainview, TX, which as the “crow flies”, is only about 45 miles from Sudan. He understands the destructive impact this plan will have not only on Sudan and our region, but on Texas and on the entire United States, because if a 10,000% expansion is allowed to happen in Texas, where the entire state is over 95% privately owned, then it can happen anywhere.

That is why I am here today and why I support H.R. 839, to defend the way of life for the place that I and thousands of hard-working West Texans call home.