

Testimony of

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Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry**

**Hearing regarding Implementing the Agricultural Act of 2014: Conservation
Programs**

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Introduction

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Lujan Grisham, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing on the implementation of the conservation title of the Agricultural Act of 2014. I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of the USA Rice Federation.

My name is Buddy Allen. I grow rice, cotton, soybeans and corn in Tunica, Mississippi. In addition to my row crops, I provide local ground and aerial custom application services and I am a partner in Miss Cal Orchards, a California-based almond farm. Because of the diversity of my business portfolio I believe I'm able to offer a unique perspective on the agriculture industry.

I am also a member of the Governor's Sustainable Water Task Force; Director for the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts; Chairman of the Tunica Soil and Water Conservation District; Member of the Mississippi Rice Council; and Member of the Conservation Committee of the USA Rice Federation. If you cannot tell already, agricultural conservation is more than business; it is my passion.

Conservation in the Agricultural Act of 2014

From a farmer's standpoint, I cannot thank the Agriculture Committee and the rest of Congress enough for the countless hours of work you and your staff put into the Agricultural Act of 2014 (farm bill). This critical, bipartisan legislation provides the backbone giving farmers the certainty and tools to stay in business during tough times and incentivizes them to invest in valuable conservation practices on their land. The farm bill has the ability to directly affect my bottom line so the policies and programs being debated every five years are of great interest to me and the livelihood of my operation.

It was also good to see that Congress, particularly this Committee understands the value of investing in the future of our business through promotion of voluntary, incentive-based agricultural working land conservation. Working land programs not only address resource concerns, they increase productivity yielding sustainability by making cropland more diverse and efficient. The consolidation and streamlining of the conservation title will make these programs more efficient and easier to use for farmers and ranchers.

Rice Stewardship Partnership

In February 2012, the USA Rice Federation (USA Rice) and Ducks Unlimited (DU) forged a model of collaboration between a farm group and a conservation organization - the Rice Stewardship Partnership. This Partnership has been working tirelessly to bring about meaningful and long-term improvements to three of the nation's critical natural and economic resources: working ricelands, water, and waterfowl. To achieve these objectives, we have and will continue to engage in public policy making, conservation programs, communications strategies, and strategic research and land management efforts that advance these resources.

This unlikely partnership between our organizations should be labeled as “historic” to say the least. The relationship between rice farmers and duck hunters and conservationists is symbiotic and has been in the works long before the Partnership was established. I’d even go as far as to say that it could be used as the model going forward. While both organizations have separate missions and methods we have managed to collaborate and find a large amount of common ground and develop goals for our partnership.

Sustaining the Future of Rice Project

One of the programs new to the last farm bill was the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This program consolidated and streamlined a number of regional programs into one comprehensive program. RCPP uses a unique and innovative approach to investing in natural resource conservation. Key to the program is leveraging federal funds with private, state and local assets. It empowers partnerships to design solutions and deliver specific measurable results. These unique partnerships draw on local knowledge and resources; and this locally-led approach is critical to the effectiveness of the program. RCPP offers the use of existing conservation programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help reach a specified goal and helps to target critical conservation areas where work is most needed.

The Partnership submitted an RCPP proposal which was accepted during the Fiscal Year 2014/2015 funding cycle entitled “Sustaining the Future of Rice.” This project is a natural fit for our organizations to pursue

and offers rice producers from every major rice-growing county in each of the six rice-growing states the assistance needed to address water quantity, water quality and wildlife habitat on their farms. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is providing \$10 million in funding to the project leveraged by \$6.8 million of cash and in-kind contributions from private sector partners to utilize EQIP and CSP on rice farms. Several conservation practices from each of the two

programs that are geared toward rice production will be offered (i.e.

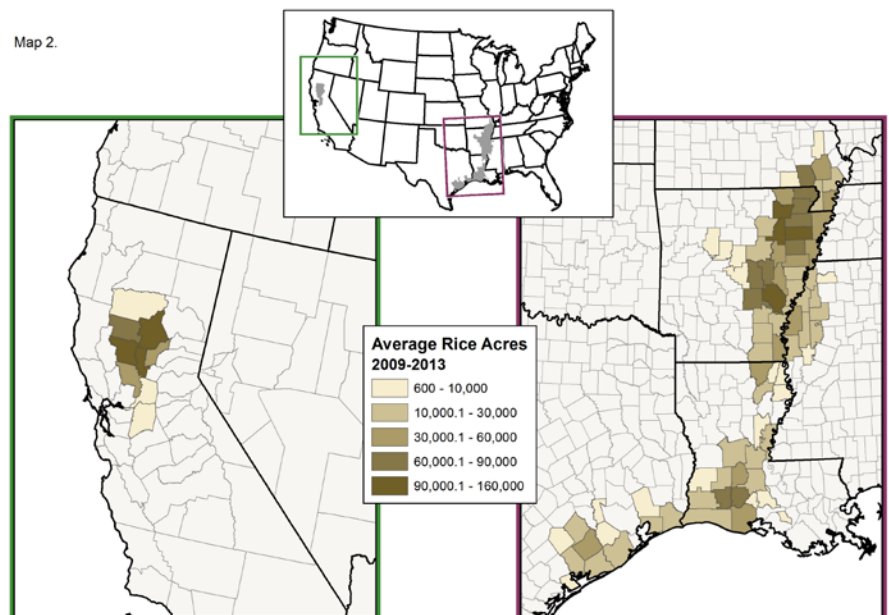


Figure 1: Illustrates the key location of rice production in correlation to the Mississippi River Basin (where 44% of the US freshwater sources drain) and the regions serve as major waterfowl flyways. This relationship further demonstrates the need for a strong relationship between rice farmers and waterfowl conservationists.

drainage water management, irrigation land leveling, irrigation reservoir construction, wetland wildlife management, etc.). One thing that is nice about the flexibility built into RCPP is the ability to tailor programs such as EQIP and CSP which as “stand alone” programs are not necessarily geared towards rice production. Thanks to this new program, we have been able to tailor these effective programs to fit the unique needs of the rice farmer and go the extra mile. As of now, each state is set to receive a minimum of \$1 million in funding from the NRCS contribution along with private contributions from partners and each will operate similarly to the others with tweaks depending on local conditions.

The project attracted over 40 collaborating partners from every sector, from the field to the market and we have estimated that up to 63,000 acres throughout the six states will benefit from our project. This effort represents the first ever of its kind – totally focused on rice farmers and what works best on rice-producing lands and we are lucky to have such a willing group of farmers to help make this a success.

RCPP Implementation Status

The NRCS staff has worked tirelessly to ensure that this program has been implemented as smoothly as possible. The folks writing the Announcement for Program Funding for RCPP stayed very true to the intent of what Congress authorized in the statute and were able to maintain the flexibility of the language throughout the application process. USA Rice and DU have had a very positive experience during the negotiating process but because our final contract with NRCS has been fairly complex we have just recently finalized our agreement.

While specific dates may vary from state to state, sign-ups for EQIP are expected to begin this summer and run through early fall. After the sign-up ends, applications will be ranked and contracts awarded. After the contracts are set, on-farm work will start shortly thereafter. In order to ensure project funds go to rice growers, NRCS, USA Rice Federation and Ducks Unlimited are developing screening and ranking criteria targeted to rice lands.

While EQIP will be the first out of the gate, the CSP won't be far behind. Work is underway to develop a specific package of enhancements for rice lands and it is expected that the sign-up will occur early in 2016. USA Rice Federation, DU, NRCS, and partners will notify rice producers of the specific dates when the sign-ups start in their state. Interested rice growers will sign-up in local NRCS offices like normal and just inform NRCS that the application falls under the Sustaining the Future of Rice RCPP project. The RCPP funds are in addition to regular EQIP and CSP and other funding may be available to growers as well.

Now that the Announcement for Program Funding has been published for the Fiscal Year 2016 funding cycle, the Partnership is looking again to see how else we are able to work together to increase our effectiveness. It is exciting to see the projects we are working on materialize and we are looking forward to using this project as a stepping stone for continuing our work together in the future.

Conclusion

As an industry we've put years of work into finding new ways to reduce erosion, reduce water usage and address a number of other critical conservation priorities. For those unfamiliar with rice production, rice fields are flooded during the growing season to provide water that the plants need and to help control weeds. Because of the unique methods for farming rice compared to other commodity crops, sensitivity of water quantity/quality and soil stability are particularly essential to maintain operations. That being said, the RCPP is a natural fit for our industry to further augment our already impressive conservation platform.

We are looking forward to bringing the USA Rice/DU project to fruition over the next couple of years and showing the success that can be achieved through unlikely partnerships. We anticipate that NRCS will continue to be supportive along the way from the Chief to the field staff on the ground helping to implement the EQIP and CSP practices.

I thank this Subcommittee for holding this important hearing to assess the implementation process of the farm bill. And I appreciate as a farmer, a conservationist and on behalf of the USA Rice Federation the work you have done to ensure that farmers have the tools they need to implement conservation practices on the landscape and feed our growing population. While conservation may not necessarily be a controversial issue, it is a vital part of our industry and a necessary investment if we want to leave our land and operations as a legacy for our children.

Again, thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to offer my testimony this morning. I look forward to working with you and your staff and will be happy to respond to any questions you might have.