

Testimony of Terry J. Cosby
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U.S. Department of Agriculture
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Chairman Baird, Ranking Member Spanberger, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the continued value that conservation programs provide for American agriculture. In implementing the programs authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA has worked alongside producers to support and strengthen agriculture, protect, and enhance our shared natural resources, build resiliency, and mitigate climate change.

My name is Terry Cosby, and I am honored to serve as the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), where I have spent the past 42 years engaging with agricultural producers and rural communities, helping them to invest in the lands that they work. My great-grandfather purchased our family land in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi in the late 1800s, and the importance of conservation has been handed down through generations with that family land.

The 2018 Farm Bill made it clear that voluntary conservation programs are critical to the continued viability of production agriculture. It also provided new incentives for producers and created new agricultural opportunities in urban communities.

The ongoing success of the Farm Bill conservation programs has led to greater opportunity to make financial and technical assistance available to agricultural producers and communities. Producer demand for voluntary conservation continues to result in our programs being oversubscribed. This is further driven by the opportunities available through voluntary conservation to respond and build resiliency in the face of devastating natural disasters while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration to help mitigate climate change.

Recognizing the important role that conservation and watershed programs, including the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program, and the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, can play in addressing critical needs across the country, Congress provided much needed additional resources through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) as well as generational investments provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to implement and quantify the impacts of climate smart conservation. These additional funds will continue to support producers and communities in making long-term conservation and infrastructure investments that enhance natural resources, enable them to adapt to and mitigate climate change impacts, and support increase resiliency. At NRCS, we are working to meet the needs of our customers across the country and ensure effective and efficient implementation of these laws while building upon the investments contained in the 2018 Farm Bill. We are achieving this while wisely using the resources entrusted to us by the Congress to deliver on the President's promise to grow the economy from the bottom up and middle out.

Farm Bill Program Implementation

NRCS staff successfully implemented the programs and authorities provided under the 2018 Farm Bill and have continued to engage and support agricultural producers in ways that protect and enhance our shared natural resources.

NRCS administers a wide range of voluntary conservation programs to support private landowners. Most are authorized by the Farm Bill, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). These financial assistance and easement programs make it possible to implement the conservation plans that result from Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) work.

NRCS also provides technical assistance, conservation planning, and support for conservation practice implementation for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). NRCS conservation programs are carried out through USDA's most extensive network of over 2,400 service centers providing direct assistance to individual farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, and other private landowners to restore and improve our natural resources. Key priorities for the implementation of these programs and practices are decided at the local level, with input from Local Working Groups and State Technical Committees, to ensure local needs are addressed through NRCS's voluntary programs.

NRCS provides technical assistance at no cost to the producers we serve with the goal of giving our customers personalized advice and information, based on the latest science and research, to help them make informed decisions. The CTA Program is NRCS's conservation planning program, helping to develop and deliver conservation technologies and practices to private landowners, conservation districts, Tribal Nations and other organizations. Through CTA, NRCS works with landowners and managers to develop conservation plans that outline the specific conservation activities to voluntarily conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources. CTA funding is also used to help agricultural producers comply with Highly Erodible Land Conservation (HELC) and Wetland Conservation (WC) compliance provisions, in addition to other Federal, state, tribal, and local environmental regulations. Additional funds for technical assistance are provided as part of the financial assistance programs to assist producers in implementing conservation program contracts. NRCS also has a process for certifying Technical Service Providers (TSPs), non-government entities who can provide conservation assistance to producers and thereby expand NRCS's technical capacity. NRCS also enters into cooperative agreements with non-government partners who can further assist producers by providing technical assistance.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): In fiscal year (FY) 2022, NRCS enrolled 31,856 EQIP contracts providing over \$1.28 billion on 9.6 million acres. Additionally, through the EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts option, offered in FY 2022 in all states, we enrolled 696 contracts providing \$50.5 million in conservation assistance.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): In FY 2022, through CSP Classic, NRCS enrolled 5,332 CSP contracts providing over \$436 million on 9.5 million acres. Additionally, we renewed

