

Testimony

on behalf of the

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

with regards to

“The Next Farm Bill: Conservation Policy”

submitted to the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

Frank Lucas, Chairman

submitted by

Chuck Coffey
Double C Cattle Company
Member
National Cattlemen's Beef Association

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**National Cattlemen's
Beef Association**

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Good morning, my name is Chuck Coffey. Ruth, my wife of 30 years, and I operate a fifth-generation cattle ranch in south central Oklahoma where we own and operate over 30,000 acres of grassland. I am a graduate of Texas A&M where I studied Rangeland Ecology, and proudly have three children who have graduated from Oklahoma State University with degrees in Agribusiness and Natural Resource Management and are now the sixth generation on the Ranch. I taught agriculture at Murray State College, chairing the department, until I joined the Noble Foundation as a Pasture and Range Consultant in 1993. I am a member of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and am testifying before you today representing the many cattle producers and family ranchers, who each have a stake in protecting the environment. Thank you Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Fudge for allowing me to testify today on voluntary conservation programs.

U.S. cattlemen own and manage considerably more land than any other segment of agriculture— or any other industry for that matter. Cattlemen graze cattle on approximately 666.4 million acres of the approximately 2 billion acres of the U.S. land mass. In addition, the acreage used to grow hay, feed grains, and food grains add millions more acres of land under cattlemen's stewardship and private ownership. Some of the biggest challenges and threats to our industry come from the loss of our natural resources. The livestock industry is threatened daily by urban encroachment, natural disasters, and government overreach. Since our livelihood is made on the land, through the utilization of our natural resources, being good stewards of the land not only makes good environmental sense; it is fundamental for our industry to remain strong. We strive to operate as environmentally friendly as possible, and it is through voluntary conservation programs that ranchers will continue to be a proud partner with the government to reach our environmental conservation goals.

I represent the fifth-generation of ranching within the Coffey family. As I stated earlier, we ranch on 30,000 acres of grassland spanning across Carter and Murray counties in south central Oklahoma. Our goals are very similar to many other ranchers around the country, be profitable, and leave the land in better condition for future generations. The primary way we are able to preserve the land, as well as our ranching heritage for future generations, is through innovative practices, diversification and voluntary conservation programs.

Ranching in south central Oklahoma comes with its fair share of difficult times, as it does for my fellow cattlemen across the country. However, we have been able to keep our operation sustainable during those hard times, by utilizing voluntary conservation programs and applying management practices that enhance the operation. Drought is a common problem in south central Oklahoma, and it requires adaptability and forward thinking to maintain the resources on the ranch. In 2011 and 2012, we were challenged with one of the worst droughts in a generation. Water was virtually nonexistent and wildfires were prevalent. But we were able to survive, and remain sustainable, because of our grazing management practices and the opportunity to work with the NRCS's voluntary conservation programs to improve our ranch and make our grasslands more resilient. Also key to our survival has been the voluntary insurance programs such as FSA's NAPP Insurance and the private insurance known as PRF-RI insurance provided through USDA-RMA. These voluntary programs were a great benefit to many producers who, quite frankly, would not have survived without them.

One way we made our ranch drought-resistant is by installing solar wells and above ground water storage systems, and even piping water to some critical areas. This ensures our livestock and wildlife have adequate and reliable water throughout the year.

We graze our cattle with a carefully managed grazing plan that we developed with the assistance of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the National Grazing Lands Coalition (NGLC) utilizing their conservation planning capabilities. We have learned that when you utilize a flexible, planned grazing program at a conservative stocking rate, leave grass cover after you move out of a pasture, and give the rangeland adequate recovery time, you will grow more grass with limited rainfall. Through cooperation with state and local agencies, in addition to the development of innovative grazing strategies, we have increased perennial grasses on the ranch, improved ground cover, greatly reduced soil erosion due to both wind and water, reduced labor inputs, and ensured adequate forage for livestock and wildlife populations on the ranch. Our grazing strategy is a big part of why we've been able to keep the ranch resilient and sustainable. Furthermore, by implementing these programs we are able to keep expenses down by lowering feed, fuel, labor and equipment costs, thus improving the profitability of our operation.

Another key to improving the grasses on our ranch is brush control, which we often do in partnership with NRCS when funds are available. We use a variety of ways to reduce brush including prescribed burns and mechanical treatment. We leave the bigger trees in to give the grasslands a savannah effect which also provides shade for the cattle, improving their welfare.

We are strong advocates of prescribed fire on the rangeland. We try to mimic the fire conditions that nature historically provided the land prior to settlement. It is a very good tool within our tool box of land improvement measures. NRCS and the GLCI have provided valuable assistance in our burning endeavors.

The Environmental Quality Incentive Program, or EQIP, is a cost-share program that rewards and provides incentives to producers for implementing conservation practices. When wildfire came through our ranch in 2011, we had to rebuild miles of fencing. EQIP helped us do it. One of the reasons EQIP has become popular among ranchers is because it is a working-lands program. Conservation programs that keep land in production and do not limit its use are best for both the ranchers and conserving our resources.

Another working lands program is the Conservation Stewardship Program. CSP rewards those of us that have been conservationists and have spent the time and money in the improving of our land, water, and wildlife habitats. CSP offers cattlemen the opportunity to earn payments for actively managing, maintaining, and expanding conservation activities like cover crops, rotational grazing, ecologically-based pest management, and buffer strips.

NRCS personnel are a tremendous resource for ranchers. In recent years local NRCS personnel have been prevented from going to training sessions provided by the Society for Range Management and Grasslands Conservation Initiative meetings. It is also becoming more difficult for them to find time to get out of the office due to the tremendous amounts of paperwork they are required to keep up with. We as ranchers must have well informed NRCS personnel to move

forward with innovative conservation practices. They are our first go to source of knowledge. It is critical we have “boots on the ground” in conjunction with the voluntary programs offered.

As Congress begins the process of developing the next Farm Bill, I have some recommendations on how to make these programs work even better for producers.

- First and foremost – NRCS needs to make it as simple as possible for farmers and ranchers to participate in these programs. Streamlining the application process will garner more producer participation.
- Farmers and ranchers need greater access to programs like CSP, where there is a great demand for these programs but limited funding. I, and cattle ranchers around the country, would like to see CSP simplified and based on outcomes and adaptive management rather than a prescribed set of management practices.
- The EQIP program should disclose penalty cancellation costs before producers sign on the dotted line. And producers who enter into an EQIP contract should have the ability to periodically revise the terms of a multiple-year contract to adjust for rising costs over time.
- NRCS should maintain and enhance EQIP at 60% or greater allocation for livestock related applications for all operations, regardless of their size.
- Reinvigorate the focus at the local “grassroots” level by increasing the NRCS staff that work with producers and provide technical assistance at the local level.
- Increase research in soil, water, plant, and wildlife science so that we have an accurate and growing pool of data to inform policy decisions.

The biggest point I’d like you to take away from this hearing is that the “voluntary” part of the conservation programs is what really makes it work for ranchers. We’ve had success using some of these conservation programs, but just because this system works for us does not mean it’s right for everybody. It’s important that we keep these programs funded to safeguard their continued success, and above all else - these programs must stay voluntary. A one-size fits all approach that accompanies top-down regulation does not work in my industry. If these programs were to become mandatory, the rules and regulations that farmers and ranchers would be subjected to would make it harder for them to utilize the unique conservation practices that help their individual operations thrive.

I believe that economic activity and conservation go hand in hand and we are always looking for new, innovative conservation programs that will have tangible benefits for the environment, and help to improve our ranching lands. USDA’s conservation programs have been a great asset to cattle producers and it is important that these programs continue to be implemented in the same practical, producer friendly, and voluntary manner for years to come to ensure that cattlemen will continue to have the ability to do what we do best – produce the world’s safest, most nutritious, abundant and affordable protein while operating in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Together we can sustain our country’s natural resources and economic prosperity, ensuring the viability of our way of life for future generations. I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you may have.