



**Testimony of Mr. Garry Niemeyer
President, National Corn Growers Association**

**House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Energy, and Forestry
Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill: Conservation Programs**

April 26, 2012

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Holden and members of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Energy, and Forestry, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) regarding farm bill conservation programs. My name is Garry Niemeyer, and I currently serve as President of NCGA. My wife Cheryl and I have been farming in Auburn, Illinois for the past 41 years where we raise corn and soybeans.

The National Corn Growers Association represents more than 37,000 corn farmers from 48 states. NCGA also represents more than 300,000 corn growers who contribute to check off programs and 27 affiliated state corn organizations across the nation for the purpose of creating new opportunities and markets for corn growers.

I am also pleased to report that my testimony today has the full support of the American Farm Bureau Federation, American Soybean Association, National Association of Wheat Growers, National Cotton Council, National Farmers Union, and USA Rice Federation. This broad consensus amongst farm groups is a significant achievement and is the result of nearly a year of detailed discussions about how to structure conservation programs that deliver environmental benefits while also improving productivity and reducing costs on the farm.

As this committee and the Congress consider legislation to authorize a new farm bill, American farmers are preparing to take on an even greater role in meeting the growing demands of world consumers. The harsh reality is that billions of people in the world today remain hungry and the numbers are rising, a trend the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations reports will continue for another 30 years. The FAO says this translates into needing to increase agricultural production by 70 percent over this period. Others place it at 100 percent. Many people cite these figures and discuss how important it

is that we reach these goals, although very few are taking a critical and comprehensive look at our policy decisions today in light of this objective. However, we are confident that with the right mix of policies, U.S. agriculture will help the world to meet these growing demands in a sustainable way, while at the same time remaining a bright spot in our nation's economy and contributing to its recovery.

Our confidence comes from agriculture's ability, led by advances here in the U.S., to generate and adopt technological innovations that increase productivity and efficiency. Seed technologies, for example, along with modern production and conservation practices have allowed us to use far fewer resources while substantially increasing productivity. We have become more sustainable, even while we help meet the pressing need for an expanding food supply. In fact, the average bushels per acre of corn increased from 114 in 1995 to 153 in 2010, a productivity increase greater than 30 percent. These remarkable numbers and the promise of new production technologies on the horizon translate into U.S. farmers' ability to meet all our needs for food, feed, fuel and fiber.

It is important to acknowledge that farm bill conservation programs have had significant positive impacts over the past several decades, which have led to lasting environmental improvements on agricultural lands. The Field to Market initiative's 2009 report *Environmental Resource Indicators for Measuring Outcomes of On-Farm Agricultural Production in the United States* shows positive trends for all major commodities in the U.S. A combination of technology adoption, improved management practices, and voluntary conservation programs have resulted in dramatic conservation benefits in U.S. corn production. Over a 20 year period from 1987 – 2007, soil erosion per bushel of corn decreased 69 percent, energy use per bushel of corn decreased 37 percent, irrigation water per bushel of corn decreased 27 percent, greenhouse gas emissions per bushel of corn decreased 30 percent, and land use per bushel of corn decreased 37 percent.

In light of the extremely difficult fiscal and economic conditions that our nation faces today, our groups recognize the monumental task before this committee to advance a new farm bill that addresses a broad range of nutrition and agriculture concerns across the country. Our growers also understand they must be part of the solution to address our nation's budget deficits and are prepared to accept spending reductions in farm programs. However, the size and scope of these cuts must not jeopardize important program functions. Fortunately, we believe there are opportunities in the conservation title to consolidate or eliminate duplicative programs in order to achieve savings, while also working more effectively for producers.

NCGA and the aforementioned agricultural organizations have expressed support for the Title II framework in the 2012 Farm Bill that the Senate and House Agriculture Committees began developing last fall, which consolidates 23 conservation programs into 13 while maintaining the same tools that were available to farmers in the past. Our growers are seeking simplification, flexibility, and consolidation in these programs, and we believe these goals are achieved in the Senate Agriculture Committee's recent draft language.

As regulatory pressures on agricultural producers continue to increase, working lands programs have become essential to achieving environmental goals. The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) remains a popular program that delivers effective conservation dollars to assist landowners who face natural resource challenges on their land. Between 2009 and 2011, EQIP helped farmers and ranchers implement conservation measures on more than 38 million acres. Above all, EQIP should preserve the full flexibility needed to adjust the program over time to focus on evolving issues and allow improvements to program features based on national, state and local needs. We support the continuation of a 60 percent carve-out for livestock producers, as well as the proposal to consolidate the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) into EQIP with a 5 percent funding allocation.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) was modified and expanded in the 2008 farm bill, which has allowed a greater number of producers to participate in recent years. It is now one of the largest USDA conservation programs, with nearly 38 million acres enrolled from 2009 – 2011. CSP prioritizes more complex management efforts, such as advanced nutrient management, by offering higher payments. The National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) should be given greater flexibility in determining the potential outcome of these practices for farmers wishing to enroll in the program.

We support the creation of a consolidated easement program to encompass the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP). The proposed changes would establish a more secure, longer term funding source for these important programs rather than authorizing for the duration of only one farm bill at a time.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the largest and one of the most important USDA conservation programs, providing many benefits including wildlife habitat, water quality improvements, and outdoor recreation. Considering current budget constraints, our groups have been supportive of gradually decreasing the CRP cap to 25 million acres to achieve savings from Title II. However, environmentally sensitive or fragile lands should be the

program's priority, with the focus on targeted enrollment and reenrollment of field borders and filter and buffer strips. As acreage leaves the CRP, we believe it is important that sound conservation practices be adopted for those exiting acres with an opportunity for landowners to enroll them in working lands programs. We also support conservation cost-share work to be undertaken in the final year of a CRP contract, as well as more flexibility for haying and grazing options on CRP land.

Our groups support the creation of a Regional Conservation Partnership Program by consolidating the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative (CBWI), and Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). This will allow USDA to leverage state, local, and non-governmental organization funds to address targeted conservation priorities.

The demand for technical assistance continues to increase, yet funding for technical assistance has been relatively flat over the years. We recommend that Congress provides adequate funding and training for NRCS field staff to help address on-farm conservation challenges. We encourage the committee to look at a long-term view of budgeting for technical assistance that balances national priorities with local needs. In addition, the consolidation of programs should result in the streamlining of the application processes to minimize paperwork and ease implementation.

In certain regions of the country, weather patterns in recent years have resulted in excess water and an increased desire to install drainage management on fields. Farmers have requested certified wetlands determinations from NRCS at a record pace, and currently, there is a backlog of 13,000 requests over four states (North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa). NRCS is working to accelerate the process while also bringing more consistency to how the determinations are made and ensuring mitigation options. Congress should provide resources to ensure the backlog is dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

One of the most important steps USDA took in the past decade was the establishment of the Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) in 2003 to develop a scientific understanding and method for estimating the environmental effects of conservation practices on agricultural landscapes at national, regional, and watershed scales. In the past two years, CEAP assessments have been completed for the Upper Mississippi River Basin, Chesapeake Bay Region, Great Lakes Region, and Ohio-Tennessee Basin. Using the survey work conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), CEAP is a highly efficient and cost effective way to demonstrate the outcomes of the conservation practices

used by farmers and ranchers. CEAP also enhances NRCS's ability to ensure that farmers and ranchers are focusing on top resource challenges. Without the NASS-supplied survey data, CEAP would not be able to provide its statistically valid and science-based estimates of agriculture's conservation accomplishments and the associated benefits for natural resources and the environment. This committee should ensure that CEAP and the underlying NASS survey collection receives continued funding into the future.

Farmers are exceptional stewards of the environment because our livelihoods depend on preserving land and water resources. We are committed to leaving our environment in better shape than we found it so resources can be passed on to the next generation to farm. Most producers throughout America view protecting agricultural land as more than a worthwhile goal. It is a lifelong commitment. Voluntary conservation programs developed over the past 30 years help farmers and ranchers play a major role in improving our environment while also expanding their sources of income and keeping them on the land. We hope this committee will choose to continue to invest in these programs through a robust and efficient conservation title in the new farm bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of NCGA and a number of other agricultural organizations. We are hopeful that Congress can act swiftly in the coming weeks and months to pass the farm bill before the end of 2012.