2,628 CSP contracts on 3.3 million acres. Also, under CSP, in FY 2022, we enrolled 772 contracts on 48,884 acres in the CSP Grassland Conservation Initiative.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): In August 2022, NRCS announced new projects under the RCPP Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) components. \$197 million in new investments was announced for a total of 41 RCPP Classic and AFA projects. There are 400 active RCPP projects that have more than 2,000 partners.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): During FY 2022, \$352 million was obligated to enroll 351 new ACEP easements totaling 181,115 acres. In FY 2022 NRCS closed 260 ACEP easements totaling over 109,449 acres. Additionally, we invested \$24.8 million in eight Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership projects to enable conservation partners to assist NRCS with acquiring and restoring private wetlands.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG): In FY 2021, NRCS awarded \$40 million to conservation partners for 37 new projects under the CIG program. These projects support widespread adoption and evaluation of innovative conservation approaches in partnership with producers and can address critical priorities including nutrient management, climate-smart agriculture, adaptation, and resilience to support drought related efforts. The Soil Health Demonstration Trial component of CIG focuses exclusively on conservation practices implementation and systems that improve soil health. For FY 22, we invested \$40 million in 31 projects, which was announced on April 6, 2023.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): In FY 2022, NRCS provided conservation planning and technical assistance on over 5 million acres for over 64,000 new or renewed CRP contracts across the nation. Technical assistance includes, but is not limited to, field visits to verify practice eligibility on the landscape, conservation planning, CRP practice survey and design, practice installation, operation and maintenance of practices and practice management. NRCS provides technical assistance for emergency use of CRP such as haying and grazing. NRCS is also working with the Farm Service Agency and selected partners to support CRP Monitoring, Assessment and Evaluation projects.

Conservation Compliance: In FY 2022, NRCS completed over 35,700 highly erodible land determinations and over 18,800 certified wetland determinations. NRCS also completed approximately 21,200 compliance status reviews in 2022.

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Implementation

The IRA represents the single largest investment in climate and clean energy solutions in American history. This is a historic, once-in-a-generation investment and opportunity for this country and for the rural and agricultural communities that USDA serves.

The IRA invests nearly \$20 billion in NRCS's oversubscribed conservation programs. These investments mean that more producers will have access to conservation assistance. This includes:

- \$8.45 billion for EQIP

- \$4.95 billion for RCPP
- \$3.25 billion for CSP
- \$1.4 billion for ACEP
- \$1 billion for CTA Program
- \$300 million to measure, evaluate, quantify carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emission reductions from conservation investments

These additional funds are important investments for farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners to increase the resilience of their operations and implement mechanisms to quantify greenhouse gas emission reductions and increased carbon storage in the nation's soils and trees. These funds are on top of otherwise available program funding, and the voluntary, incentive-based approach is targeted to support climate mitigation.

We are working towards improvements on implementation based on feedback from our customers, partners, and employees. Staff are in the process of addressing the public comments and streamlining our programs to ensure they are easier and more accessible. A few examples are:

- Feedback from stakeholders included, but was not limited to:
 - Staffing Capacity – recommendations were made to strengthen and expand agency partnerships and increase technical assistance funds
 - Climate Smart Practices – requests that the agency prioritize practices that provide the most co-benefits; expand scope of practices; prioritize indigenous communities; increase innovative practices, such as investment in technological advancements
 - Equity – requests that the agency remove or reduce match requirements for ACEP and RCPP for Historically Underserved landowners; improve the agency's application process; increase and improve agency engagement with Tribal communities; increase the visibility of advance payment options; continue to invest in land access for heirs' property owners and new and beginning farmers and ranchers
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – the agency has several teams that are charged with developing a roadmap for a simplified and streamlined program, anticipated by fall 2023.
 - Some anticipated changes include:
 - One announcement covers Farm Bill funding (RCPP Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA)) and IRA funding – up to \$500M.
 - Simplifies Technical Assistance language.
 - Streamlining workflow processes to reduce implementation timelines.
 - Additional flexibility for easements to use covered programs.
 - Emphasis on historically underserved producers and landowners.
 - Emphasis on locally-led projects with collaboration at the state level.
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) - the agency is reducing implementation timelines for easement programs by improving streamlined workflow processes, efficiency in appraisals and appraisal reviews, boundary survey timeline,

expansion of eligible entity certification, and delegation of approval authority to the state office, which reduces the need for waivers.

- Measuring, Monitoring, Reporting and Verifying (MMRV) - To achieve the IRA quantification effort, the agency is forming strong collaborations between USDA and external partners to advance the quantification of greenhouse gas (GHGs) and carbon sequestration. This will improve the agency's ability to quantify the benefits from conservation activities and track trends through the USDA GHG Inventory and Assessment Program.
 - Stakeholder engagement meeting is scheduled for May 11th to update them on agency progress.

NRCS is moving forward with FY 2023 implementation, while also continuing to further expand capacity for the years ahead. On February 13, 2023, USDA announced the availability of \$850 million in FY 2023 IRA funding for EQIP, CSP, ACEP and RCPP. Producers applying to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices and systems through EQIP and CSP can now be funded through IRA, with sign-ups and priorities continuing to be set at the state and local level. Funding is provided through a competitive process and will also include opportunities to respond to unmet demand. For FY 2023, NRCS will prioritize ACEP Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE) for grasslands in areas of highest risk for conversion to non-grassland uses to prevent the release of soil carbon stores. NRCS will prioritize ACEP Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) for lands that contain soils high in organic carbon. For both ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE, applications for the first round of the IRA funding cycle closed on March 17, 2023. The agency received 49 ACEP-ALE applications, with an estimated funding request of \$42,307,682 and 213 ACEP-WRE applications, with an estimated funding request of \$132,240,070. NRCS will expand options for ACEP in FY 2024 and beyond as the funding levels increase.

Option 1

NRCS plans to roll out the next RCPP funding opportunity this spring, which will include IRA funds for FY 2023. The announcement targets IRA funds to maximize climate benefits. Other opportunities for agreements and partnerships at the state level will be announced for FY 2023 in the coming months, as state-level partnerships are a core component of expanding capacity and outreach to bring new participants in the door.

Option 2

NRCS recently announced the FY2023 RCPP funding opportunity for up to \$500 million, for RCPP Classic and RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) this did include IRA funds. The announcement targets IRA funds to maximize climate benefits. The funding announcement included the first step in improving the RCPP program and ongoing efforts at USDA to streamline conservation programs.

To effectively implement the provisions of IRA, NRCS is developing strategies to expand capacity through hiring, target funding, streamline program delivery, leverage partnerships, advance equity, and quantify outcomes. As part of this effort, NRCS published a Federal Register Request for Information (RFI) in the Fall of 2022, requesting public input on various aspects of IRA implementation. Through the RFI, NRCS solicited feedback on how to maximize benefits for climate mitigation, streamline and improve program delivery to increase efficiencies,

and expand program access for producers, especially underserved producers. NRCS utilized initial RFI feedback for FY 2023 and will continue to identify and adopt additional changes based on public feedback in FY 2024 and in future years.

Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry

NRCS is leveraging our conservation programs and tools to address climate change mitigation and adaptation, while continuing to take a comprehensive approach to natural resource conservation and ensuring that underserved and urban producers receive the support they need to meet their voluntary conservation goals.

Agriculture, forestry, and rural America are both uniquely affected by climate change and positioned to be a meaningful part of the solution. The Biden-Harris USDA, under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, has embarked upon a department-wide effort to enact climate-smart agriculture, forestry, and rural clean energy policies that are voluntary, flexible, and led by producers. All along the way, NRCS is ensuring that science and rigorous monitoring underpin our work, and that underserved communities and small and medium-sized farmers participate in and benefit from this important department-wide effort.

