

Testimony

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American Farmland Trust is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting America's farmland and rangeland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by a group of farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped save millions of acres of farmland from development and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more.

Introduction

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Fudge, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, My name is John Piotti and I am the president and CEO of American Farmland Trust (AFT). Though I am new to AFT, I have worked on farming issues in the state of Maine for 25 years, much of that time as part of a statewide organization that has protected farmland and supported farmers. I have first-hand, on-the-ground experience with many of the programs within the Farm Bill.

I want to start by thanking Chairman Conaway and Ranking Member Peterson, as well as Subcommittee Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Fudge, for seeking input from interested stakeholders on policy priorities for the next Farm Bill.

For 36 years, AFT has been dedicated to protecting America's farmland and rangeland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. In the United States, we lose the equivalent of 40 acres of farmland to development every hour. Replacing our farmland with homes or shopping centers has ripple effects for our society, from eroding rural towns and their traditions, to decreasing our ability to provide cities with fresh, local food, to losing wildlife populations through habitat destruction. AFT also recognizes that farmers and ranchers hold the solutions to many of our most pressing environmental problems when they implement conservation practices on their land. Finally, AFT is concerned with the decreasing number and increasing age of farmers: in the time since AFT's founding, the average age of farmers has risen from 50 to 58, while the number of beginning farmers decreased 20% between 2007 and 2012.

The Farm Bill's conservation title should, and often does, address all these issues. AFT views the conservation title programs as a set of tools to address the complex needs of America's farmers and ranchers—as well as public interests. Each program has demonstrated value to producers and landowners to achieve specific outcomes tailored to their needs. One of AFT's goals for the upcoming Farm Bill is to ensure that we retain a full set of tools, and that we fund each program adequately. More specifically, AFT believes the next Farm Bill should adequately fund and streamline the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and strengthen the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

The Need for Conservation Title Funding

First and foremost, AFT urges committee members to work with colleagues on the Budget and Appropriations Committees to ensure that conservation programs do not undergo additional funding cuts. The 2014 Farm Bill marked the first time a Farm Bill voluntarily reduced spending, and it was the only reauthorization bill in that Congress that voluntarily offered savings. As part of this effort to reduce future deficits, the conservation title saw a 10% decrease in funding levels, or nearly \$6 billion in cuts. While the 2014 Farm Bill was originally estimated to contribute \$23 billion to deficit reduction over 10 years, a recent analysis by the Congressional Budget Office shows that the entire bill will result in nearly \$100 billion in deficit reduction. The cuts already endured, coupled with better-than-expected spending outcomes for the 2014 bill, show that the farm and food community has already done its part—and should not be the target for additional cuts.

Cuts to the conservation title have many negative consequences. Some programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and RCPP have expressly-stated purposes of providing conservation assistance to avoid regulatory requirements for farmers; inadequate funding stands in the way of this purpose. Further, funding for voluntary, incentive-based conservation ensures both environmental sustainability for our farms and economic sustainability for our farmers and ranchers. For example, not only does ACEP provide funds for farmers to enable them to protect their land, it also often allows them to reinvest in their businesses. Recent cuts to ACEP mean that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) must turn away 70% of the farmers and ranchers who apply for funds each year.

Although AFT sees great value in all the programs in the conservation title, these remarks—offered early in the Farm Bill process—focus on two programs that benefit working lands, and with which AFT has been strongly involved: ACEP and RCPP.

The Importance of Federal Farmland Protection: Funding and Streamlining ACEP

Farmland is a necessary part of our country's infrastructure. Protecting farmland from development protects the foundation of our agriculture and agriculture-related industries, which

contribute \$985 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). Protecting farmland means protecting wildlife habitat, water tables, and carbon stored in our soils. Protecting farmland means protecting the supply of healthy foods provided to our cities. Protecting farmland means protecting the way of life in rural America and ensuring that the next generation of farmers can enter the profession. Simply put, federal investments in farmland protection through ACEP provide vital benefits for Americans today and into the future.

Allow me to take just a minute to further explain one of the many benefits of ACEP, with which some people may not be familiar. We don't always think of farmland protection playing a critical role in making land more affordable for farmers, both for existing farmers who are looking to expand, and for beginning farmers who are trying to enter the profession. And yet, in any part of this nation with development pressures, protected farmland is often the only farmland that farmers can afford.

I earlier mentioned that the number of beginning farmers dropped by 20% in the last Census of Agriculture. But that's a national statistic; that doesn't play out in every region. In my home state of Maine, for instance, our story could not be more different: between 2007 and 2012, the number of beginning farmers in Maine grew by an impressive 39%! And one of the key reasons is that Maine during this period significantly increased its farmland protection efforts, creating affordable options for entering farmers to acquire land.

Despite the many benefits of protecting working agricultural lands, the funding for ACEP saw a precipitous decrease in the 2014 Farm Bill. The three component programs that were combined to create ACEP (Wetlands Reserve Program, Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, and Grassland Reserve Program) were funded at an average total of \$732 million annually from 2009-2012. Yet the average for ACEP for 2014-2018 is \$405 million, a 32% decrease from the previous average. Even more alarming is that ACEP funding drops to \$250 million annually in FY18 and in future years, which is a 66% decline from the previous average. This decrease in funds makes it increasingly difficult for partners, who rely on ACEP funds to leverage state and local funding for farmland protection projects. AFT believes it is of utmost importance to return ACEP funding to historic levels.

In addition to ensuring adequate funding for ACEP, AFT believes there is a need to streamline the program to ease administrative burdens for producers, land trusts and NRCS. This would save the federal government significant time and money, while making the process easier and more timely for a broad variety of farmers and ranchers, from Vermont to Texas, Pennsylvania to Montana, California to Michigan, and every state in between. AFT is discussing with other advocacy organizations, land trusts, and state farmland protection programs how ACEP might be refined to best serve the farmers and ranchers who need it. We look forward to working on this important issue with members of this committee and staff.

Quantifying Benefits through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program

AFT has long championed a targeted, partnership-based project approach to conservation to achieve landscape-scale environmental outcomes. RCPP is an innovative program that brings together a diverse array of partners with technical and scientific expertise and leverages private sector dollars. RCPP projects can focus on specific natural resource concerns in specific geographies to magnify desired conservation outcomes. By 2018, NRCS and its more than 2,000 conservation partners will have invested over \$2.4 billion in high-impact RCPP projects nationwide, with more than half of that funding coming from non-federal sources.

AFT is working with many partners to implement RCPP projects around the country. In Washington State, AFT and partners have helped farmers adopt conservation practices to improve water quality in Newaukum Creek. Funding has gone towards stream-side plantings to improve habitat, projects that help farmers better manage manure and nutrients, and several other conservation practices. In Illinois, AFT and partners are working to improve water quality in the Upper Macoupin Creek Watershed, which feeds into the Mississippi River and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. According to the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, the Macoupin Creek watershed is one of the three highest phosphorus-yielding watersheds in Illinois. In addition to providing technical and financial assistance for soil-saving and nutrient-saving conservation practices, the AFT-led partnership will also address the need for expensive new equipment that would otherwise be a significant barrier to the adoption of water-quality practices. Included in this watershed, and eligible for support by this project, are farmers in the traditionally underserved African-American community of Royal Lakes.

One of the goals of RCPP was to fund projects that elect to measure environmental, social, and economic outcomes of the practices adopted within a project area. However, AFT, like other groups, have struggled to do so, due to the lack of guidance from NRCS on what such outcomes mean or which measurement methods to use. AFT believes that improvements to the Farm Bill could help NRCS and its conservation partners quantify the different outcomes associated with conservation practices, which will provide needed evidence to the public, Congress, farmers, and the conservation community to show that voluntary conservation works.

For these reasons, AFT believes that the Farm Bill should, first, include definitions of these environmental, social, and economic outcomes, and second, direct the Secretary of Agriculture to provide guidance and reporting criteria to RCPP project partners. That would enable data showing the progress that RCPP and its project partners are having in achieving, quantifying, and reporting on these outcomes to be regularly reported to Congress. Having information about the actual outcomes of conservation practices, rather than simply reporting on the dollars spent, will allow agricultural and conservation organizations to make a stronger case for voluntary conservation going forward.

Concluding Remarks

The conservation title is vitally important not just for farmers and ranchers, but for all Americans. It gives producers a variety of programmatic tools to achieve cleaner air and water, healthier soils, more wildlife habitat, and protected farmland and rangeland that benefit us all. The importance of conservation title funding in obtaining these public benefits cannot be underestimated. While we acknowledge the budget realities that this nation faces, we believe that adequate funding of the conservation title is critical to protecting our valuable natural resources. Beyond this, these voluntary conservation programs help our nation's farmers and ranchers advance environmental goals without burdensome regulatory requirements. We feel that such programs are needed now more than ever.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to share our views on these important issues. I would be happy to address any questions you have.



FUNDING FOR AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS UNDER THE 2008 AND 2014 FARM BILLS

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) combined funding from three programs in the 2008 Farm Bill: the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), and the Grassland Protection Program (GPP). Under the 2014 Farm Bill, the funding level for ACEP reaches its peak in FY17 at \$500 million, compared to the peak of \$882 million in FY10. In FY18, funding is slated to drop precipitously to \$250 million—a 66% decrease when compared to the average funding level under the 2008 Farm Bill.

