

Testimony

on behalf of the

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

and the

Iowa Cattlemen's Association

with regard to

“A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Stakeholder Perspectives on Title II Conservation Programs”

submitted to the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

Abigail Spanberger, Chairman

submitted by

Shayne Wiese
Member

National Cattlemen's Beef Association and Iowa Cattlemen's Association

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**National Cattlemen's
Beef Association**

Good morning Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Shayne Wiese, and I'm honored to join you today. I am the fifth generation of a cattle operation in West Central Iowa that specializes in the production of high quality, productive Hereford bulls for commercial cow/calf producers. But beyond our production focus, our operation has a strong conservation history. Wiese & Sons are advocates for on-farm conservation and have utilized cover crops, CRP, water filtration buffers, and erosion reduction practices for decades. Wiese & Sons is a past winner of NCBA's Environmental Stewardship Award, which recognizes operations that go above and beyond to effectively manage not only their cattle, but their natural resources as well.

I am proud to represent the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and Iowa Cattlemen's Association today. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association is the nation's largest and oldest national trade association representing the U.S. beef cattle industry, with other 250,000 producers represented through both direct membership and 44 state affiliate associations. The Iowa Cattlemen's Association is an affiliate of NCBA, and represents nearly 8,000 producers and friends of the beef cattle industry through membership and its 97 county affiliate associations.

U.S. cattle producers own and manage considerably more land than any other segment of agriculture— or any other industry for that matter. Cattle producers graze cattle on approximately 666.4 million acres across the United States— nearly one-third of our nation's continental landmass. Additionally, acreage used to grow hay, feed grains, and food grains add millions more acres of land under cattlemen's stewardship and private ownership. Some of the biggest challenges and threats to our industry come from the loss or conversion of our natural resources. The livestock industry is threatened daily by urban encroachment, natural disasters, and government overreach that makes our stewardship harder – if not impossible. Since our livelihood is made on the land, through the utilization of our natural resources, being good stewards of the land not only makes good environmental sense; it is fundamental for our industry to remain strong. We strive to maximize the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of our operations, and it is through voluntary conservation programs that ranchers will continue to be a proud partner with the government to reach our environmental conservation goals.

Conservation programs are one of the most visible and consistently important portions of the Farm Bill for cattle producers across the country. Many cattle producers' only nexus to Farm Bill-related services occurs at their local NRCS or FSA office. Building and maintaining robust voluntary conservation resources must remain a top priority for USDA. The 2018 Farm Bill sent a strong signal to agricultural producers across the country that voluntary conservation is a top priority, we appreciate this committee's commitment to continually improving these vital programs. Implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill created opportunities for cattle producers across the country, but also new challenges. I'm excited to discuss those opportunities and challenges with you today.

Cattle producers pride themselves on being good stewards of our country's natural resources. Cattle producers employ various conservation practices, many of which we put in place by utilizing NRCS programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (or EQIP). EQIP is designed to assist producers in implementing conservation practices that will enhance the health of grazing lands, improving water quality, improving soil quality, and reducing soil erosion. One important feature of EQIP has been its focus on livestock operations, and we appreciated the 50 percent funding designation for livestock-related practices in the 2018 Farm Bill. Because crop production receives significant value from other working lands programs, like CSP, a livestock carveout for EQIP funding ensures that resources are equitably distributed among producers. Federal funds spent on conservation are a good investment in our country's natural resources and the sustainability of agriculture and wildlife, and it is vital to ensure that livestock producers have access to these valuable resources for grazing and feeding management.

While the intent of EQIP is to make conservation funding and technical assistance accessible to all producers, barriers to entry often disincentivize producers from utilizing NRCS programs. Recently, I applied to receive EQIP cost-share funding for a water infrastructure project on my operation. After months of waiting with no approval, I finally gave up and completed the project without assistance from USDA. I see many other opportunities on our ranch to improve the land and environment with EQIP funding but simply do not have the confidence in the process to apply again. We could improve upon soil-health-building grazing practices, provide more erosion control, and promote cleaner water sources. I would rather budget responsibly and pay for it ourselves to help the ranch be environmentally progressive than wait for assistance and lose

valuable time. I am not alone in this. Ranchers care about the environment and their livestock, and any improvement on the land is something we are unanimously proud of. By creating additional hurdles for producers that want to utilize these programs, the committee and USDA limit access to these programs while simultaneously limiting the government's ability to record our environmental improvements. I urge the committee to support initiatives in the Farm Bill that allow NRCS programs to support innovation and commonsense land management.