We know voluntary conservation works, and we are committed to working with farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, and partners to leverage our resources to increase climate resilience, sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, enhance agricultural productivity, support rural economies, and maintain critical environmental benefits through voluntary conservation efforts. USDA's work on climate change is:

- Focused on partnerships – with agriculture, forestry, tribes, businesses, and communities;
- Voluntary and incentive-based;
- Focused on creating new opportunities and markets for agriculture and forestry;
- Focused on ensuring rural America plays a key role in our transition to cleaner sources of energy;
- Leveraging and enhancing the quantification of climate mitigation benefits; and
- Farmer, rancher, and private forest landowner-led.

Climate-Focused Conservation Investments: Many of NRCS's existing practices have climate mitigation benefits, making them climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. Working closely alongside our partners and those we serve, NRCS has been supporting the implementation of these practices within existing conservation programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon. Many of these mitigation practices also provide other environmental co-benefits as well as critical climate adaptation benefits to help agricultural producers make their operations more resilient to climate change. In 2022, NRCS:

- Invested \$197 million for 41 locally-led projects through the RCPP that address climate change, improve water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agriculture;
- Announced \$35 million in funding through CIG to help agricultural producers adopt innovative conservation practices and mitigate the effects of climate change on their operations;

- Expanded the **EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts** option to nationwide availability with a \$50.9 million investment, building on the \$10 million program pilot investment in 2021. Provided over \$309 million of **EQIP** funds for producers directly tied to climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices. Provided over \$192 million of **CSP** funds for producers directly tied to climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices. Provided \$8 million in regional projects to support and expand the **monitoring of soil carbon** on working agricultural lands and assess how climate-smart practices are affecting carbon sequestration;
- Invested up to \$12 million in partnerships that expand access to conservation technical assistance for livestock producers and increase the use of conservation practices on grazing lands through the **Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative**;
- Provided new opportunities to improve **nutrient management**, including through an initiative referred to as Act Now, which features an expedited application process for key conservation programs, a ranking threshold for pre-approval and a streamlined enrollment process. NRCS instituted outreach campaigns focused on the economic benefits of nutrient management and on the nutrient management planning process.
- Additionally, NRCS established new agreements with key partners who have existing capacity to support nutrient management planning and technical assistance.

As an example of the impact of our farm bill conservation programs on climate mitigation, EQIP and CSP together delivered more than 27 million metric tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (MMTCO_{2e}) in estimated emissions reductions in 2020. CTA, which provides our nation's farmers, ranchers and forestland owners with the knowledge and tools they need to conserve, maintain and restore the natural resources on their lands and improve the health of their operations for the future, has led to an additional 54 million metric tonnes of CO₂ equivalent reductions in 2020. USDA is continuing to expand our ability to measure, monitor, report on, and verify climate mitigation outcomes, including through additional investments provided through the Inflation Reduction Act.

In line with the whole-of-government approach to address climate change, NRCS also utilized its conservation programs in partnership with other Federal agencies to further its climate goals related to both mitigation and adaptation, including:

- Investing \$25 million as part of a collaboration with the Department of Interior's (DOI) **WaterSmart Initiative** to help farmers and ranchers in three new priority areas and 37 existing priority areas conserve water and build drought resilience in their communities, assisting communities and producers in 12 Western states. This builds on a \$21 million investment in FY 2021;
- Announcing over \$1 billion in disaster relief funds for **post-wildfire and hurricane recovery** with the Forest Service through 41 projects, including 17 new projects, that will bring together agricultural producers, forest landowners, and national forests and grasslands to improve forest health using available Farm Bill conservation programs and other authorities;
- Supporting new **Sentinel Landscapes** to strengthen military readiness and address climate change and other natural resource challenges together with Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Interior (DOI);

- Contributing to the **Drought Resilience Interagency Working Group** to improve drought-stricken communities' longer-term resilience to drought through financial and technical assistance; and
- Through the **Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership** NRCS and Forest Service funded 14 new projects in FY 2023 and awarded funding towards 25 existing projects. This continued partnership builds upon fiscal year 2022 investment of more than \$48 million (\$18 million of which was from NRCS and \$30 million from the Forest Service), for projects that will mitigate wildfire risk, protect water quality, improve wildlife habitat, restore forest ecosystems and ultimately contribute to USDA's efforts to combat climate change. Staff are currently working with Forest Service on solicitation for FY2024 projects.

Adaptation and Resilience: NRCS is implementing the NRCS Climate Change Adaptation Plan, released in 2022, which identifies key actions for addressing climate change vulnerabilities within NRCS's mission, operations, and infrastructure. We will continue to improve the climate literacy of staff throughout the agency, as we did with 23 tailored "Climate Conversation" training sessions delivered in partnership with the USDA Climate Hubs, a series of Regional Climate Town Halls for all national, state, and field staff, and ongoing contributions to the Climate Hubs and continued support for resource and tool development in 2023. In addition, we are working to improve science and technology for understanding, measuring, and tracking climate-related impacts and outcomes of NRCS practices and programs. This includes actively working with subject area experts to evaluate and update the list of climate-smart mitigation activities as needed.

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Implementation

The BIL is a historic piece of legislation that allows NRCS to address a broader portfolio of priority watershed needs across the nation and US territories. BIL provided \$918 million for Watershed Programs administered by NRCS, including \$118 million for the Watershed Rehabilitation (REHAB) Program, \$500 million for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program, and \$300 million for the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP). REHAB helps project sponsors rehabilitate aging dams that are reaching the end of their design lives and/or no longer meet federal or state standards. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to local project sponsors to rehabilitate aging dams that protect lives, property, and infrastructure. WFPO helps units of Federal, state, local and tribal governments (project sponsors) to protect and restore watersheds up to 250,000 acres. NRCS offers financial and technical assistance through this program for erosion and sediment control; watershed protection; flood prevention; water quality improvements; rural, municipal and industrial water supply; water management; fish and wildlife habitat enhancement; and hydropower sources. EWP offers vital recovery options for local communities to help people reduce hazards to life and property caused by major storms, wildfires, floods, and other natural disasters. Through this program, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to state, local, and tribal governments for flooding and erosion protection that threaten life and property.

In implementing BIL, NRCS has prioritized providing ongoing relief to communities impacted by severe weather events such as wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. NRCS

has also prioritized carrying out projects in limited resource areas or for underserved communities, including tribal communities, where there is a severe need for watershed infrastructure to protect entire communities from floods, natural disasters, and other watershed-related resource concerns.

By the end of FY 2022, NRCS had invested a total of \$803 million of BIL funds into watershed programs. \$589.5 million of these funds went to 240 projects in 39 states for WFPO and REHAB. \$213.7 million of these funds went to 26 EWP projects, which included \$133 million of BIL funding to cover 100 percent of the cost of post-wildfire recovery efforts in communities impacted by the Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon wildfire in New Mexico. NRCS, in cooperation with local sponsors, will use EWP program BIL funds to implement much-needed aerial seeding — a successful post-wildfire conservation practice that helps reduce soil erosion, restore ground cover and establish native plant species.

Drought

Producers around the country experienced drought in the last year. This is especially a challenge in the Western United States. Water supply in sufficient quantity and quality is declining in many areas of the West as it is increasingly threatened by growing demand and the impacts of climate change. Declining water supply threatens working land resources that sustain agricultural productivity and environmental quality in these areas. These interrelated threats increase challenges encountered by water resource managers and producers, but also increase the importance for NRCS to deliver conservation assistance where it can make a greater impact.

