



REPUBLICAN LEADER GLENN 'GT' THOMPSON

SUSTAINS Act

*Sponsoring USDA Sustainability Targets in Agriculture to
Incentivize Natural Solutions*

Sponsored by Glenn 'GT' Thompson (PA-15)

SUMMARY: The legislation provides an opportunity for the private sector to partner with USDA to engage farmers and ranchers in supporting conservation initiatives, including to expand land use practices to sequester carbon, improve wildlife habitat, protect sources of drinking water, and address other natural resource priorities. Key provisions include the ability for USDA to match private sector investments and for the contributor to work with USDA to decide which natural resource concerns they want to address.

BACKGROUND: The legislation seeks to address two issues: 1) demand for conservation programs far outweighs the funding available and, 2) it gives the private sector an opportunity to help meet their public climate change commitments by investing in proven, scientifically backed conservation programs offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Total annual mandatory budget authority for conservation programs has grown from a total of \$3.9 billion in FY 2008 to over \$6.7 billion in FY 2019. The 2018 Farm Bill is arguably the greenest farm bill to date, however, the demands for conservation funding and technical assistance still outpaces the current resources. For example, in FY20 NRCS was only able to fund 28% of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts, leaving nearly 90,000 applications unfunded.

Corporations and small businesses want to market to their customers' desire to buy sustainably grown food and fiber. Many large corporations have made public commitments to lower their carbon footprint within their supply chain, but are struggling to find the best way to achieve those goals.

Private-sector partnerships with USDA will increase farmers conservation of natural resources and help meet commitments for agriculture sustainability.

SPECIFICALLY, THE SUSTAINS ACT...

- Authorizes the "Contributions for Private-Sector Partnership," a USDA account that allows for private sector donations.
- Incentivizes private funding by awarding sponsorship of targeted conservation initiatives, including expanded land use practices to sequester carbon, improve wildlife habitat, protect sources of drinking water, and address other natural resource priorities.
- Allows USDA to administer conservation initiatives with current scientific practice standards, proven conservation programs and practices, and trusting relationships with farmers.
- Authorizes funds for USDA to match certain donations.

SUSTAINS Act: Sponsoring USDA Sustainability Targets in Agriculture to Incentivize Natural Solutions Act of 2021

Short Summary: This legislation encourages private sector funding of USDA conservation initiatives. The bill authorizes specific accounts at USDA that allow for private sector donations and incentivizes private funding by awarding sponsorship of targeted conservation initiatives. The bill also allows USDA to administer the conservation initiatives with current scientific practice standards, proven conservation programs, and trusting relationships with farmers.

Section-by-Section

Section 1. Short Title

The Sponsoring USDA Sustainability Targets in Agriculture to Incentivize Natural Solutions Act of 2021, or the “SUSTAINS Act.”

Section 2. Acceptance and Use of Contributions for Public-Private Partnerships

Section 2 amends the contribution authority under section 1241 of the Food Security Act of 1985 to expand upon the authority in order to create public-private partnerships. The section gives the Secretary, acting through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the authority to establish subaccounts under each covered program to accept contributions of non-Federal funds. The contributions would be for the purposes of projects to address changing climate, carbon sequestration, and improving habitat and drinking water resources.

The new authority allows for the Secretary to match contributed funds. The section further allows for a contributing entity to designate the covered program and specify the geographic area for intended use. It also establishes a procedure by which an entity making a significant contribution may identify the natural resource concern that will be address and have a name or brand associated with a project carried out with the use of the contributed funds.

The section also requires the Secretary to give priority to socially disadvantaged famers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, and beginning farmers and ranchers. It further requires a producer who receives funds contributed by a private entity to negotiate with the entity if selling benefits in environmental markets.

The section allows the Secretary to change rules associated with easement programs if the change would help address climate change.