

Chairman Peterson and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today to share the California ranchers' perspective on U.S. agricultural policy as preparations begin for the 2012 Farm Bill. My name is Kevin Kester, and I am a rancher from Parkfield, California and First Vice President of the California Cattlemen's Association.

I'd like to welcome all of the members to California, which – in addition to the wide array of crop production you'll hear about from other panelists – is home to 34 million acres of rangeland. This rangeland, in turn, provides wildlife habitat, is home to a diversity of common and threatened species, produces wholesome, nutritious food and economically supports family businesses, family traditions and many communities. These vast open landscapes are under threat to conversion to development and other land uses, invasive species and the whims of the weather.

The 2012 Farm Bill must adequately address the economical and environmental challenges facing these rangelands. Conservation continues to provide the greatest opportunity for partnership with Congress that will mean the most for ranchers and make wise use of federal dollars to address the issues that impact them as well as public needs for conservation and environmental stewardship. As such, it should not be sacrificed for other priorities in the bill.

To this end, California ranchers support further reform to the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill to make programs more attractive and functional for producers on the ground. In addition, authorization levels for programs that are currently working need to be increased to meet the needs of ranchers in the state. In California alone, demand for conservation funding far exceeds the money available. For example, more than 6,000 California farmers and ranchers applied for EQIP funds, but only 1,700 projects were accepted to receive cost-share funding to address pressing natural resources issues and improve a producer's economic viability.

Ranchers like me also recognize the value in flexibility and targeting funding to address specific conservation, species and on-ranch concerns. A key example is the recent initiative undertaken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to cooperatively work with ranchers to improve habitat, and ultimately help mitigate the need for listing of the Sage Grouse, currently a species of concern, under the Endangered Species Act. This model of joint efforts by which individual and regional Farm Bill investment can help solve problems that address complex issues that may affect the viability of and regulatory burden for a broad scope of farmers and ranchers should continue to be considered.

Along the same lines, the next Farm Bill should facilitate additional coordination between USDA and other federal agencies, including the Department of Interior. It is important that USDA have explicit authority to share technical knowledge with other entities regulating working farms and ranches, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, to help ranchers navigate regulatory hurdles. Additionally, the 2012 Farm Bill needs to ensure landowners who improve the natural resources on their land are not later punished with additional regulatory oversight because of their proactive management practices today.

Positive changes to a number of conservation programs were made in the 2008 Farm Bill – including the Grasslands Reserve Program and Agricultural Water Enhancement Program – and, in developing and executing programs for the next bill, those program changes and funding authorizations need to be retained. Further progress can be made in the 2012 bill by working toward meeting state and regional priorities by providing additional flexibility to work with landowners and other partners, including states and NGOs who can be trusted partners in advancing federal priorities.

The 2012 Farm Bill also should more explicitly recognize the economic value provided by ranchers, along with the environmental benefits of using managed grazing as a tool to meet federal priorities. Significant

peer-reviewed research has been conducted illustrating that a number of threatened and endangered species not only coexist with grazing, but benefit from managed grazing, making the rancher's grazing efforts a value that provides tangible, financial public benefit.

An overall funding protocol for the next Farm Bill should be based on key criteria that focus efforts to areas of need and threat, that recognize state size, agricultural production, number of federally listed species and other resource challenges. This need to consider unique situations – such as that existing on California's rangeland – is particularly true when it comes to conservation easement programs that must account for potential for conversion to other land uses, land value and number of acres included in high quality acquisition proposals during program funding allocation to states.

California has returned to a normal rainfall pattern this year, after three or more years of drought in most parts of the state. During the past two years, many ranchers have been able to take advantage of the permanently authorized disaster programs. While development of these new programs was slower than any of us would have preferred, it appears that this new direction has improved delivery to better meet the future needs of ranchers who are highly subject to changes in weather as long as the centralized monitoring of drought continues to recognize changing conditions in each part of the country.

I'd also like to note a couple of concerns about issues that ranchers feel should not be addressed in the Farm Bill process. First, we support agricultural policy based on a free, private enterprise, competitive market system, including a producer's ability to market cattle however, whenever, and to whomever and so are concerned about inclusion in the Farm Bill of any language impacting market structure or removing options for ranchers to sell livestock. Additionally, because animal agriculture is based on humane care for cattle, horses, and other livestock, it is also imperative that the Livestock Title of the Farm Bill not become a platform for extremist organizations to push their anti-meat/anti-agriculture agendas.

In conclusion, California ranchers were pleased with a number of program changes under the 2008 Farm Bill and believe that in working with this committee and a wide range of interested stakeholders that additional significant steps forward are possible. Working for program improvements that meet individual and broader resource and regulatory concerns for ranchers, the need to increase funding to meet these priorities and to again review how funding is allocated to states are issues of critical importance.

On behalf of California ranchers, thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We look forward to working with each of you on the development of the 2012 Farm Bill.