

**CONGRESSWOMAN VERONICA ESCOBAR (TX-16)**

**TESTIMONY**

Thank you, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott, for hosting this Member Day Hearing.

I have the honor of representing El Paso, Texas, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to advocate for the needs of my community.

I would like first to say this committee must continue to ensure families across this country have access to affordable, healthy, and nutritious foods that safeguard the well-being of Americans, focus on environmental sustainability that improves soil health and water quality for millions of farmers and ranchers, and adequately fund rural development programs that foster economic growth for communities across the country.

As the committee continues to craft this legislation, I would like to highlight a few of my priorities.

First, I would like to discuss my bill, H.R. 2740, establishing an Office of Colonia Affairs within the Department of Agriculture. As you

know, colonias are majority Latino, unincorporated communities along the U.S. Mexico border that often lack access to infrastructure that many of us take for granted. This includes water, wastewater, rural electrification, and other essential services. El Paso County has approximately 329 colonias with an estimated population of 90,582. Traditionally, there has been insufficient federal funding for colonias, and localities often have faced colonia issues on their own, which can be costly. By establishing an Office of Colonia Affairs within the Department of Agriculture, colonias will have the resources they need for technical assistance pertaining to federal programs and can be informed on what funding sources apply to their community.

Second, I would also like to highlight my bill, H.R. 2939, The PIGS Act, which expands the Animal Welfare Act by prohibiting specific methods of confining breeding pigs that restrict their movement. My bill would increase the square footage requirement to at least 24 square feet, which allows pregnant pigs to lie down, stand up, and move about freely. Additionally, my bill establishes a program that provides

\$10 million a year to help pig farmers improve housing systems and comply with the prohibitions. My bill is an important step forward in holding the swine industry accountable by limiting the horrific conditions pregnant pigs are kept in.

Third, I would like to emphasize the need to expand access to nutritious and healthy foods for low-income and minority communities. Most recently, a new study conducted by the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and El Pasoans Fighting Hunger concluded that 35% of El Pasoans and 61% of UTEP students are food insecure. We must strengthen local food systems by expanding urban farming, investing in food security, and continuing to invest in food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC. It has been proven that programs like SNAP improve current and long-term health, improve nutritional outcomes, and lower healthcare costs.

Lastly, it is of the utmost importance that the next Farm Bill ensures the nearly \$20 billion provided in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) for USDA conservation programs is used for its intended purpose.

This funding is a win-win for farmers and for the planet. In 2023, USDA received requests for more than three times what the IRA made available for that year for climate smart agriculture - meaning farmers want it - and the funding benefits us all by helping to address the climate crisis.

I will continue to work for and advocate for my community of El Paso and prioritize the needs of farmers, rural communities, and the well-being of animals, and I hope you consider these priorities as you continue to craft the 2023 Farm Bill.

Thank you for this opportunity and consideration of my requests.