

**Executive Summary of LtCol Andrew Sanchez, USAF
Operator, Family Ranch, Sierra County New Mexico**

**Hearing on Access to Conservation Programs by Historically Underserved
Farmers and Ranchers
December 17, 2019**

Personal Information

- Current majority owner and operator of my family's ranch in Sierra County, New Mexico
- Ranches 2000 acres of private and BLM land with 60 head of cattle
- Previously served as active duty officer for 9 years in U.S. Navy
- Currently serve as the Deputy Group Commander of the 150th Operations Group
- Utilized EQIP benefits available through USDA, NRCS
- Member, Farmer Veteran Coalition

Recommendations

1. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DoD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agri-business.
2. Continue to fund USDA's programs addressing veterans, especially the conservation programs under Title II.
3. Consider modifying the definition of "veteran farmer or rancher" to remove the "who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10-year" period restriction.

**Full Testimony of LtCol Andrew Sanchez, USAF
Operator, Family Ranch, Sierra County New Mexico**

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Thank you, Members of the Subcommittee, on Conservation and Forestry for the opportunity to testify on the opportunities and benefits available to military veterans in agriculture.

I am the 5th generation to operate a cattle ranch in Sierra County in southern rural New Mexico. This land was originally homesteaded in the territory of New Mexico in the late 1800s. My family has been running cattle there ever since, and I am currently in the process of purchasing the land from my father, Adam Sanchez. However, when I was young and wanted a life of adventure and a chance to fly, I saw minimal opportunity in Truth or Consequences or Alamogordo, where I graduated high school. My parents recognized they could not change my mind and agreed to let me join the U.S. Navy at age 17.

I served as an active duty Naval Flight Officer for nine years. My service took me around the globe on multiple deployments, where I was exposed to many cultures and the diverse cross-section of the world. I enjoyed fellowship with local community members in huts in Asia Pacific and with dignitaries at fancy receptions in Poti, Georgia. I became close with my fellow Americans, whom I only met due to my service. All this led me back to the place that I've always considered home, rural New Mexico.

Now that I operate the farm where I was raised, I see the same desire to escape in my children, and like my parents, I pray that I can instill just a bit of that calling that will bring them back to the land where their family legacy thrives. As a young man, my sole ambition was to find a way to leave the farm and find success in the larger world. Now I am faced with the same decisions that my father had to make. How do I raise my family without losing this legacy?

My grandfather was the last generation that successfully made a living on the ranch. My dad had a 25-year Civil Service career on White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base and worked close enough to commute to the ranch on weekends and holidays. I would spend summers living with my grandparents at the ranch until they passed. I then lived there with my great aunt and worked for what little profit the cows would bring each year. Sometimes, it was just enough to cover the bills and taxes. I became the chief operator of the ranch in 2011. I was the sole provider for my wife and two kids, and the farm income was not enough to support our

family. As is the case with many American farmers, I was forced to find off-farm income. In my case, I joined the New Mexico Air National Guard.

When I returned to the farm full-time, I faced the same obstacles many beginning farmers confront. The ranch had been somewhat neglected, and I had to rebuild it. It was at this time that I first applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) as a Beginning Farmer/Rancher. I needed a new well, which had pumped its last ounce of water when my grandparents ran the ranch in the 1980s. I was awarded this grant, but upon completion of the project, I realized it fell far short of what would be required to revive the ranch. In 2014, I applied for a second grant to run a pipeline; add another drinker and additional storage that was critically needed to ensure a greater forage cover; and keep the cattle from overgrazing the areas so close to the water. My application was denied for two years due to the low amount of points on my request. This was despite my USDA agent helping me to compile more projects to my proposal, thus increasing my points. However, in my district, the competition is just too fierce, and not until I used my Veteran status, was I awarded the grant.

My status as a military veteran has afforded me the benefit of competing with fewer applicants for the EQIP. It also awarded me a supplementary payout to put in the additional water storage and drinker. This project allowed me to retain the 60 head, and I have also seen an increase in elk, deer, and other native wildlife. Most importantly, this allowed me to complete the additional \$38,000 project without putting my family's livelihood at risk. However, due to the timing restrictions on how a veteran farmer or rancher is defined in the 2018 Farm Bill, next year I will no longer be eligible for USDA veteran benefits as I will have been out of the Navy for ten years.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Farmer Veteran Coalition's role in this process. I attended their annual conference in 2018 and their founder explained the veteran provision in the 2014 Farm Bill then directed me to the USDA-NRCS table to learn how to apply. It is not just veterans like me who do not know of the veteran preference priorities, but also many USDA employees are not aware of them. In the 2018 Farm Bill, there has been more funding appropriated to outreach and raising awareness which should increase knowledge of these programs.

The USDA veterans programs modified in the 2018 Farm Bill have a direct positive impact on farmer veterans. Veterans are given preferences under certain programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Reserve Program Transition Incentives Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The 2018 Farm Bill added preference for veterans receiving financial and technical conservation assistance for pilot programs. Veteran farmers and ranchers were also included as part of a new definition of an underserved producer, which allows them additional aid in the federal crop insurance program. Finally, it extends benefits to veterans for down payment loans, reduced interest rates on guaranteed loans, disaster assistance coverage, and increased educational focus from the Food Safety Outreach Program and the Federal Crop Insurance Education Program. The bill expanded advocacy and outreach to veterans through the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement

and the Military Veterans Outreach Liaison Office. It further requires additional data collection and a dedicated USDA website with information for veterans about USDA programs and support which will certainly raise awareness of these veteran benefits.

However, as I mentioned above, amending the definition of the term “veteran farmer or rancher” prevents a wide swath of farmer veterans from profiting from these benefits. The statute defines a farmer or rancher as one who has served in the Armed Forces (U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and the reserves) and “has not operated a farm or ranch; or ... has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years” or who first obtained status as a veteran “during the most recent 10-year period.” The data on veteran farmers does not support such a change as large numbers enter the agriculture sector more than ten years after they have left the military, most of whom are still quite young. As a result of this language, a large number of the targeted audience will not have access to these benefits.

I am now exploring rural business loans through the USDA. Since I have returned to New Mexico, the National Guard armory in Sierra County was dismantled because the population is too small to support the Guard. Several stockyards have closed, and it is more and more challenging to make a living in my region. I, with the help from my local New Mexico Veteran Business Outreach Center (VBOC), am trying to turn my small cow/calf operation into a profitable direct-to-consumer business, but it is challenging to say the least.

Like the military, neighbors in rural America depend on each other, and we are in this fight together. This includes: Maj Zamora, a Maintenance Officer in the National Guard who runs his family hay farm in Tome; MSgt Justice, with whom I deployed in OEF and runs his family farm with his father in Los Lunas; and Mike Carr, an Vietnam-era Army Veteran and fellow Farmer Veteran Coalition member, who works an all-veteran cooperative farm near Taos. We are all trying to preserve this Legacy of service, not only on the battlefields, but in our rural American heartland. I am a Sailor, an Airman, and a Farmer. I fought for freedom, and I continue to fight for a way of life that is slowly dying. USDA’s Veteran preference programs are essential in keeping rural America alive as many of our veterans, like me, come from small towns and return to these towns after their service.

In closing, based on my experience as a farmer veteran, I would recommend the following for your consideration:

1. Continue to support the USDA’s, VA’s, and DoD’s efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agri-business.
2. Continue to fund USDA’s programs addressing veterans, especially the conservation programs under Title II.
3. Consider modifying the definition of “veteran farmer or rancher” to remove the “who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10-year” period restriction.