

Representative Abigail Spanberger, Chair  
Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee

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Farmer/Co-Owner Keenbell Farm

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

Testimony for Hearing on Title II Conservation Programs, Exploring Climate Smart Practices

Dear Madam Chair,

I am a third-generation farmer, co-owner of Keenbell Farm located in Hanover county, and resident of Virginia's First Congressional District. On our farm we utilize regenerative agriculture practices while we work to produce and market directly to the consumer quality grass-fed beef, pasture raised pork, chicken, turkey, eggs, and specialty non-GMO grains. Our mission is to improve the quality of life of our customers, community, environment, and ourselves by producing the highest quality foods and products using humane, sustainable, biologically sound practices. Our focus since inception is to promote a living, healthy soil; utilizing forages, livestock, and crops as the management tools to accomplish this goal.

My grandfather started the farm in 1951 and progressed from a laying hen operation into a farrow-finish hog operation, and then all beef cattle with finishing feedlot. This was all while growing conventional grains for area elevators. My father left the farm full time during the 80's due to the inability for the farm to support multiple families, but still worked nights and weekends to help out. My grandfather retired from farming in the late 90's and sold some adjacent tracks of land, all the livestock, most of the equipment, removed fencing infrastructure, and rented out the land to a local grain farmer. Growing up in the farm, I had always wanted to farm but was told "there is no money in farming and to go get an in-town job for stability". In 2006, I started to work and clean up the neglected remains of farm buildings and 2 acres not utilized by the grain farming tenant. I was also providing labor to a local farmer, who had a cow pass away leaving a week-old calf. He gave the calf to me and told me that "we can settle up if she makes it". Well she made it, and I started to do research for opportunities that would allow for profitable farming at a level in which my family's home place could provide. This research yielded a lack of local meat proteins available to local consumers, so I formulated a business plan to take my single heifer and expand over the next 10-year period. With my business plan in hand, and the primitive base farm operation started; my father and I sat down and formally started our partnership with the creation of our LLC in 2008. Since that time, we have grown and diversified to incorporate a multitude of livestock species and food grade grains for direct to consumer sales.

While growing and developing our farming operation, we have been fortunate to have developed relationships with our local Natural Resources Conservation Service office, Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District, Virginia Cooperative Extension agents, and USDA service centers. While working towards our overall mission statement and sharing our vision of healing the land utilizing innovative approaches to livestock and crop production. Our approach relies

heavily on the use of cover crops, particularly multi-species cover crops, no-tillage, and additionally incorporating livestock into this cover/cash crop rotation. Our local agency's recognition of our approach to environmental stewardship, made us aware of title II conservation programs that would fit our production model. We are dedicated to utilizing conservation programs regardless of whether we receive an award, if the practices are economically feasible. And if awarded, the offset in capital would be put toward other conservation practices that are not covered by these outlined conservation programs. We have been fortunate to participate in numerous Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQIP) in which we have implemented stream exclusion fencing, prescribed grazing systems, cover crop, nutrient management planning, livestock watering systems to name a few.

Environmental stewardship is a foundational value of our farm and one of our key factors when we evaluate management decisions in our operation. Being that our farm is in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, we made the decision to install exclusion fencing to keep livestock out of the lake and streams that are on the farm. The fencing was installed with twice the minimum buffer from water to provide additional filter support and stimulate wildlife refuge areas. As a part of our conservation efforts we practice intense rotational management of all livestock species we raise. Most are moved daily, but at a minimum every 3 days. This rotation allows for natural distribution of manure, preventing the buildup and potential runoff of nutrients. This rotational management in combination with exclusion from our lake and streams required the installation of over 12,000ft of underground water lines and over 40,000ft of fence line. We also utilize precision agriculture, with grid sampling and variable rate fertility application. In addition, we intensely utilize multi-species cover crops both to sustain a living cover in the traditional sense but also is a key component in our crop production cycle that has virtually eliminated the need for routine chemical applications. Our structured management of both livestock and cover crops has allowed for the almost doubling of soil organic matter, which reduces erosion and increases water/nutrient holding capacities, thus reducing runoff potential. Conversion of cropland formerly under a conventionally managed system was a hurdle to work through as we grew. Time and management have allowed for the stimulation of the soil biology and building of soil organic matter & health. This continues to be our focus both in currently managed land and as we take on new land during the expansion of our operation. While implementing this approach to livestock and crop production with the assistance of title II conservation programs, we have seen substantial benefits from the implementation of these practices. We have eliminated erosion, doubled our soils organic matter, reduced water runoff, increased our soil biology, increased our carbon sequestration and improved our forage/crop quality. We have confirmed these improvements with both anecdotal observation and imperial scientific data.

Although the benefits of title II conservation programs are great in number, the implementation of these programs could be improved. As with most programs reliant on budgetary allocations, there are many more dollars applied for than funding provisions. Focus needs to be directed to allow for greater access to these programs and assistance provided to ensure continuation of these conservation practices when funding is not available. As producers see the physical and financial benefits of conservation, they will be more prone to continuing previously awarded practices. Barriers to greater adoption of these programs and practices include: limited staffing at local NRCS service centers, limited access to NRCS offices,

excessive paperwork required for application, capital cost requirement upfront, and program requirements are too restrictive. For example, they do not account for environmental conditions which may eliminate eligibility for producers due to inability to comply with outlined timeframes, and the strict verbiage does not account for newer dynamic regenerative agriculture practices.

I have several recommendations that would assist in improving the implementation and adoption of conservation programs/practices. Support continued and increased funding allocation for title II conservation programs, with a directed focus of continued outreach post producer funding award to encourage the continuation of conservation practices. For example, after a program award providing the technical assistance to assist the producer in understanding both the environmental and financial benefits from the awarded program. This along with additional support to give confidence to the producers to continue conservation efforts beyond program award, once operational benefits can be identified. Conversion of the current NRCS brick and mortar paper application process, to a computer-based system. Understandable that some efforts have been placed with the pandemic to do so, but as a producer I continue to have to go in person to file crop reporting, CFAP application, and the like. If each farmer had a web portal with all of the farms associated to them, then could apply, file crop reporting, yield data, etc without the need for the infrastructure to house the current paper system. Provide NRCS agents the tools, technology, and flexibility to spend more time in the field with producers. Revise program restrictions to allow for upfront program payments to producers when awarded, currently many producers are discouraged to apply due to the financial burden having to spend the upfront capital costs to implement the program, in hopes for reimbursement at a later date. Lastly, allow for more flexibility within program guidelines to better reflect the changes in climate, environmental events, and modern innovative regenerative agriculture practices.

By working together through the implementation of conservation and regenerative agriculture practices we can heal the soil that feeds the plants, and in turn feeds all of us.

I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify.