

Prepared Statement
By
David Bell, Executive Director
Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine

*Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill:
Conservation Programs*

**House Agriculture Subcommittee on
Conservation, Forestry and Energy**
April 26, 2012

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member Holden for holding this hearing on the conservation title of the Farm Bill. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the conservation priorities of the specialty crop industry. As we all are aware, sound conservation practices are of critical importance to the ability of farmers to succeed and continue to provide an abundant supply of healthy food, feed and fiber to America.

My name is David Bell and I serve as Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, which is devoted to the mission of assisting wild blueberry growers in developing sustainable practices and competing in a global food market. However, today I am joining you as a representative of the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance (SCFBA), a broad coalition of specialty crop interests nationwide. The Alliance, which represents close to 300 different commodities and has nearly 120 members, was formed prior to the 2008 Farm Bill. As you

know, with the support of members of this Committee, that Farm Bill contained a solid investment in programs that are important to enhancing the competitiveness of U.S. specialty crop farmers. We are grateful for that focus on our sector and look forward to working with you on ways to ensure that our industry is able to continue providing Americans with access to an abundant, affordable supply of nutritious fruits and vegetables and other specialty crops.

Today, United States consumers have affordable access to the most abundant and diverse food supply in the world. However, aside from market diversity and competitive prices, consumers demand that food be held to very high quality standards. Likewise, consumers want an agricultural production system that not only produces abundant, affordable, safe food and fiber, but also conserves and enhances the natural resource base and protects the environment.

Unfortunately for producers, investments in natural resource management and conservation are rarely recouped in the global market place. The short-term economic value for the farmer does not compare to the long term ecological and fiscal benefits for the public and for future generations. The increased benefits for the public come in the form of a more stable and productive farm economy and an improved environment. Protecting the environment and productivity today will mean less cost for U.S. consumers in the future and will therefore assist in ensuring sustainability in the years ahead.

Current conservation programs administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) assists specialty crop farmers in meeting the multiple challenges of addressing sustainability, increasing environmental regulations while meeting U.S. consumer demand for abundant, safe, and reasonably priced food all within the competitive pressures of a global economy. Because of these factors, access to conservation programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) are critically important to specialty crop producers and U.S. citizens. Farmers' natural affinity for the environment, coupled with technical assistance and the resources necessary to implement conservation practices, results in long term stability for the nation's food supply. Our specific concerns and recommendations to strengthen current conservation programs include:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Issue: For a variety of reasons, EQIP Conservation Practices are not marketed to specialty crop producers equitably across the country.

Policy Recommendation: Since specialty crop producers account for approximately 25% of the production value of U.S. agriculture, Congress should apportion EQIP funding accordingly. This would set the expectation for NRCS to meet specialty crop producer conservation needs across the U.S.

Issue: Specialty crop producers need irrigation water when it is dry to maintain quality standards of their crops. In many areas of the country natural water bodies have limited ability to supply irrigation water during dry periods and maintain necessary fish habitat. NRCS EQIP sustainable water use practices and programs should be available to specialty crop producers needing assistance to meet state or Federal environmental or habitat objectives.

Policy Recommendation: As part of EQIP, prioritize the sustainable use of ground and surface water for irrigation as a separate national priority, rather than being included within the non-point pollution category.

Issue: In many specialty crop growing areas, air quality concerns and regulations related to agriculture are increasing.

Policy Recommendation: Congress should create an air quality program under EQIP with dedicated funding.

Issue: Pest management challenges for specialty crop producers are becoming more acute and complicated due to invasive species, phase out of older effective control materials, new research on crop/pest interactions and knowledge based management systems such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

Policy Recommendation: Time limitations on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) cost share practices should be eliminated as pest populations are dynamic over time and innovative IPM programs are continually evolving to address ever changing pest complexes.

Policy Recommendation: NRCS should work with land grant universities and other entities to develop model programs for using EQIP funds to enhance pesticide stewardship.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Issue: Increasingly, specialty crop producers need to meet state and/or Federal habitat requirements as mandated by laws such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Often navigating the complex rules associated with these laws requires specific understanding and skills farmers do not have. Models have been developed whereby nongovernmental organizations assist private landowners such as farmers in meeting “consultation requirements” with agencies by serving as the landowner agent. This is an efficient approach as each farmer does not have to become an expert in the implementation of ESA policies. However, in the 2008 Farm Bill a limitation on an entity accessing WHIP funding precludes an agent working with many landowners in a single year.

Policy Recommendation: Congress should direct the WHIP program to allow for organizations to work with multiple private landowners within a year.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Issue: regarding the Conservation Stewardship Program, we believe that this program is based on a sound premise, incentivizing producers who adopt or maintain a wide range of conservation management practices aimed at resources such as soil, water and wildlife management. As you know, the CSP program addresses seven resource concerns: soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plant resources and animal resources.

Policy recommendation: In order to better tailor the program to local and regional needs and therefore, make it more useful for specialty crop producers, we suggest adding pest management as a priority area that can qualify for participation in the CSP program. This would add a resource concern to CSP’s list of resource concerns. I know the members of this Committee are aware that states can focus on three to five priority concerns.

Closing

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Holden, these are the highlights of the results of the Farm Bill review which the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance (SCFBA) undertook over the course of the 18 months to assess the various titles of the Farm Bill to determine their impact on the specialty crop industry. As part of that review, I served as chair of the SCFBA working group that examined the conservation title. As you are well aware, the Senate Agriculture Committee has released their version of the Farm Bill and we appreciate the work of Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts. We pledge to continue working with them and you on these policy recommendations to ensure that specialty crop producers can participate in meaningful and effective ways to conserve and maintain resources needed for environmentally sound agriculture production. Thank you again for this opportunity and I'll be happy to answer questions.

DAVID K. BELL

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine (WBC); 1995-present.

Responsible for all programs, projects, and administration of the WBC which supports Maine's Wild Blueberry 575 growers and processors by fostering research and development, promotion, and addressing public policy issues.

<http://www.wildblueberries.com/>

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Chair, Board of Agriculture; 2009-present, 2003-2004, - Statewide agricultural research and development board established by the Maine Legislature. Also served 3 years as Vice-Chair.

Director on Agricultural Council of Maine since 1995, a council of statewide agricultural organizations. President 1999-2000, and 2 years as Vice-President.

Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance – Served in various capacities on a large national coalition working on 2008 and 2012 US Farm Bill policies for specialty crop producers. Co-Chair of the Conservation Working Group for the 2012 Farm Bill.

National Berry Crop Initiative – one of the founding steering group members and Board member. NBCI collectively works on policy issues for US berry growers such as the “Farm Bill”. It also sponsors the Berry Health Benefits Symposium bi-annually.

<http://www.berryhealth.org/> Served as President 2009-2010.

Maine Agriculture in the Classroom Council member since 2007, currently Chair.

PRIOR WORK EXPERIENCE

Resource Conservation Services, Inc. /Browning Ferris Inc. 1986-1995: Worked in various project management, management and business development positions with a Maine Inc. 500 company purchased by a Fortune 500 company. RCS/BFI developed and implemented innovative, large scale, organic waste recycling projects for businesses and municipalities many of which occurred on farms.

USDA, Soil Conservation Service, 1983-1986; Conservation planning, design, and construction verification.

EDUCATION

MS University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1983

BS University of Maine, 1980

WORK CONTACT

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**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form**

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2008.

Name: David K. Bell

Organization you represent (if any): Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: X



Signature: _____

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.