For this reason, NRCS has developed the Western Water and Working Lands Framework (Framework) for Conservation Action, which will support NRCS leaders across 17 western states in collaborating with partners and effectively delivering conservation assistance to address priority issues related to water. This is based off a landscape approach and other frameworks that NRCS has developed in recent years, including the Great Plains Grasslands Biome Framework, the Sagebrush Biome Framework, the Northern Bobwhite, Grasslands, and Savannas Framework, and the Landscape Conservation Initiative. NRCS released the Western Water Framework on February 13, 2023. The Framework identifies six major management challenges related to Western water conservation:

- Forecasting water supply
- Sustaining agricultural productivity
- Protecting groundwater availability
- Protecting surface water availability
- Managing and restoring rangelands and forestlands
- Responding to disruptions from catastrophic events

The Framework also identifies available NRCS programs and resources to address these challenges, including data collection and forecasting of water supplies, disaster recovery assistance, efficient water use like precision agriculture, or supporting landscape and watersheds across the Department's climate smart agriculture work. For example, NRCS uses EQIP funds to help farmers and ranchers implement practices that conserve scarce water resources, reduce wind erosion on drought-impacted fields and improve livestock access to water. EQIP assistance may

also be available for emergency animal mortality disposal from natural disasters and other causes.

While we look at immediate relief and flexibilities that producers need in the short term, we are also addressing drought resilience and asking hard questions about the programs, tools and authorities NRCS may need to appropriately assist producers navigating drought and climate change in the future.

Additionally, many public and private sector organizations have technical or financial resources to help address water and land resource management challenges. Although NRCS does not establish water allocation policies or regulate water or land resources, NRCS does coordinate with local, state, and Federal, and tribal partners to ensure that voluntary conservation actions are considered in such decisions. NRCS uses a locally-led model to direct agency resources to vulnerable areas where those resources will address community priorities and have a greater impact.

The 2018 Farm Bill provided NRCS with multiple new avenues for addressing drought. Through the EQIP, NRCS may now provide direct program assistance to water management entities such as irrigation districts, acequias and other public or semi-public entities for the purposes of improving water use efficiencies. The 2018 Farm Bill also created the new Conservation Incentive Contracts option within EQIP to address high-priority conservation and natural resources concerns, including drought. Through up to 10-year contracts, producers manage, maintain and address important natural resource concerns and build on existing conservation efforts. In addition, NRCS utilizes waivers as needed to assist producers who are dealing with natural disasters; often, these waivers allow actions that would otherwise be prohibited to support practice implementation, such as allowing producers with applications to install practices prior to contracting.

NRCS is also coordinating across USDA and other federal agencies to ensure effective collaboration to address drought. As noted above, NRCS is investing \$25 million as part of a collaboration with the Department of Interior's (DOI) WaterSmart Initiative to help farmers and ranchers in three new priority areas and 37 existing priority areas conserve water and build drought resilience in their communities, assisting communities and producers in 12 Western states. This builds on a \$21 million investment in FY22.

Equity

USDA is committed to advancing equity across our systems, processes, and policies. The President's issuance of Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities paved the way for USDA to meaningfully listen to internal and external stakeholders, understand where barriers to accessing USDA programs and services exist. NRCS is taking deliberate, bold, and historic action to dismantle barriers to equity, justice, and equal opportunity in agency programs and policies.

NRCS is committed to sustaining a culture that operates with core values of equity, justice, and equal opportunity for all. In 2022, NRCS released its *Equity Action Plan*. The NRCS Equity Action Plan provisions set forth a well-defined framework to meet the agency's equity

objectives. The NRCS Equity Action Plan was developed using a framework to advance equity in the culture of NRCS and a commitment to institutional transformation. The plan describes five strategic goals for NRCS:

1. Organizational Capacity for Equity
2. Equity Toolkits
3. Equity and Inclusion Data
4. Equity and Inclusion Partnerships
5. Operationalize Equity

NRCS is investing in this plan. In 2022, we awarded \$50 million in Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements through 118 partnerships to support underserved farmers and ranchers with climate-smart agriculture and forestry. NRCS recently announced the availability of up to \$70 million in funding for Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements, and these partnerships will be instrumental in expanding access to our Farm Bill conservation programs for underserved producers. We are also continuing to identify and eliminate barriers within our programs to expand access.