It is clear through my experience with NRCS and FSA that lack of funding for practice implementation is not an issue. Especially when it comes to EQIP, the 50 percent livestock carveout is effective in ensuring that necessary monies are available. The most significant challenge for producers who want to take advantage of working lands programs is the inefficiency in technical assistance availability and funding distribution that allow us to accomplish a project. While this hurdle was acknowledged by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, few of the policies focused on increasing functionality.

Flexibility is key to ranchers' utilization of conservation programs. Ensuring that producers have the freedom to effectively manage their land goes beyond EQIP, stretching to other conservation programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (or CRP). CRP has the potential to provide significant environmental benefit, but currently fails to maximize its value. Changes made in the 2018 Farm Bill limit our ability to effectively manage CRP acreage with grazing. Livestock graze mature, stagnate grasses and allow regrowth of green, carbon-capturing plants. Our ranch took some land out of CRP and transitioned it into our cattle rotational grazing system recently. We have seen improvements to all pastures due to more grazing options. We have successfully reduced the need for synthetic fertilizers near that land base and have seen less weed pressure with more green grass growth. If we allow more CRP grazing, we will promote more opportunity for beginning ranchers to graze animals responsibly and provide existing pastures more rest and recovery during drought years. This will be especially beneficial in areas where pasture is scarce and livestock production is rapidly dwindling like my home state of Iowa. Furthermore, mid-contract management within CRP includes carbon-emitting prescribed burns that are dangerous on drought years, spraying herbicides that terminate good and bad plant species, or tilling up the soil and reseeding which contradicts soil health improvements. Cattle and other forms of livestock

can be the sustainable solution to managing CRP without the negative impact on the ecosystem while also helping ranchers economically.

Congress and the Administration have made clear their interest in building a climate-smart economy, including the integration of climate-smart practices into the agricultural industry. Grazing is a valuable tool in maximizing carbon sequestration but is not a tool that we are able to use on CRP acreage. This policy not only limits our ability to effectively manage our land but contradicts the administration's climate-related priority. By allowing cattle to graze CRP acreage without a reduction in payment, we could greatly increase interest in CRP contracts, while simultaneously maximizing environmental value and economic benefit.

Voluntary conservation programs work because they are voluntary. Our operation has had success in using USDA conservation programs, but just because this system works for us does not mean it's right for everybody. Continuing to fund voluntary conservation programs, while keeping them voluntary, is critical to their continued success. A one-size fits all approach that accompanies top-down regulation does not work in the cattle industry. If these programs or practices were to become mandatory, the rules and regulations that farmers and ranchers would be subjected to would make it harder for them to utilize the unique conservation practices that help their individual operations thrive.

As policymakers consider the sustainability of the U.S. agricultural industry, environmental sustainability is only one leg of a three-legged stool. Cattle producers strive to balance environmental sustainability with economic viability and social consciousness – maintaining this balance is key to ensuring our long-term success. Economic prosperity, social awareness, and voluntary conservation go hand-in-hand and we are always looking for new, innovative conservation programs that will have tangible benefits for the environment and help to improve our ranching lands. USDA's voluntary conservation programs have been a great asset to cattle producers, and it is important that these programs are implemented in a practical, producer friendly, and voluntary manner for years to come to ensure that cattle producers will continue to have the ability to do what we do best – produce the world's safest, most nutritious, abundant, and affordable protein while operating in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Ranchers

across the country maintain open spaces, healthy rangelands, provide wildlife habitat and feed the world. Together we can sustain our country's natural resources and economic prosperity, ensuring the viability of our way of life for future generations. I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you have.