

December 17, 2019

Testimony of Ms. Kim LaFleur

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House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

“Access to Conservation Programs by Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers”

Good morning, Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa and members of the subcommittee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify this morning on the important topic of USDA’s conservation programs and the ability of historically underserved producers to access these programs. My name is Kim LaFleur, and I – along with my husband, Jeff – own and operate Mayflower Cranberries, a 112-acre cranberry farm and agri-tourism business in Plympton, Massachusetts. Jeff and I are first-generation farmers, and it is our hope that someday our two sons will decide to take over the family business that we have created. Although we have only farmed our bogs since 2009, they have been in production for more than 100 years and are our most critical asset. Their health and vitality determine ultimately how sustainable our operation will be.

Both my personal and professional life have deep ties to agriculture and conservation. I am the state advisor and program director for the Massachusetts FFA Association. FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America, is a career and leadership development youth organization for students studying agriculture at the high school level. I am also proudly serving as the Second Vice President for the National Association of Conservation Districts. This role has provided me with the unique opportunity to advocate for locally led conservation programs across the nation.

Jeff and I are also proud to grow for Ocean Spray, an agricultural cooperative owned by more than 700 cranberry growers. Ocean Spray is the leading producer of cranberries in the United States with a wide variety of cranberry products. The farmer-owned cooperative model Ocean Spray employs is unique in that we as the growers are also the owners of the business. Thus, when we are working the land, harvesting cranberries, and marketing our product, we are doing so as part of a larger business that employs hundreds of farmers and workers across the country. As grower-owners, we remain committed to sustainably producing cranberries in order to protect our bogs and the lands around them.

We are proud that Ocean Spray is committed to becoming the first fruit cooperative in North America to verify 100 percent of its crop as sustainably grown. To meet this goal, Ocean Spray is benchmarking our bogs to the Farm Sustainability Assessment, a tool for sustainable farming developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform. Criteria we as growers and as a cooperative seek to meet include protecting and improving the natural environment, protecting and improving the social and economic conditions of farmers, as well as the efficient production of safe, high quality products. The implementation of conservation programs on the farm is directly tied to our ability to be certified as sustainable. The sustainability certification will allow us to better market our product to consumers.

As first-generation farmers, Jeff and I have been able to take advantage of important federal resources to help us make our operation both financially and environmentally sustainable. Cranberry growers – like many other producers across the country – are good stewards of the land, and we want to implement farming practices and technologies that not only save our operation money but also improve conservation outcomes. It is also important to remember that cranberry farmers grow the berries in wetlands; thus, we depend on healthy wetlands that could sustain another hundred years of cranberry

production. While conservation practices and technologies are critical to preserving wetlands and bogs, they are often expensive investments for farmers, especially first-generation farmers. Therefore, it is critical for Congress to continue to fully fund USDA conservation programs, such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Innovation Grants. Investing in these grant and cost-share programs will ensure beginning and first-generation farmers will be able to continue to protect the lands we depend on.

As mentioned, our operation has a total of 112 acres, of which twenty-three and a half acres are cranberry bogs. The remaining acreage consists of reservoirs, wetlands, and upland buffer areas that all support the bogs and our production. We believe in protecting the land and use technology to do so. Through the EQIP program we have implemented practices to improve irrigation efficiency, water quality and pollinator habitat. Our farm conservation plan provides a road map on which we use to make management decisions. We use precision irrigation technology to report soil moisture data, plant stress levels and weather information to the Internet in real-time. The monitoring stations, which run on solar power, send in-field data to the cloud. From that point, Jeff and I can access the data from our phones or computers and receive text alerts and notifications when field conditions dramatically change. This smart, precision agriculture technology not only saves us time in measuring soil moisture by hand, but it also allows us to reduce our water usage. Since we started reducing our water usage, we also noticed that the quality of the berries has improved. This allows us to grow higher quality fruit while also reducing our environmental footprint.

Another way we conserve water and reduce input costs is through the use of automated sprinkler systems. During early spring, and again in the fall near harvest, we protect our berries from the frost by

applying water through our sprinkler irrigation system. These systems have sensors in the vines that monitor temperatures, and we can control the system using the Internet. We are not the only cranberry growers who have implemented this conservation practice, though. In fact, as part of a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Conservation Innovation Grant, the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association worked with growers like Jeff and I to implement irrigation technology. We save money and use less water by starting our pumps closer to the actual frost temperature. If not for the Conservation Innovation Grant from the USDA, we may not have been able to install this type of system. Therefore, it is important for Congress to continue to fully fund the grants and monitor their implementation by USDA over the life of the 2018 Farm Bill to ensure these types of technologies can be implemented by other growers. Also, irrigation automation systems are approved as a cost-share practice in USDA's EQIP. This means that Massachusetts cranberry growers can receive EQIP funding to implement these water and cost-saving systems in their bogs.

Our ability to incorporate these conservation practices was as a result of the relationship we had with our local conservation district. Recognizing an unmet need for conservation plans for our unique crop, a partnership was formed between the cranberry industry and state and federal agencies. Growers such as ourselves received the benefit of highly specialized farm plans developed by conservation district staff to protect water quality and enhance water conservation. The outreach activities conducted by the district resulted in a conservation plan for every cranberry operation in the region.

At the heart of all these conservation practices is access. Producers need access to information, technology, financial and technical assistance. Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the nation. Farming here is becoming ever more difficult with an increasing population that may or

may not be connected to agriculture and are competing for the same land resources for housing and recreation. Opportunities for new farmers in general, and especially the historically underserved, are limited. Conservation technical assistance is limited to begin with, but when coupled with underserved producers, it makes the delta to be able to serve this need even wider.

Through my work with FFA members, I see firsthand that there is a generation of young women who are wanting to have a career in production agriculture but lack the financial and technical resources to do so. In Massachusetts 65% of our members are young women, yet we do not see that translate into the agriculture workforce. Direct outreach must occur to help them bridge the gap from interested in agriculture to working in agriculture if we want to ensure that women play a greater role moving forward. Increasing opportunities for women in agriculture needs to be more than a few yearly conferences, webinars and email blasts. USDA can and should do more to reach the historically underserved populations within and outside the conservation space.

One of the greatest barriers to access for all producers is when a producer's local USDA service center lacks adequate capacity to both process program applications and conduct needed outreach. This barrier is even greater for historically underserved producers who may not be familiar with the opportunities provided through USDA to help their operations. USDA must also consider the extra outreach to these producers when conducting workload analyses to determine needed staffing and Congress must continue to provide the needed funding and oversight so NRCS can reach these producers where they are, rather than hope they enter a USDA Service Center.

One of the answers to increased access to conservation programs lies in front of us. With 3,000 conservation districts nationwide, this locally led conservation delivery system has been in place for more than eighty years. Districts reach urban, rural and suburban communities. Conservation districts have a rich history of working with NRCS. They work side by side with NRCS staff at the local level. However, there is an opportunity to enhance this relationship to provide increased access to programs to historically underserved producers.

Conservation districts also provide education and leadership opportunities for producers. I am the first woman to serve as an officer of the National Association of Conservation Districts. That is not a statistic that I typically mention. I want my time in this leadership role to be based on my merits, not on my gender. However, the fact that I am a female in a leadership position in a heavily male dominated industry is not lost on me. I owe it to those who came before me who did not have this opportunity to ensure our voice is always on the same playing field. Those who will come after me depend on it.

In a historically male dominated industry, there are still changes that are needed to ensure access is equitable to all. However, through strong partnerships and outreach with underserved communities, the path towards a solution becomes clear. As a female producer I don't want a seat at a special table. I want a seat at the same one as everyone else.

Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I look forward to answering your questions.