NRCS is also making progress towards accomplishing the Biden-Harris Administration's Justice40 initiative to have 40 percent of the overall benefits of Federal investments in covered programs supporting underserved communities, which is a key piece of NRCS's Justice40 plan for reducing barriers to program participation. Based on feedback from producers, communities, and organizations, NRCS updated its forms to streamline procedures and improve clarity, including applications, applying for multiple programs, and practice approval. NRCS's Act Now Policy also helps to streamline the application process, particularly for underserved producers, by providing an opportunity for States to identify ranking pools and establish a ranking threshold at or above which they can automatically pre-approve an application for funding and move to contract obligation quickly.

Another aspect of NRCS's plan was to develop a methodology for geographically targeting underserved communities. To that end, NRCS developed geospatial data layers for internal use that include multiple datasets addressing priorities for equity, climate change, and urban agriculture to guide programmatic decision-making at national, regional, and state levels. Additionally, each NRCS State Office has been directed to appoint and maintain an Outreach Coordinator in order to increase the agency's ability to provide localized, strategic outreach to communities that NRCS has not previously served, or which may not be visible at the national level.

To address concerns of Tribal Nations and tribal producers, NRCS has published policy on Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFAs) under EQIP and CSP. AFAs provide Tribal Nations and Alaska Native Corporations with additional flexibilities for funding, planning, and administration where existing processes created barriers to program participation. Additionally, NRCS is developing systems to assure that indigenous knowledge better informs NRCS standards and program opportunities.

Urban Agriculture

NRCS supports conservation everywhere, regardless of location or size of the agricultural operation. This includes urban agriculture and innovative forms of controlled environment agriculture, including hydroponics, aquaponics, and rooftop production. USDA views supporting these operations as an important part of engaging the next generation of agricultural producers and living up to USDA's commitment to equitably support all producers. As agricultural production methods evolve, NRCS is working to innovate its programs and policies within the current legislative bounds in order to best meet customer needs.

Examples of this innovation include the creation of over 50 new payment scenarios and interim practice standards, clarification on EQIP eligibility in small-scale and innovative settings, and NRCS staff training focused on the reduction of barriers to participation of urban and innovative producers in NRCS programs.

The Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP) hired a permanent director last year and now has 6 full-time staff and several detailees. OUAIP has awarded over \$55 million to date and has given awards in 45 states and Puerto Rico. In FY22, OUAIP awarded approximately \$44 million through its funding opportunities, Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grants and Composting and Food Waste Reduction cooperative agreements, as well as through the People's Garden Initiative, thanks to funding from the American Rescue Plan.

The Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (FAC) held its fifth public meeting on April 18th. The FAC is currently drafting recommendations for the Secretary on how USDA can better support urban and innovative producers.

Additionally, to further demonstrate USDA's commitment to serving these producers, NRCS and FSA have jointly committed to opening brick and mortar urban service centers in 17 cities throughout the United States. These service centers will offer urban and innovative producers the full suite of applicable USDA programs and services and bring our employees closer to this expanding customer base.

Conclusion

NRCS's accomplishments would not be possible without our more than 10,000 employees in every state and territory across the country. Agency employees work to connect with farmers, ranchers, forestland owners, tribes, and partners to implement our many programs and initiatives. I am honored to lead so many dedicated conservationists. I appreciate Congress's continued support for NRCS and our work to combat climate change, address drought, ensure equity, and support voluntary conservation on working lands. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony.