

**HEARING TO REVIEW USDA FARM BILL
CONSERVATION PROGRAMS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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HEARING TO REVIEW USDA FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 2019

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:04 a.m., in Room 1300 of the Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Abigail Davis Spanberger [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Spanberger, Fudge, Pingree, Axne, Peterson (*ex officio*), LaMalfa, Allen, and Kelly.

Staff present: Félix Muñoz, Jr., Grayson Haynes, Prescott Martin III, Anne Simmons, Alison Titus, Josh Maxwell, Ricki Schroeder, Patricia Straughn, Dana Sandman, and Jennifer Yezak.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ABIGAIL DAVIS SPANBERGER, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM VIRGINIA

The CHAIR. This hearing on the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry entitled, *Hearing To Review USDA Farm Bill Conservation Programs*, will come to order, and I will begin with my opening statement.

I am pleased to be here today for our first Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee hearing. I am pleased to hold this on the 157th birthday of the USDA, which was founded in 1862 by President Lincoln. So, happy birthday to the USDA.

I look forward to working with Ranking Member Doug LaMalfa, and I thank him for his leadership on the Subcommittee, and for the productive conversations and discussions we have already had regarding our shared priority.

I also want to thank each Member for being a part of the Subcommittee, and I look forward to working with each of you.

Today this Subcommittee will be addressing USDA farm bill conservation programs. We will be discussing the conservation programs under the respective authorities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency, as well as the changes that the 2018 Farm Bill made to some of these programs.

To that end, I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today, and I would like to thank our witnesses for taking part in this discussion.

I represent a diverse swath of central Virginia, from the Richmond suburbs to the fields of Nottoway County in the south, to the rural communities of Culpeper County in the north.

I have heard from producers in my district who make use of the USDA's conservation programs such as EQIP and CRP, particularly now with net farm income at just ½ of its 2013 levels. These voluntary programs that provide support to farmers, while at the same time protecting our natural resources, are absolutely critical.

The role of voluntary conservation programs in our country's history provides additional context as to why they are necessary today.

Federal conservation assistance began during the Depression when the Great Plains experienced severe multi-year droughts leading to soil erosion, dust storms, farm abandonment, and mass migration, the Dust Bowl.

In response, Congress established the Soil Conservation Service, which began advancing on the ground conservation practices to reduce soil erosion and promote productive fields and healthy landscapes.

Today the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency at USDA administer more than a dozen programs and subprograms to address natural resource concerns. And through a voluntary incentive-based approach, USDA provides private landowners and operators with the technical and financial assistance they need to thrive, remain sustainable, and achieve profitability.

This work is vital. More than 70 percent of land in the United States is held by private landowners, so the decisions they make have deep and lasting implications for Americans both on and off the farm.

Much like the Dust Bowl era, the case for agricultural resiliency and sustainability applies today. According to the National Climate Assessment, climatic disruptions to agricultural production over the past 40 years have been linked to changes in crop yield and quality.

Extreme weather events such as historic snowfall and flooding in the Midwest, destructive hurricanes across the Southeast, and devastating wildfires in the West lend urgency to conservation efforts.

Throughout this hearing, I am interested in learning more about the suite of conservation programs available to producers through USDA, I am interested in learning more about the outreach strategies that recruit producers and encourage them to adopt new practices, and I am also eager to hear about the new authorities afforded by the 2018 Farm Bill and the prospects they hold in accelerating conservation efforts on the ground.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Spanberger follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. ABIGAIL DAVIS SPANBERGER, A REPRESENTATIVE IN
CONGRESS FROM VIRGINIA

I'm pleased to be here today for our first Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee hearing. I look forward to working with Ranking Member Doug LaMalfa, and I thank him for his leadership on the Subcommittee and the productive discussions we've already had about our shared priorities. I also want to thank each Member for being a part of this Subcommittee, and I look forward to working with each of you.

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that end, I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today to lead that discussion.

I represent a diverse swath of central Virginia—from the Richmond suburbs to the fields of Nottoway County in the south to the rural communities of Culpeper County in the north. I've heard from producers in my district who make use of the USDA's conservation programs, such as EQIP and CRP. Particularly now, with net farm income at just ½ its 2013 level, these voluntary programs that provide support to farmers—while at the same time protecting our natural resources—are critical.

The role of voluntary conservation programs in our country's history provides additional context as to why they're necessary today. Federal conservation assistance began during the Depression, when the Great Plains experienced severe, multi-year droughts leading to soil erosion, dust storms, farm abandonments, and mass migration—the Dust Bowl. In response, Congress established the Soil Conservation Service, which began advancing on-the-ground conservation practices to reduce soil erosion and promote productive fields and healthy landscapes.

Today, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency at USDA administer more than a dozen programs and subprograms to address natural resource concerns. Through a voluntary, incentive-based approach, USDA provides private landowners and operators with the technical *and* financial assistance they need to thrive, remain sustainable, and achieve profitability. This work is vital. More than 70% of land in the United States is held by private landowners, so the decisions they make have deep and lasting implications for Americans both on and off the farm.

Much like the Dust Bowl-era, the case for agricultural resiliency and sustainability applies today. According to the National Climate Assessment, climatic disruptions to agricultural production over the past 40 years have been linked to changes in crop yields and quality. Extreme weather events such historic snowfall and flooding in the Midwest, destructive hurricanes across the Southeast, and devastating wildfires in the West lend urgency to conservation efforts.

Throughout this hearing, I am interested in learning more about the suite of conservation programs available to producers through USDA. I am interested in learning more about the outreach strategies that recruit producers and encourage them to adopt new practices. I am also eager to hear about the new authorities afforded by the 2018 Farm Bill and the prospects they hold in accelerating conservation efforts on the ground.

With that, I would like to recognize the Ranking Member, the distinguished gentleman from California, Congressman Doug LaMalfa for 5 minutes.

The CHAIR. With that, I would like to recognize and thank Ranking Member Doug LaMalfa, the distinguished gentleman from California, for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG LAMALFA, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM CALIFORNIA

Mr. LAMALFA. Good to see you, Madam Chair. Thank you for convening this hearing today, and it has also been a pleasure to work with you so far leading up to this point. I know we are going to have a great relationship as we accomplish a lot this session on these key issues we are going to deal with in conservation, and timber as well.

I am obviously very geared towards what we have going on in my own district with that, but also all across the country with our management of our assets and the best conservation and use of it long-term.

Good morning, and again, thank you for having this hearing on the USDA farm bill conservation programs.

Over the past 35 years Congress has acknowledged that voluntary conservation works well, leading to significant investments and various conservation initiatives.

In recent farm bills we have expanded our financial commitment for important issues like the CRP, Conservation Reserve Program,

and EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Both are very key to my own district in northern California.

We also created new tools like the CSP, Conservation Stewardship Program, where it expands the use of on-farm conservation practices, and RCPP, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, that leverages Federal funding, matching assistance from partners in the private-sector.

Over the past 5 years, RCPP has been successfully utilized in Sacramento Valley as NRCS and other partners have worked with rice producers to create habitat for waterfowl, something we have done on our own farm at home to great effect.

The 2018 Farm Bill has contained new approaches to funding and delivering conservation programs. The House Agriculture Committee worked hard to protect mandatory funding to strengthen the working lands and infrastructure programs. A few of the highlights include CSP, which was reformed to allow more flexibility in program delivery, EQIP funding was significantly increased and would reach over \$2 billion per year by 2023, allowing for expanded authorities to address water savings and irrigation projects and to address drought in the West.

CTA payments were established to allow for scalable adoption and maintenance of conservation practices, practices that will be tailored to address locally-identified resource concerns, very important.

RCPP, which I had previously mentioned, was provided its own funding allocation, allowing the program to operate on its own along with streamlined delivery for NRCS.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program which protects our farmlands, grasslands, and wetlands, received a significant increase as well. The CRP acreage cap was increased and meaningful reforms were implemented to prevent the program from competing against beginning farmers or other producers wanting to access land.

Finally, the 2018 Farm Bill made significant investments in infrastructure, including our Watershed Operations Program that will provide certainty to project sponsors across the country.

The funding and reforms that made these programs, along with the new authorities provided to address active management of National Forests, make this the strongest farm bill ever for western states as well.

While our focus today is on the conservation programs administered by USDA, the farm bill also did many great things to assist private forest owners as well as state and National Forests. However, many needed authorities of streamlined active management of National Forests were left out.

If we do not address the declining health of our largest carbon sink, many of our conservation gains will be wiped away with the destruction of watersheds and wildlife habitat, along with the loss of personal property and life, air quality, the whole shooting match.

We need to do better.

Again, thank you, Chair Spanberger for calling today's hearing. I look forward to working with you in this Congress. The Subcommittee has a lot of important work to do ahead of it as we review the implementation of key conservation and forest practices.

I would also like to thank our witnesses today, Chief Lohr and Administrator Fordyce, for joining us today. We know both of you are very busy with farm bill implementation, always a challenge, never fast enough for some folks but we know you are busting it trying to get it going, and keep it going.

Thanks for making time to be with us and I appreciate what you do to help our producers on the ground as well. I will yield back.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

The chair would request that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so the witnesses may begin their testimony and to ensure there is ample time for questions.

I would like to welcome our witnesses today. Thank you for being here.

Today we will hear from Matthew Lohr, Chief of the Natural Resources and Conservation Service. As Chief, Mr. Lohr provides leadership for NRCS and its mission to support America's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners in their conservation efforts.

Mr. Lohr is a fellow Virginian and a fifth-generation farmer. Prior to NRCS, Mr. Lohr served as Virginia's Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services from 2010 to 2013, and in the Virginia House of Delegates from 2006 to 2010.

Since 2017, he has farmed full time on his family's operation, which includes poultry, beef cattle, row crops, and sweet corn.

We will also hear from Richard Fordyce, Administrator of the Farm Service Agency. Our second witness is Mr. Richard Fordyce, Administrator of the Farm Service Agency. As Administrator he provides leadership for FSA and its mission to support agricultural production across America through a network of over 2,100 county and 50 state offices.

Mr. Fordyce is a fourth-generation farmer from Bethany, Missouri, and previously served as the state's Executive Director for FSA in Missouri, and as Director of the Missouri Department of Agriculture from 2013 to 2017.

I thank you both for your service and I look forward to your testimony.

Chief Lohr, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF HON. MATTHEW J. LOHR, CHIEF, NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. LOHR. Well, good morning, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, and thank you so much for this opportunity for Richard and I to testify before you today to discuss the United States Department of Agriculture's conservation programs, and happy birthday, USDA. I appreciate you mentioning that.

My name is Matthew Lohr and I have the distinct honor of serving as the 16th Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or more commonly known as NRCS.

I started this position last December as a fifth-generation farmer in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, and my earliest memories are as a child working alongside my father and my grandfather on our

family farm, fortunately for me they modeled a love and appreciation of our natural resources that continues with me today.

I know firsthand the importance of our motto, "Helping people help the land."

Under the leadership and guidance of Secretary Perdue, the Farm Production and Conservation or FPAC mission area was recently established with a focus on domestic agricultural issues. Led by Under Secretary Bill Northey, the FPAC mission area consists of NRCS, the Farm Service Agency, and the Risk Management Agency.

The USDA mission area serves as the focal point for our nation's farmers, ranchers, and stewards of private forestlands. Together, the agencies work to support each other as we deliver our programs to best serve our customers.

As an agency within the FPAC leadership structure, NRCS is focused on delivering conservation programs and technical assistance through a locally-led process where local input drives natural resources priorities.

We have over 2,000 offices in communities nationwide with more than 9,000 employees who provide information, tools, and a delivery system to assist producers with conserving, maintaining, and enhancing their natural resources.

NRCS works in partnership with private landowners, communities, local governments, and other stakeholders to promote a sustainable usage while safeguarding the nation's private working lands.

Our conservation work revolves around two core functions, technical assistance and financial resources.

Through our conservation operations, we provide technical assistance that is aimed at helping people conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. These operations support our critical infrastructure that enables our staff to deliver quality conservation planning, assist communities, and producers with water supply forecasting and assist the nation with becoming more resilient against climate change.

Our web survey is broadly used by the agricultural sector as well as the general public.

Each day, NRCS proudly invests roughly \$8 million in conservation efforts, but that number is multiplied many times over through our great partnerships that we have, and agreements across the country.

We also partner with fellow agencies, within USDA, like the Farm Service Agency and the U.S. Forest Service.

Our working lands programs includes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program or EQIP, the Conservation Stewardship Program or CSP, we also offer farmland and wetland protection through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program or ACEP, and features of each of these programs are available through our Regional Conservation Partnership Program or RCPP. Lots of acronyms to keep straight.

Since the 2018 Farm Bill has become law, NRCS has worked to implement ACEP, CSP, and EQIP in 2019, while developing the rules and regulations for the Fiscal Year 2020 enrollment.

Moving forward in 2019, we plan to do much more with our new authorizations. Today, in fact, I am pleased to share that the Secretary has announced a notice of funding availability for up to \$25 million for our Conservation Innovation Grants or CIG, for on-farm conservation innovation trials. This announcement will include a soil health demonstration trial component and will be accepting proposals through July 15 of this year.

As a farmer, I can attest to the fact that good conservation makes good financial sense for agriculture production. Through NRCS's services, farms are improved, efficiencies are established, and producers enhance production in concert with natural resources protection.

NRCS's conservation efforts also extend to times of natural disaster, assisting both producers and communities in their greatest times of need. Through our programs like EWP and EQIP, we have assisted in hurricane recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, flooding across the heartland, and damaging wildfires throughout the West.

Some of my greatest moments as Chief have occurred around kitchen tables and pickup trucks where I have heard stories from our customers face to face. Many of them have shared personal stories about how our efforts at NRCS have literally saved their farming operations.

It is an honor to be able to share with you today and talk about the farm bill programs and the efforts that we are making to improve the environment, preserve our natural resources, and ensure the viability for agriculture and forestry for many generations to come.

Thank you again for the invitation, and I look forward to the conversation.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lohr follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MATTHEW J. LOHR, CHIEF, NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about the United States Department of Agriculture's conservation programs administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I appreciate the ongoing support of this Subcommittee for voluntary, private lands conservation and the improvement of our soil, water, and other natural resources. I come before you today not only as the Chief of the NRCS, but also as a farmer who is well aware of the agency's conservation programs and their benefits to landowners.

NRCS was first established as the "Soil Conservation Service" in 1935, to address the dust storms that ravaged the nation's farmland. This is a history many know well, particularly those who work in the agriculture industry. These storms stripped away millions of tons of topsoil that were carried all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The massive soil loss was recognized as a national emergency. The agency was later renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1994, to recognize its broader mission of addressing the nation's important natural resources.

For more than 80 years, NRCS and its predecessor agency have worked in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and other Federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes. Through one-on-one interaction, we work with producers and communities on a voluntary basis with the goal of "helping people help the land."

Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area and the NRCS

Under the leadership and guidance of Secretary Perdue, the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area was established in 2017 with a focus on domestic farmer-facing agricultural issues. Led by Under [S]ecretary Northey, the FPAC mission area consists of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service

Agency, and the Risk Management Agency. This USDA mission area serves as the focal point for the nation's farmers, ranchers, and stewards of private agricultural lands and non-industrial forest lands. Together, the agencies work to support each other as we deliver our programs to serve our customers.

As an agency within the FPAC leadership structure, the NRCS has a key focus on conservation programs and technical assistance. The agency employs skilled employees in fields such as agriculture, agronomy, engineering, biology, soil science, plant science, forestry, and hydrology. We have more than 2,000 offices across communities nationwide with more than 9,000 employees dedicated to providing information, tools, and a delivery system to assist producers with conserving, maintaining, and enhancing their natural resources for the betterment of their individual agriculture operations and their communities. NRCS works in partnership with private landowners, communities, local governments, and other stakeholders to promote the sustainable use and safeguard the nation's private working lands.

NRCS Farm Bill Conservation Programs

NRCS offers a suite of working lands and easement programs that provide assistance to agricultural producers and others for addressing their natural resource concerns. The suite of working lands programs includes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Each of these programs assists producers with implementing land stewardship practices and activities. Under the easement programs, NRCS restores, protects, and enhances wetlands and grasslands and assists third parties in protecting agricultural lands.

For FY 2018, NRCS programs provided:

- \$245 million in ACEP financial assistance funding used to enroll more than 100,000 acres of farmland, grasslands, and wetlands. The agency also closed more than 440 ACEP easements, protecting a collective 140,000 acres.
- More than \$1.3 billion in obligations for EQIP financial assistance covering an estimated 13 million acres.
- Approximately \$24.6 million in financial assistance obligated to five states through the National Air Quality Initiative to help producers meet requirements of the Clean Air Act.
- More than \$11.7 million in contracts with producers obligated in three states severely affected by drought. These producers were able to use EQIP financial assistance for watering facilities, prescribed grazing, pasture and hayland planting, and planting cover crops.
- More than \$83 million in financial assistance for new enrollments provided through CSP to improve more than 7.5 million acres.
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) incorporates features from both the working lands and easement programs in coordination with the private-sector and other non-Federal partners. NRCS began the 2018 enrollment activities in January 2017 by issuing the 2018 RCPP Announcement for Program Funding (APF) for \$252 million, which increased the number of training/outreach efforts to the public and partners about RCPP and improved program processes. In the 2018 APF, the agency received 164 pre-proposals that requested a total of \$683 million in program funds and provided a partner contribution of \$1 billion in support of those projects.

Conservation Operations

The purpose of Conservation Operations is to provide technical assistance supported by science-based technologies and tools that help people conserve, maintain, and improve the nation's natural resources. Conservation Operations has four major program components: Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA); Soil Survey; Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF); and Plant Materials Centers (PMCs). CTA has been thought of as the backbone of the agency's conservation delivery system. The CTA discretionary funding provides for the development and delivery of a major portion of the products and services associated with four of the agency's five business lines: (1) Conservation Planning and Technical Consultation; (2) Conservation Implementation; (3) Natural Resource Inventory and Assessment; and (4) Natural Resource Technology Transfer. The fifth business line, Financial Assistance, is funded through the conservation programs listed above.

FY 2018 Results through the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program

- In 2018, NRCS developed conservation plans covering 27.5 million acres. In accordance with those plans, conservation practices and systems designed to improve soil quality were applied to 6 million acres of cropland.
- Owners and managers of grazing and forest lands applied conservation practices to improve more than 12 million acres.
- Conservation practices were applied to more than 16.5 million acres of agricultural land, as designed by the agency, to improve off-site water quality.
- Conservation practices were applied to nearly 325,000 acres to improve irrigation water use efficiency, which reduces producer costs, groundwater withdrawals, and surface runoff.
- Conservation practices and systems were applied on more than 7 million acres to improve wildlife habitat.

Mission Delivery Highlights

NRCS employees proved adaptable, innovative, and effective in working to address continuing and emerging natural resource challenges. A few recent highlights include:

- **Responding to Natural Disasters:** NRCS used the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program to provide assistance for hurricane recovery in Puerto Rico and the Southeast hurricane impacted areas, wildfires in the West, floods in the Midwest.
- **Enhanced Nutrient Management:** NRCS provides technical and financial assistance for the development and implementation of enhanced nutrient management plans. NRCS field staff are trained to provide nutrient management planning and implementation assistance to USDA clients using nutrient movement risk assessment tools and by implementation of practices to reduce agricultural emissions.
- **Livestock:** NRCS actively works with producers in grasslands systems (pasture and range) as well as confined operations (feedlots and dairies). Practices such as prescribed and rotational grazing, range planting, and forage and biomass planting ensure that grassland areas are maximizing productivity, sequestering carbon, and increasing resiliency to conditions such as prolonged droughts.
- **Improving knowledge of soils, ecological sites, and land-use:** NRCS Soil Survey, Natural Resources Inventory (NRI), and Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) Programs build the foundation of knowledge to better direct land-use decisions. Through these efforts, we better understand land and soil characteristics, land use trends, and impacts of conservation practices on water, soil, and air quality.

Success through Initiatives

Landscape Initiatives are a way to maximize the conservation impact achieved through NRCS programs. We find win-win solutions that address conservation problems in a way that meets the needs of the agriculture sector as well as the broader public. Landscape Initiatives allow NRCS to effectively and consistently address resource concerns that occur on a scale that crosses boundaries to achieve meaningful conservation outcomes. We target resources to effectively address important conservation problems and work in partnerships to build on the strength and investments of engaged stakeholders.

Examples of NRCS initiatives include:

- **Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership:** The U.S. Forest Service and NRCS are working together to improve the health of the forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the agencies are restoring landscapes, reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality, and enhancing wildlife habitat.
- **Longleaf Pine Initiative:** Longleaf pine forests once encompassed more than 90 million acres across the Southeast, stretching from eastern Texas to southern Virginia. These forests represent some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems and are home to nearly 600 plant and animal species, including 29 threatened and endangered species. Over the past 2 centuries, development, timbering, and fire suppression reduced the ecosystem's range by almost

97 percent. Since 2010, NRCS has worked with agricultural producers and conservation partners to restore longleaf forests through this initiative.

- **Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI):** States within the Mississippi River Basin have developed nutrient reduction strategies to minimize the contributions of nitrogen and phosphorus to surface waters within the basin, and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. MRBI uses a small watershed approach to support the states' nutrient reduction strategies. Avoiding, controlling, and trapping practices are implemented to reduce the amount of nutrients flowing from agricultural land into waterways and to improve the resiliency of working lands.
- **National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI):** Now in its eighth year, the National Water Quality Initiative is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation. NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds most in need, and where farmers can use conservation practices to make a difference. Beginning this year, the scope of NWQI has been expanded to include the protection of drinking water.
- **Western Lake Erie Basin:** This initiative expands conservation and financial assistance opportunities available to farmers in the Western Lake Erie Basin who want to take additional steps to improve water quality.
- **Working Lands for Wildlife:** Through Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), NRCS uses a win-win approach to systematically target conservation efforts to improve agricultural and forest productivity, which enhances wildlife habitat on working landscapes. Target species are used as barometers for success because their habitat needs are representative of healthy, functioning ecosystems where conservation efforts benefit a much broader suite of species.

Conclusion

As we look forward to the work that is before us, our goal is clear: to continue "helping people help the land." This goal remains consistent each day as we serve our customers, whether in the field or in Washington, D.C. In the short time that I have been with the agency, I can assure you that the workforce is operating full steam ahead as we carry out our objectives and work to implement our respective provisions of the farm bill as quickly as possible. Madam Chair this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer your questions and those of the other Subcommittee Members.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much, Chief Lohr. We appreciate your comments.

Administrator Fordyce, please when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD FORDYCE, ADMINISTRATOR, FARM SERVICE AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. FORDYCE. Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to be with you this morning.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to be before the Subcommittee or the Committee in general since being appointed Administrator last May.

Thank you for your support of our vital farm programs and the excellent farm bill that allows us to help farmers and ranchers promote, build, and sustain family farms.

The Farm Service Agency serves America's farmers, ranchers, and agricultural producers through the delivery of effective, efficient agricultural programs.

The agency offers farmers a strong safety net through the administration of farm commodity and disaster programs, while conserving natural resources and providing credit to agricultural producers who are unable to receive private commercial credit.

Obviously, I am very proud of the work the Farm Service Agency does and the services they provide to our agricultural producers. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the nearly 10,000 folks that work on behalf of the Farm Service Agency across this country, and more than 2100 county offices. And as I travel the country and visit with them, hearing their stories, understanding their passion for agriculture, their understanding for agriculture, a lot of times they refer to the farmers that they serve in their local communities as *their farmers*.

Agriculture is in my blood. I am a fourth-generation Missouri farm boy, my son is a fifth-generation farmer on our farm, so I know the importance of how our work and NRCS's work, and I know the policies and programs we implement not only affect my farm but my neighbors and our communities as well. I take this job and this role very seriously.

One of USDA's largest conservation programs is the Conservation Reserve Program. It is a complex program that provides a variety of benefits. It has come a long way since its inception in 1985, and continues to evolve even today, including more partnerships like those under the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

In some parts of the country, marginal, highly-erodible lands that are not ideal for agricultural production, it is better for the long-term health of the soil to keep them covered with grass or trees year round. And in more productive fields, conservation buffers like riparian buffers, grass waterways, and contoured grass strips are often needed to prevent sediment and nutrients from polluting water bodies.

In exchange for cost-share and rental payments, farmers remove environmentally-sensitive land from production, and plant resource-conserving land cover to protect soil, water, and create wildlife habitat. The program recognizes that benefits from a farmer placing environmentally-sensitive cropland into conservation uses are consumed not just by the farm but by other people.

CRP can spur hunting, fishing, recreation, tourism, and other economic activity across rural America.

I have some news for today. I am happy to share that the Secretary just announced that beginning June 3, we will reopen CRP continuous signup and accept requests for extensions of expiring CRP contracts.

Additionally, our Emergency Conservation Program, or ECP, and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program, EFRP, continue to provide critical funding for rehabilitation to farmers and ranchers across the nation after a disaster. Within the last year alone, we have seen fires across the western states and our prairies, hurricanes pummel the Southeast, extreme drought in the Texas Panhandle, and last month historic snowfall and flooding across the Northern Plains and the Midwest. Even with the best planning, the impacts of these disasters will take years, in many cases, for a full recovery.

Our conservation programs are voluntary, and the fact that our main program, CRP, covers over 22 million acres and the additional millions of acres enrolled in NRCS programs, shows how farmers are naturally good stewards of the land. For many, these lands are their livelihoods, their history, and their legacy. They

want to leave the land better than they found it and pass it down to future generations, and our conservation programs and services that we provide help them do just that.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fordyce follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD FORDYCE, ADMINISTRATOR, FARM SERVICE AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to be with you this morning. Today's hearing marks my first occasion to appear before this Subcommittee, and the Committee as a whole, since my appointment as Farm Service Agency (FSA) Administrator. I thank you for the opportunity to testify and share how FSA is helping farmers and ranchers to promote, build, and sustain family farms in support of a market-oriented, economically and environmentally sound American agriculture delivering an abundant, safe, and affordable food and fiber supply while sustaining quality agricultural communities.

Like Secretary Perdue, I am an unapologetic advocate for American agriculture. Farmers, ranchers, and foresters are the backbone of America. Shouldering the tremendous responsibility of feeding a rapidly growing nation and world, their critical work also provides economic stability across the countryside—supporting rural economies and creating jobs in local communities. Their stewardship and careful management of these vital landscapes builds resilient local economies with profitable farms and ranches, clean air and water, healthy food, and abundant wildlife.

The Farm Service Agency serves America's farmers, ranchers, and agricultural partners through the delivery of effective, efficient agricultural programs. The agency offers farmers a strong safety net through the administration of farm commodity and disaster programs while conserving natural resources and providing credit to agricultural producers who are unable to receive private, commercial credit with special emphasis on beginning, under-served and women farmers and ranchers.

The conservation programs, which FSA and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administer, are effective tools for farmers, ranchers, and land stewards to manage the land and conserve natural resources. As a farmer myself, I truly understand the benefits these agencies and tools provide to producers across the country in finding the best solutions to meet our conservation and business goals. Today, I'll talk about FSA conservation programs and the benefits they are providing for the American people.

CRP Benefits Stretch Far and Wide

Created by the 1985 Farm Bill, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is one of the USDA's largest conservation programs. CRP is a voluntary program. The program recognizes that the benefits from a farmer placing environmentally sensitive cropland into conservation uses are realized not just by the farm but also by all people. Land placed in CRP contributes to cleaner water, provides habitat for valued wildlife, generates pollination services, helps to reduce downstream flood damage, and restores aquifers. In doing so, CRP supports wildlife populations and natural landscapes, and spurs hunting, fishing, recreation, tourism, and other economic activity across rural America.

What separates CRP from the Department's other conservation programs are the annual rental payments in addition to the more traditional cost share assistance provided to program participants for installing conservation practices. Throughout the 10 to 15 year CRP contract, CRP participants receive annual rental payments based on their offer to retire marginal cropland from production and restore it to conservation covers comprised of either grasses or trees, and associated forbs, legumes, and other plants.

In general, farmers and ranchers are willing to voluntarily install conservation practices when and where practicable so long as doing so does not adversely impact their ability to make a living off the land.

Since 1985, CRP has made a vital impact on our landscapes:

- More than 8 billion tons of soils have been prevented from eroding.
- More than 170,000 stream miles are protected with CRP riparian and grass buffers. In New York State, these buffers are protecting the City of New York's water supply.

- On fields enrolled in CRP, nitrogen and phosphorus losses are reduced an average of 95 percent and 85 percent, respectively.
- In 2017, nitrogen and phosphorus releases to the environment were reduced by an estimated 521 million pounds and 103 million pounds, respectively.
- Sediment loss reductions were an estimated 192 million tons in 2017.

CRP also helps farmers and ranchers in rural America create wildlife habitat for both game and non-game wildlife species, helps protect threatened and endangered species, and even helps prevent candidate species from being listed.

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) identified the CRP as having contributed to restoration of grassland habitats, positively influencing Lesser prairie chicken abundance and distributions.
- A USFWS analysis credited CRP with increasing Prairie Pothole duck populations by two million ducks per year between 1992 and 2004. A second analysis found that between 2007 and 2011, habitat on CRP land contributed approximately 1.5 million ducks annually.

The benefits from CRP, along with those reaped from NRCS conservation programs, positively impact not only producers' lands, but also their neighbors, their watersheds, and ultimately the entire U.S. population and beyond.

Current State of CRP

CRP allows USDA to contract with landowners so that environmentally sensitive land can be devoted to generating conservation benefits. Participants establish long-term, resource-conserving cover and, in return, FSA, which administers CRP on behalf of the Commodity Credit Corporation, provides participants with annual rental payments and other assistance. FSA administers CRP with technical support from NRCS, state forestry agencies, local soil and water conservation districts, and other non-Federal technical service providers.

Currently, 22.4 million acres are enrolled in CRP contracts, including 13.5 million acres under General sign-up enrollment authority, 8 million acres under Continuous sign-up enrollment authority, and 900,000 acres under the Grasslands sign-up enrollment authority. Twenty-four million acres of enrollment were authorized under the 2014 Farm Bill.

Producers have been able to enroll in CRP in multiple ways: General sign-ups, Continuous sign-up and Grassland enrollments. General sign-up is a competitive process where land is ranked using an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). General sign-ups occur periodically, not necessarily every year. The last General sign-up occurred in the spring of 2016.

CRP Continuous sign-ups occur on a continuous basis throughout the year and do not have a distinct sign-up period. Unlike General sign-ups, there is no bidding and ranking; the land is enrolled automatically if it meets the eligibility criteria. Continuous sign-ups target specific practices such as riparian and grass buffer strips along streams and wetland restorations, as well as specific habitat types of wildlife. Under the CRP Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), which utilizes continuous sign-up, FSA partners with states to address high priority local and regional conservation issues.

CRP Grasslands sign-ups occur on a continuous basis with periodic rankings and selection. Under this signup type, landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland and pastureland, and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. The statutory enrollment cap is 2 million acres, which counts against the overall CRP acreage cap.

The Transition Incentives Program (TIP) encourages landowners to sell or lease long-term to beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers and ranchers willing to implement sustainable practices or transition to organic production by providing 2 years of additional payments for expiring CRP-enrolled land. About \$22 million of TIP funding was obligated under the 2014 Farm Bill, helping an estimated 1,519 eligible new producers.

CRP contracts on 1.6 million acres (combined general and continuous) are set to expire on September 30, 2019. Although enrollment is currently suspended as we evaluate and respond to changes to the program required by the 2018 Farm Bill, FSA will be sending out letters to producers, who have CRP acres expiring this year, later this month.

CRP and 2018 Farm Bill

The passage of the 2018 Farm Bill brings some new opportunities for CRP. One of the most noticeable changes is a gradually increased enrollment cap from 24 million acres in FY 2019 to 27 million acres in FY 2023, of which at least 8.6 million

acres will be targeted for continuous practices and 2 million allocated for CRP grasslands. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill directs water quality practices to be prioritized, aiming for at least 40 percent of continuous CRP acres to be in practices under the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) initiative.

Two new pilot programs were also added to CRP: CLEAR 30 and the Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot Program (SHIPP). The CLEAR 30 CRP pilot program will allow producers to reenroll CRP CLEAR water quality practices for up to 30 years. SHIPP will offer short-term (3 to 5 year) contracts to landowners to remove the least productive land from their operation.

Other additions to CRP include expanded opportunities for haying, grazing, and other management tools, cost-share for fencing and other water distribution practices, and the opportunity for certain land that was under a 15 year CRP contract that expired in 2017 or 2018 to reenroll.

FSA continues to look for ways to help new and beginning farmers gain entry into farming—whether through outreach or other means. The 2018 Farm Bill provided \$50 million for TIP through FY 2023, up from the \$33 million provided in the 2014 Farm Bill.

Since the start of CRP, rental rates have been set to follow the market. FSA currently uses data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service cash rents survey, adjusted for soil types, to set CRP annual payment rates. Rates are updated periodically, and under the new farm bill will be updated annually. The 2018 Farm Bill reinforced FSA's process for setting rates, reaffirming the need for alternative rates in certain cases and adding a proration of those rates by signup. The 2018 Farm Bill also added requirements to publish rates on the web and offer an opportunity for Congressional briefings prior to publication of the rates. USDA continues to strive for CRP rates to follow the market while meeting Congressional intent for conservation of the land.

Currently, FSA is evaluating all the changes made to the CRP by the 2018 Farm Bill and is working to implement those changes as quickly as possible. The language and structural changes to the CRP statute are extensive, including adding the new targets for enrollment, codifying language on mid-contract management and haying and grazing, specifying incentives, prorating annual rental rates while allowing for alternatives, codifying Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) administration specifically for the first time, adding the two pilot programs, and adding reporting requirements. Where administrative decisions are needed, we are ensuring all our decisions are facts-based and data-driven, with a decision-making mindset that is customer-focused.

Emergency Assistance through non-Title II Conservation Programs

First authorized in 1978, the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) is of great importance to farmers and ranchers across the nation after a disaster. Within the last year alone, we have seen fires across the western states and our prairies, hurricanes pummel the Southeast, volcanic eruptions in Hawaii, extreme drought in the Texas Panhandle, and just last month, historic snowfall and flooding across the Northern Plains and Midwest. Even with the best planning, the impacts from these disasters will take years, in many cases, for full recovery.

ECP provides funding and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers to restore farmland damaged by natural disasters and for emergency water conservation measures in severe droughts. FSA allocated more than \$226 million in ECP cost-share and technical assistance funds to 37 states in FY 2018 for farmland rehabilitation across the nation resulting from disasters.

As natural disasters happen, we stand ready to provide ECP funding, within our available resources, to farmers and ranchers in those states to restore livestock fences and conservation structures, remove flood debris, and rehabilitate farmland. So far, FSA has allowed for the streamlining of signup at the local county offices by authorizing waivers of on-site visits to farms and ranches where needed. County offices are currently conducting sign-ups in a variety of counties across the nation.

Under the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP), FSA provides payments to eligible owners of nonindustrial private forest land to carry out emergency measures to restore land damaged by a natural disaster. Using EFRP, FSA provided targeted funding in FY 2018 for forest rehabilitation to owners of non-industrial private forest land across the nation resulting from disasters such as western wildfires and drought, southeast hurricanes, and tornados. FSA allocated over \$13 million in EFRP cost-share and technical assistance funds to ten states in FY 2018.

Enhanced Service through Closer Interaction with NRCS

Building on a long history of working closely with NRCS on programs like CRP and ECP, FSA is very much focused on continuing to strengthen our existing rela-

tionship with NRCS and the Risk Management Agency (RMA) in the new Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area. With nearly 3,000 offices across communities nationwide, our employees continue to provide the information, tools, and delivery systems necessary for producers—in every state and territory—to conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. Together, we look forward to enhancing the service provided to our farming and ranching customers.

Our conservation programs, along with those of NRCS, are part of the tremendous toolkit that FPAC, and USDA as a whole, provides to the original American land stewards, U.S. farmers and ranchers, to support their agricultural operations.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide FSA's perspective on the role our conservation programs aid in delivering on Secretary Perdue's four guiding principles: to maximize the ability of American agriculture to create jobs, sell foods and fiber, and feed and clothe the world; to prioritize customer service for the taxpayers; to ensure that our food supply is safe and secure; and through the support of programs and assistance like those described today, to maintain good stewardship of the natural resources that provide us with our miraculous bounty.

Madam Chair this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer your questions and those of the other Subcommittee Members.

The CHAIR. Thank you both for your testimony.

Members will be recognized for questioning in order of seniority for Members who were here at the start of the hearing, and after that, Members will be recognized in order of arrival.

I would like to begin by recognizing Chairman Peterson of Minnesota.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. COLLIN C. PETERSON, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM MINNESOTA**

Mr. PETERSON. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Fordyce, we found out yesterday afternoon, and you apparently have announced that at 10:00 this morning that you are going to open up the continuous using the existing regulations. How do you think you have the authority to do that? And I just want you to know that if you do, I am going to stop it somehow or another.

This program has been hijacked by the continuous stuff and the CREP stuff, which means we are going to have some exposure to what has been going on here, but I am tired of it.

And so you are delaying the general signup to December for some reason because you have to do regs. Why don't you have to do regs on the continuous? What rationale are you using down there?

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, Mr. Chairman, thanks for the question. It is good to see you.

My response to that would be after thorough analysis, FSA has determined that CRP continuous and CREP sign-ups may be opened under limited circumstances prior to publication of the regulation.

FSA is also working to ensure subsequent to the updating of rental rates and publication of the CRP regulation, a general signup will be held in December of 2019.

The Secretary and I are committed to meeting this timeline within the law.

Mr. PETERSON. Why, if you can do it for continuous, why can't you do it for general? What is the rationale?

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, I would say that we are continuing to go through those decisions on the general signup. The rental rate piece, some of the other things that don't necessarily enter into those continuous—

Mr. PETERSON. Well, did you guys not get the message out of the farm bill? For the continuous, the signup has been \$134 an acre, the general is \$52.

What you are going to end up doing here is you are going to create a situation where farmers are going to go out there and do everything they can to get in, when they find out about these new rental rates, to get into the continuous because they are going to get three times as much as they would get if they get in the general. And that is just going to suck more acres up into the continuous that are not going to be available for the general.

Now, maybe some of this stuff does some good in terms of water quality and so forth, but it does almost zero good for wildlife. These small strips are not doing anything for wildlife. The only thing that does are big tract CRP, which is what you get out of the general.

And one of the reasons we have had trouble around the country is because we have eroded the general CRP and gone to continuous. I am serious, and I don't know what we can do to stop you. If I have to sue you, I will. This is not right and if you can do continuous without regulations, then you can do general without regulations.

And I don't think farmers at this point understand what is going to come under the new rules, but they will find out. They are always smarter than we are, and you are going to create a situation here.

I don't know. The statement you gave me is not satisfactory to me. And maybe you need to have the Secretary call me or somebody, but I do not buy what you are saying, and I don't think you have to do this.

Message delivered, and also some of this easement stuff that you guys have been doing, some of this stuff was done before you got there; but, they are adding easements onto these continuous signups and CREPs, that are just out of line, and we are going to be doing a hearing on this too in the full Committee as soon as we get all the facts on the table.

I just want you to know I am watching you.

One other thing. It says in here you are also going to delay the sign up for the GRP for some reason, and I don't know what that is for; but, we have doubled the size of that program and that is something that would be available to a lot of people. I don't see any reason why that should be delayed either if you are going to be able to do this with the continuous.

I just want you to take this message back and if you guys don't correct this, I am going to figure out what we can do here to change it.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

After hearing from the Chairman, I am going to resume calling on my colleagues, back into the order of for questioning.

And I will begin with recognizing myself for 5 minutes.

The 2018 Farm Bill made a number of important changes to the title II conservation programs.

Chief Lohr and Administrator Fordyce, can you both start off by providing us with an update on the implementation of the farm bill

conservation programs? In particular, I would like to know when do you expect the first and the last rules to be published?

Mr. LOHR. Thank you, Madam Chair, for your question and again for having this hearing today.

You are right. Congress was extremely generous in proving their commitment to conservation with the funding that was delivered to the programs, and we certainly thank you for that.

We started working the day after the farm bill was signed into law, in December, to create the rules and regulations for the farm bill. As you know, it is quite a lengthy process. Literally the next day we began assembling our teams, our review teams, and throughout January up until now they have been working diligently to go through the entire process.

We are making great progress. I think we are definitely on track. Our goal is to have these rules, the interim rules, formulated by the first quarter of the new fiscal year. I think we are on track to make that happen.

Of course, as you know, the current farm bill programs, our farmers haven't had any gap in service, because based on the extension of the 2014 Farm Bill they have been able to continue as normal this year. The rules that we are writing will take effect for 2020, so 2019 everything runs as before.

Just a quick update on CSP: We had our deadline that closed on May 10 of signup, so farmers were able to sign up for CSP contracts, and some changes that the farm bill made to CSP, it shifted from instead of an acres cap to a dollar cap, and approximately \$700 million a year next year will be for CSP.

There is also a new component called CSP grassland which there is some talk about we are working with FSA to take land that has been not cropped for the last 9 years that is not eligible for RPLC payments, they can enroll it in a CSP grassland program and be paid \$18 a year. There will be more details about that program coming up later.

EQIP, kind of our flagship program, again as it was said earlier, increased funding support up to \$2 billion by the end of the farm bill in 5 years. Some of the priorities we are working on is how we can serve better the historically under-served populations by approving advanced payments of 50 percent before the practices begin.

We are in the process of reviewing those conservation practice standards which should take place later this year and—

The CHAIR. Great. And Chief Lohr.

Mr. LOHR. Yes.

The CHAIR. If I could just thank you very much for some of those details. But getting back to the dates for the rules to be published, do you have a specific timeframe? You said by the first quarter. And so my question is, many of the programs are allowed to continue operating under the existing rules until the end of Fiscal Year 2019, so do you all have plans in place or what are the contingencies available if the relevant rules are not done when the fiscal year ends in September?

Mr. LOHR. Sure. It is certainly our goal to work towards making that happen. We hate to put ourselves in a box and say it will be

done by October 1, but that is certainly our goal and we are working hard to make that happen.

The CHAIR. Okay. Well, certainly from a Committee perspective or Subcommittee perspective, I would like to make sure that we stay apprised of the timing for those rules.

Mr. LOHR. Yes.

The CHAIR. And when they will be published so we know the impact on those producers who rely on those vital programs.

Mr. LOHR. Absolutely.

The CHAIR. Chief Lohr, as you know, as a fellow Virginian, parts of Virginia are on the Chesapeake Bay watershed. I know your farm is as well.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program, RCPP, brings conservation partners and USDA to the same table to support farmers and ranchers as they address shared natural resource concerns.

RCPP programs like the Farm Stewardship Project in my district support increasing the use of cover crops and reduced tillage.

Unfortunately, since RCPP started in 2014, the Chesapeake Bay watershed has seen reductions in NRCS funds supporting critical in-the-field conservation work.

How will the farm bill changes enable us to build new successful RCPP partnerships in the Chesapeake Bay watershed?

Mr. LOHR. Well, that is a great question, and RCPP actually is one of my favorite programs that we administer here because it is a collaborative effort of bringing various partners and stakeholders together. The change is very quick in RCPP. It is going to a national dedicated funding at \$300 million a year.

The money is going to be half divided between state RCPP projects and the other half is going to be in those targeted areas which the Chesapeake Bay watershed is one of them. There are opportunities available.

Like I said, \$150 million will be spread out across those targeted areas and it is a ranking process, so it certainly encourages the partners that are located within the Chesapeake Bay to put their proposals together.

We will be announcing signup deadlines later in the year, but I agree and certainly being a farmer within the Bay watershed, it is important that we can have these great programs in action taking effect to better improve the quality of the water in the Bay.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much.

I now recognize Ranking Member LaMalfa from California.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief Lohr, in my district in addition to the Federal land, there are many thousands of acres of family-owned forests that are—as we see—at high risk of catastrophic wildfire year after year.

Many landowners, they want to do the right thing and treat their land, but at over \$2,000 an acre it is out of reach under some types of conventional thinking.

How is NRCS able to support these family forest owners that have this challenge, and how many forest owners have you had a chance to work with, and on how many acres so far in California have you had a chance to implement?

Mr. LOHR. I certainly appreciate the question and you are right. The wildfires across the West and especially in California have truly been devastating both on a public scale and a private land scale as well.

I would say first of all, our EQIP Program that I mentioned earlier, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, kind of works two ways.

Forest landowners, before a disaster, can certainly put conservation practices on their forest lands through EQIP, whether it be conservation plans or looking at forest management practices or doing prescribed burns.

There are EQIP dollars that are available for farmers that they can do certainly before a disaster, but then once a disaster happens, EQIP can also be used again. Although it is not intended to be a disaster relief program, there are funds available through EQIP that help in times of disasters as well.

And so certainly again, being able to look at how do you remove the burned timber, replanting trees, or improving soil erosion that takes place after these wildfires, there are EQIP cost-share dollars available to landowners who are facing that situation. Certainly, I would encourage your farmers to reach out to one of our local NRCS offices.

I don't have an actual number of acres that have been affected in California that have actually worked through our NRCS offices. I would be happy to—

Mr. LAMALFA. That is all right. I don't expect you to have an exact number, but do you feel like it is getting to the ground? Are people taking advantage of it in significant effect? Yes?

Mr. LOHR. Yes.

I do know that there are EQIP programs or projects that are in place, and I would certainly—I don't know if you have met our State Conservationist, Carlos Suarez. If not, I think it would be a great opportunity to make that connection for you, as he oversees all of NRCS in the State of California.

But yes, as far as digging in to making sure that the farmers and the forest landowners in that area are aware, certainly the staff in those areas know that when these situations happen, they do their best to reach out to the landowners to make sure they know their services are available and working through our partners as well.

Mr. LAMALFA. All right, thank you.

Mr. LOHR. Thank you.

Mr. LAMALFA. And for both of you, Administrator Fordyce as well, often times we have environmental groups, others that point towards regulations as the only way to achieve conservation results, and seeing in my own backyard, my own district, we have seen a lot of great work done along with NRCS and FSA that has made improvements on ESA recovery for species, wetlands, and streams, and many other things in the program. I am in the rice industry but others are conserving water, like fish screens.

Can you give me your opinion on how you think the voluntary conservation would actually have a better track record than the regulatory hammer that so many folks are worried about? Because I see a lot of volunteerism on there, people doing things on their

own to provide fish passage and fish safety and fish screening, a lot of other things. Please?

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, that is a great question and something I know that the Chief and I in our current roles and in actually in our previous roles talked a lot about, and that is that concept of voluntary conservation. And I do believe that we will gain far more benefits through a voluntary conservation approach as opposed to a regulatory approach.

I think that agriculture, in general, for decades have been some of the most fervent conservationists from a voluntary perspective. And I mentioned in my opening testimony that farms, these lands are a legacy. They are a history in these families and they want to improve them and make them better than they were than when they first took them over. And so I do believe the concept of voluntary conservation will get us more advancements and more successes than taking a regulatory route.

Mr. LAMALFA. Okay. Thank you. Quickly, as I have a little time left.

The issue with finding markets for wood coming off the forest here, whether it is post-wildfire that was salvaged, what is NRCS able to do to help make more markets and take more advantage of biomass?

I am going to have to let you think about that one. Maybe we will get a second round.

Thank you.

The CHAIR. I now recognize the gentlewoman from Ohio, for 5 minutes.

Ms. FUDGE. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you both for your testimony this morning.

Mr. Fordyce, the amount of land owned by African Americans has plunged over the past century from about 15 million acres now down to about 2 million. And you may or may not be aware that 40 percent of that land is heir property and has been left out of this process for some time.

However, in the 2018 Farm Bill, there is language that allows them to participate. It enables them to qualify to get a farm number so that they can participate in the programs.

What specific outreach or strategies have you used to let these farmers know that they are now qualified, and when did you start it, or if you haven't when are you going to start?

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, thank you for the question, and you do bring up a very important point that since I have been there almost a year, that topic has come up in my visits across the country. I very much appreciate the language in the farm bill that will help us address that as well.

I know that we are talking through the process as to how we will implement it. From an outreach perspective we have a very robust outreach program.

We have an outreach coordinator at headquarters here in Washington, and she has a few staff here in Washington, but we have outreach coordinators, public affairs and outreach coordinators—

Ms. FUDGE. I don't want to cut you off, but I just want to know what it is you are doing to do the outreach.

Mr. FORDYCE. When? We are in the process of doing that outreach as we speak.

Ms. FUDGE. Thank you very much. You are contacting these farmers with the heir property? You know who they are and you are making contact with them?

Mr. FORDYCE. That I can't answer. I don't know the specific mechanism by which we are doing that, but—

Ms. FUDGE. Could you get back to me and let me know?

Mr. FORDYCE. Yes, ma'am, I will. Yes.

Ms. FUDGE. Thank you so much.

I live on the Great Lakes. I live in the State of Ohio. Water quality is a major concern for us as we get our drinking water from Lake Erie.

We have had problems in the past with nitrogen and phosphorus runoff, which has led to toxic algae blooms which I am sure you are aware of.

I was very excited about the fact that in the farm bill we did include provisions that provide farmers and ranchers with additional incentives to address and improve water quality.

Can you both just briefly touch on the programs that are available to do this and if you think that they are being successful or will be successful? Included in that, if you could talk just briefly about the Source Water Protection provisions in the bill and the CLEAR 30 (Clean Lakes, Estuaries and Rivers (CLEAR) Initiative) Pilot?

Mr. FORDYCE. I will take the first stab at that, Congresswoman.

The Under Secretary and I had traveled last summer to Michigan and Ohio in the western Lake Erie basin area to look at the CREP Program, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and the adoption of producers there. It has a high adoption rate. A lot of producers are participating.

I met with some other community members in that western Lake Erie region, and while it is probably a little too early to tell what kind of gains we are getting from doing that, we know that they are positive gains, a little hard to measure at this point, but certainly a popular program and is working toward reducing sediment and nutrients that are ultimately in that watershed.

Ms. FUDGE. Mr. Lohr?

Mr. LOHR. Thank you, ma'am, and I will be brief because NRCS has many programs that really tackle this problem.

First of all, it was mentioned RCPP, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, one of our most successful projects because of the number of partners that it brings in addressing large scale watershed areas like this. Within RCPP farmers then are able to participate with EQIP contracts that allow them to focus on specific water quality issues, whether it be stream fencing to keep livestock out of streams, whether it be working on cover crops to make sure that the soil stays in place to reduce sediment runoff, different types of tillage practices, going to a no-till again which reduces runoff.

RCPP is one of those programs that again, it multiplies the dollars three or four times with lots of partners.

I mentioned EQIP. There are 169 practices that we have within the EQIP Program. Many of those focus on water quality to give

farmers, again specific cost-share opportunities to make sure that they are protecting the resources, again keeping the water as pure as possible. Conservation easements are—sorry.

Ms. FUDGE. No, I was just going to say—

Mr. LOHR. Yes.

Ms. FUDGE. Thank you. I just want you to be aware that we are watching, because it is an important issue for us.

Mr. LOHR. Thank you.

Ms. FUDGE. And I would close with this, Madam Chair.

As the Chairman of the Full Committee had said, we just expect for you all to uphold the letter and the spirit of the law. We just passed a farm bill and certainly we would appreciate if you would not ignore our will, the will of Congress, for your own.

I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

I yield back.

The CHAIR. Thank you. I now recognize the gentlewoman from Maine, for 5 minutes.

Ms. PINGREE. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you to you and the Ranking Member for holding this hearing today, and to both of you being in front of us, and thank you both for the work that you are taking on. Welcome to your relatively new jobs.

The programs that you administer and the work that you do is critically important in my State of Maine. I am very proud to represent Maine where we have had somewhat of a renaissance of farming in our state after losing some of our ground. People are coming back. We have a lot more young farmers in farming today. We have land that is coming under cultivation, families finding new ways to preserve their farm, and a lot of people taking advantage of new markets. And much of it is because of the programs that you administer and their ability to access them. Thank you so much for that.

I am really interested in the intersection of climate change in agriculture and with this resurgence of interest and a lot of things being written about climate change, sometimes the first thing we go after is the farmers. And while there are practices that need to change in agriculture, people often don't understand that soils have the capacity to store a tremendous amount of carbon as well as the plants that we are growing, and farmers really need to be our partners in climate solutions. And through the programs you administer, you are already promoting many of the very things that we need farmers to do more of.

I would love to hear you talk a little bit about voluntary programs like EQIP and how their incentivizing farmers to do this and how we can be ramping up some of those soil health practices, and how you are thinking about it going into the future?

Let me just throw in my follow up on there, and I would love to hear from you both, but a little bit for you Mr. Lohr. In order for farmers to be in a position to participate in some of the carbon markets that we anticipate they could be a part of, we are going to need some verified ways to recognize what they do, and I am glad to hear you talking this morning about the soil health demonstration trial because that is a critical part of it. But if you want to dig in a little bit deeper about some of the ways we can recognize and administer in the role that USDA might play in that.

So, go to it.

Mr. LOHR. All right. Thank you very much for your question, and I appreciate you recognizing the efforts that farmers in a positive way are doing to help mitigate climate change, because you are right, there are a lot of the things that we do already as conservationists which have a positive impact towards mitigating climate change; making sure that we keep the ground covered with cover crops making sure that there is grass on the ground, that our forests are healthy. Healthy soil reduces erosion in times of disaster.

As you said, the practices that our farmers are already engaging in, especially through EQIP and those conservation practices, are going a long way already towards being able to mitigate climate change and sequester the carbon that is in the air.

We have about 25 plant material centers across the country that are administered by NRCS staff, and these are many research areas as well where they are able to see which cover crops are the most effective, constantly looking at practices that can be adapted by our farmers across the country, again to mitigate that climate change.

And you are right, with the CIG grants, there have been trials before that have been done to focus on the trading of carbon credits. That is the point of CIG. It is innovative. It is new ideas. And these on-farm trials, these demonstrations, again with the soil health component, will go a long way towards looking at creating new practices that can be replicated, again towards tackling this issue.

Mr. FORDYCE. I think the Chief answered that question very well from a farmer perspective, from NRCS's perspective.

From FSA's perspective, I think that if you look at the number of acres of CRP that are enrolled, 22½ million acres. Just in 2017 alone, CRP reduced carbon, emissions of carbon dioxide, by an estimated 34 million metric tons. It is the largest carbon sequester program of any Federal program, so certainly I think that is important.

I might just add just from a personal perspective, on our farm we use cover crops following corn or soybeans. We also have a small CRP contract, but the Chief really laid it out really well. The efforts of agriculture, the efforts of farmers, again from that voluntary perspective I think are really, really making a dent in some of the issues that you referred to.

Ms. PINGREE. And just quickly. I am going to run out of time. But, Mr. Lohr, in the Soil Health Demonstration Trial, what do you think are some of the most promising ways to develop tools to measure what is going on in the soil so that farmers can have a outcome-based measurement?

Mr. LOHR. That is a great question, because again, we have to be able to capture the work that is being done.

I will mention, we also have what is called the CEAP, the Conservation Effects Assessment Program. This is again, a program we have across the country that partners with other agencies and entities to best try to measure ways and collect, and one of the emphases through CEAP is how we can best track and collect that data.

Ms. PINGREE. Great. Thank you. Thanks, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. I now recognize the gentleman from Georgia, for 5 minutes.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you, very much, Madam Chair. And I want to thank our guests for being here.

Yes, it is my belief that our farmers and ranchers across this nation are the true conservationists because they depend on the land, the work day in and day out of caring for their land and ensuring its health and vitality, and they do this and they have for generations.

USDA conservation programs also play an important role in these efforts.

My constituents in Georgia's 12th District contact my office regularly asking for more information on the different programs available to them as they continue to seek more ways to enhance their current practices on their lands to not only improve cultivation, but to help conserve and provide for wildlife.

This is for both of our guests this morning.

What are the biggest obstacles agricultural producers face when they attempt to adopt new practices that have been encouraged on their land?

Mr. LOHR. That is a great question. And I will be brief.

I was in North Dakota last week visiting with a farmer in the Red River Valley, and he was very progressive in his approaches, but he was trying things that were clearly outside the box where none of his neighbors were joining suit. And I asked him that very question. How can we get more farmers to implement good conservation?

And it really takes by a farmer understanding the importance of soil health, being able to understand and then be that farmer that is in the community on the cutting edge to be able to model for other farmers as well.

Certainly cost is always an issue, but again, through our programs with cost-share monies, we provide opportunities in some cases up to a hundred percent, but clearly we try through our conservation programs through our various partnerships is to eliminate the cost as much as possible. Cost is one.

Not having the proper information. Again, we have soil health scientists that are around the country that try to put on seminars and workshops and field days, partnering with extension agents and universities to try to get the word out so farmers understand the practices that are available and the programs that are available.

A combination of it is hard to break that cycle of it has never been done before and cover crops won't work, or we can't use no-till conservation here, but we have to have soil health champions that are willing to be on the leading edge. We have to have our staff that is willing to be engaged to tell the story, and we have to rely on our partners, again to show that these opportunities are out there.

Mr. ALLEN. Anything to add, Mr. Fordyce?

Mr. FORDYCE. Yes, Congressman.

I would echo what the Chief said; but, farmers in general are early adopters of technology. They are early adopters of conserva-

tion practices because there is that philosophical desire to do the right thing.

And I would say that a lot of conversations that I have had long before I had this job was that there has to be patience. There has to be patience and there has to be that network as the Chief referenced, whether it is Federal agencies, land-grant universities and other partners that help us get conservation on the land and adopt those new technologies and those new practices.

But a lot of times it is patience.

Mr. ALLEN. Do you see as a follow up—obviously we are here to listen today and to react to the needs of our constituents and particularly in agriculture. What can we do as a body, as the House of Representatives on both sides of the aisle, to help you with these challenges?

And that is for both of you.

Mr. LOHR. Well, I think you certainly went a long way towards joining that with the passage of the farm bill. The conservation title was extremely generous and we are as an agency, along with FSA, are excited to get these rules and regulations written so we can streamline, that we can look at how we can better serve all of the facets of agriculture.

I appreciate the support you guys have done. I think now having hearings like this are great, because hopefully this hearing will be picked up and the media will talk about the things that we have done, and hopefully there will be folks out there around the country that will listen and understand and learn about maybe programs and agreements that are out there that they didn't know about.

Mr. ALLEN. Communication is key?

Mr. LOHR. Absolutely, sir. Absolutely.

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, I think communication absolutely.

Mr. ALLEN. Or education, educating our folks out there to what is available.

Mr. FORDYCE. And I might just go one step further. I think there is a really good story to tell in agriculture, whether you are from Georgia or whether you are from Virginia or California or Maine, and the Members telling that good story and talking about the good things that are happening in agriculture across this country can certainly help go a long way too.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you. It is a good story. Thank you very much. I yield back.

The CHAIR. Thank you. I thank the Members for their questions, and we are going to proceed with a second round of questions for the Members who remain here.

And so I begin by recognizing myself for another 5 minutes.

For both of the witnesses today, sometimes producers will have a main point of contact at either NRCS or FSA, and so they will go to their regular agent with an issue, but it may be actually that their issue is covered by the other agency.

I have heard personally from my constituents about cases of lapsed communication where a conservation issue that they could have gotten assistance for was actually not addressed because the agency they approached first didn't refer them or the agency wasn't able to address their question.

Could you both address how you will encourage communication between your field agents in the same region and how the farm production and conservation reorganization will impact this issue?

Mr. FORDYCE. Absolutely. And, Madam Chair, that is an excellent question and it is something that the Chief and I visit about a lot.

We collaborate, not only the Chief and I, but our staffs here in Washington. When the Secretary had a vision of bringing together a new mission area that brought together the three agencies that are the most farmer-facing. RMA, NRCS and FSA to come together as one mission area and really, really work hard on collaboration and put a focus on if we are going to provide exceptional customer service to our farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards across this country, those three agencies have to be lockstep and working together. I think that message comes from the top, and the Chief and I certainly promote that and talk about that.

NRCS has State Conservationists, we have state executive directors that are carrying that message as well about collaboration and working together.

I know our Secretary would not be happy to hear that a producer went into an office and did not experience exceptional customer service, and so it is our responsibility to make sure that that happens. And I think with bringing the agencies together under one mission area, I believe in my mind that it is happening and, but we have some work to do maybe in some parts of the country to do a better job.

Mr. LOHR. If I can comment again, if that is okay?

We have roughly about 2,000 shared offices across the country between FSA and NRCS, and again, the goal for us is for a farmer to walk in the door who has an issue and the staff works back and forth both ways to direct them in the proper direction, whether they need FSA help or NRCS help as well.

As the Administrator said, our vision is certainly to have that collaboration throughout the country, and again, if there are individual situations in offices where there isn't that collaboration, certainly we want to make sure that the area leaders and the state leaders know that we can address that because that is not the vision that we are trying to set from here in Washington.

The CHAIR. I appreciate your work on that and I hope that we are able, we as Members of this Committee or Members of Congress, can ensure that our constituents understand where they can best go for services. And I thank you for your commitment to serving individual producers.

For a second question, it is about the EQIP Program. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program or EQIP is widely used by farmers and ranchers in my district, and Chief Lohr, the most recent agricultural Census revealed some bright spots for conservation. More farms are implementing conservation practices, reduced tillage practices increased by 21 percent, and land planted with cover crops increased by over 15 million acres. This is very good news in the areas I represent in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The 2018 Farm Bill does offer increased payment rates for cover crops resource-conserving crop rotation, and rotational grazing, and

what plans are in store for the Department to promote these practices to farmers and producers?

Mr. LOHR. And I appreciate your in-depth knowledge of what EQIP does. It is great to hear that you understand the program and you support it.

As I said earlier, we are in the process now of formulating the rules and regulations that we will be rolling out later this year, and it is going to be exciting for farmers to actually see what is going to be available.

Our job is to communicate and educate the best that we can starting here in D.C. with our public affairs team to administer press releases and working individually with our state offices all the way through to our district offices across the country.

I can assure you that once we have new programs and exciting changes, we will do our best to make sure that we are being able to get the word out, starting with our State Conservationists filtered all the way down to our district offices through social media, through press releases, through partnering with other entities and partners so they can help spread the word as well.

Again, this is good news. We are excited to have the opportunity, but it doesn't do any good if our producers are unaware.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much.

I now recognize Ranking Member LaMalfa, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you again, Chair Spanberger.

Back to Chief Lohr on the question I alluded to in the beginning.

Again, we have a situation where we are importing a tremendous amount of timber and lumber products to this country and we have all this inventory, especially in the western states, that is burning up or at least causing a hazardous situation and causing more harm—the density of the forests is causing harm to it itself. Because if we are having a drought situation, then you can see that you are not going to have a winning combination there, trees starving for limited water supply.

What we need in my view, and I want to see what your thoughts are on how we can develop more of the markets for the wood products that come domestically, help these family landowners and on public lands to feed the manufacturing and the biomass, which we need a lot more of on the green energy side of it.

How can NRCS be helping, NRCS be working with more local markets, more domestic markets for utilizing biomass for energy, or the lumber, the timber that we still need in this country, and utilize more of what we grow domestically for own communities and our own economy and our own fire safety, for wildfire mitigation, *et cetera*?

How can we kick that up significantly as what we are facing?

Mr. LOHR. Well, I appreciate your question. It is certainly a good one.

I will say I think the answer comes back to being able to look at partnerships.

Obviously, we are in the conservation business, so our job is to work with the individual landowners to have the best conservation practices on their operation that they can manage their forests. When it gets into the marketing of products, that is a little bit out of our wheelhouse, but within USDA there are other agencies that

focus on that. I would say the Agricultural Marketing Service, for example.

Certainly, if there is a need that you can bring to us, we could certainly reach out to other agencies to try to begin a dialogue and kind of let them know the issues that we heard and see if there is some communications that can take place.

But again—

Mr. LAMALFA. Certainly, underlining domestically grown, domestically harvested as an offset for the inventory and the wildfire risk that is just making forests, so I will stop.

Mr. LOHR. Yes. Well, I appreciate you bringing the issue to us. We will be happy to follow back up with you for more details and maybe our team can try to help get you pointed in the right direction with an agency that might be able to be able to take the lead in that.

But we will certainly be able to follow back up.

Mr. LAMALFA. Yes. And I know the Secretary is taking great interest in that as well.

For both of you on the panel here as well, again, a lot of discussion about climate policy, maybe as regards to the Green New Deal. That is a bit of a moving target, but how are we going to specify this?

There are a lot of concerns that some of these ideas of this policy would be pretty negatively impactful to farmers who I find by and large are the best stewards of the land that is in use, and always on the cutting edge of trying to utilize better practices. Discussions about dictating land use and maybe less and less beef or meat in our diets.

Coming back to voluntary incentive-based success, can you speak to the success of how that relates to carbon sequestration and the wins we are having there when it is done integral with the voluntary activities or innovation that happens on the farm? Because what I find is that so many of the ideas do come from local innovation.

Mr. FORDYCE. Well, I can speak from FSA's perspective and NRCS and the carbon sequestration that takes place on the 22½ million acres of CRP, and we mentioned that earlier, an estimated 34 million metric tons.

But, what is interesting, that I found to be interesting since becoming the Administrator, is the amount of analysis that we do that supports or gives us information on the programs that we do.

We have a group within the business center at FPAC that does analysis, environmental analysis, economic analysis of the programs that we do, again voluntary, voluntary programs from a producer's perspective, that are communicated out, and there we have access to those things that can really tell a story, tell the tale of what are we accomplishing.

Certainly, I couldn't speak to those because they can get pretty technical, but we are measuring from the things that we do as an agency, but I know that other voluntary efforts that go beyond the things that NRCS or the things that FSA do, there are better ways to measure success. And so the more that we know, the more that we can document, and the more that we can prove goes a long way to telling the story about voluntary conservation.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIR. I now recognize the gentlewoman from Florida—oh, I am sorry, from Maine.

Ms. PINGREE. A lot of Mainers go to Florida in the winter, and we want them to come back now. It is summer.

Well, thank you. And I just want to thank Mr. LaMalfa for that question, because again, I think that is part of what I was trying to get at before.

The first thing people say when they are talking about climate change is, “Oh, you will never have a hamburger again,” or kind of put this fear in and talk about the problems that they see farmers creating. And I really appreciate the work that is being done to help people understand the important role the farmers play in carbon sequestration, and appreciate you mentioning the CEAP program to me. I wasn’t that familiar with it, so I will do a little work understanding that.

But, there are a lot of ways that the USDA can be helpful, frankly, in helping people to understand just what the myths and what the truths are and the work you are already doing that is really extensive to help farmers sequester carbon. The sooner that farmers can participate in a carbon market, which could potentially be an extra source of income for them, which no farmer is going to say no to, it will be really helpful.

Again, thank you for that and I will look forward to continuing to talk with you about that so we can kind of get people into the reality of what farmers do. But I really do think there is a big role for the USDA to play in promoting what you are already doing in a sense and helping people understand this climate debate in a different way, and putting farmers in a different light.

I wanted to ask you about a different program. I am really interested in the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program, and I am really glad to see robust funding for that. I would just like to hear you talk a little bit about the importance of it.

Administrator Lohr, you maybe have it on your farm, so you probably have some personal experience. I know it is just these easements have been really important in our state, and can you talk about their importance and what we can do with increased funding?

Mr. LOHR. I will warn you, I get excited when I talk about easement, so I don’t want use up the whole time.

Ms. PINGREE. That is good. You go right ahead.

Mr. LOHR. But yes, so on our farm we placed permanent conservation easements 2 years ago. I have six children and it is important to me as a fifth-generation farmer that that land can stay in ag production forever.

Our ACEP Program really has two components, the ALE which is the ag land component and WRE which is the wetland reserve component, so it allows some flexibility no matter where you are across the country or what your ultimate goal is to be able to make sure that land can be—the development rights can be taken away in the ALE example, and that land will have to stay in an agricultural use forever.

The beauty of it is we have partners, so there are land trusts and agencies around the country that partner with us that provide cash

matches and assistance and actually will hold the easements. And basically a farmer then will be compensated for the value of that development that they forego and then they are able to enhance the land, take that money and improve the operations. There have been so many success stories of farms that were able to take the money that they received from those development rights and invest it back into the business, to add an ice cream operation or some neat things like that to ensure that viability for the next generation.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. LOHR. ACEP is one of my favorite programs to talk about.

And then on the wetlands side, I was just in North and South Dakota last week and got to see land that is very environmentally sensitive. It doesn't make good environmental sense for farmers to try to farm this area when it is flooding every third year. There is a lot of erosion efforts that are being neglected, so the WRE allows them to basically, whether it is for 30 years or for a permanent easement, that land is taken out of production, restored back to the original wetlands and habit flourishes, native grasses flourish. It can really be a wonderful example of how the land was supposed to be.

I think that the ACEP program accomplishes both of those missions with our working lands and with our wetlands. I am a proud supporter and proud to say that we have permanent easements placed on our farm forever.

Thank you for the question.

Ms. PINGREE. No, that is great.

Another important component of it that people don't often recognize as part of this climate change debate is that we are losing farmland quickly, and I can't remember the number off the top of my head, but it is like acres per hour. It is so much.

But what people often don't calculate is that every time you lose an acre of farmland you are very likely increasing the climate change issue, the carbon in our atmosphere, because if it is turned over to development there is a very good chance that is more homes, more cars, more concrete, and less land to sequester the carbon. It just exacerbates the cycle.

Very quickly as I am almost out of time, but do you want to say anything good about the climate hubs? We just visited with the University of Maine, our land-grant college, and they were just really excited about the relationship they have with the ten, one of the ten climate hubs, and there is a little bit of decreased funding among the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, so we are anxious to keep that funding there, but it is kind of an accumulation of different agency funding.

Can you talk about their importance as we move forward in this discussion?

Mr. LOHR. Absolutely. Well, there are ten climate hubs around the country and they provide amazing data collection. We need to study what is happening with the environment, the impacts that the work that we are doing have on the climate. And again, it captures that information so we can make wise and informed decisions, so I think the climate hubs that USDA has are very impor-

tant and I am sure there are many that would appreciate increased funding for them, so.

Ms. PINGREE. That is good. Thank you. I yield back.

Thank you, Madam.

The CHAIR. I now recognize the gentleman from Georgia.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you again, Madam Chair, for continuing this important conversation we are having.

As far as USDA conservation, we have partnerships with and they provide a voluntary incentive-based way for a private landowner, farmer, or rancher to enhance these conservation practices.

Some programs require partnerships with wildlife groups or land trusts to help foster these projects and conservation efforts on their lands.

For those not familiar with this, on the Committee, can you provide an example of how these partnerships work and how they ultimately benefit the land, water, and wildlife habitats?

Mr. LOHR. I will be quick. I don't want to take the Administrator's time.

Again, another one of the neat projects that we do, there are several, Working Lands for Wildlife is one, the Healthy Forest Reserve Program, another one.

I will just mention briefly, a couple weeks ago I was down in the panhandle of Florida near Pensacola and through RCPP and HFRP, they had an agreement with 4,000 acres through the Healthy Forest Reserve Program where they were able to partner with various groups and agencies, fish and wildlife, where they placed permanent conservations on almost 4,000 acres of land. They were able to put plans together to market and to make sure those forestlands are managed through the Long Leaf Pine Initiative. Very exciting stuff. They bring in the economic aspects, but the really cool part about these programs is the habitat component that you mentioned.

The Gopher Tortoise is a threatened species in that part of the world, and they were able to partner with Fish and Wildlife to put habitat plots throughout the property to increase the opportunity for the Gopher Tortoise to thrive. That is just one example where it takes many different agencies, partners to come together to accomplish a lot of missions, but that species component and the habitat component is really a neat addition.

Again, Working Lands for Wildlife is a similar program as well that combines lots of different partners together accomplishing good things at the end.

Mr. FORDYCE. I would just mention, Congressman, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and previous to the 2018 Farm Bill the partners in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program were states. New language in the new farm bill allows for partners to be NGOs, for example, to be able to help offset the producers' costs, in some cases contribute to those, to the payment to the producer.

But the fact that we are able to open that up to other partners I think it is going to be meaningful.

In my mind when we open that up to other partners, we have talked a lot this morning about outreach and communication, and the more folks that we have that are participating from a contribu-

tion standpoint they are going to help get the word out as well, and not only get the word out about it is available to sign up, but also get the word out about the accomplishments that those practices are doing.

I am very excited about entering into those new agreements with folks other than just states.

Mr. ALLEN. How about on our federally-owned forestlands where we are having problems with management? Are we making any efforts to deal with that issue? I know that the farm bill did address some of those issues, but there is this big debate about, "Okay, how do you manage it properly from an environmental standpoint." Have you addressed any of that?

Mr. LOHR. Yes, sir. Obviously, public lands typically fall under the space of the U.S. Forest Service, but I will say that we do look for ways that we can continue to collaborate and partner, and one of the programs that we do is called the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Initiative.

There are two chiefs at the USDA, the Forest Service and NRCS, and this idea was born about 7 years ago where both agencies are able to put money together. There is a ranking and an application process that we could look at large-scale projects that involve both public and private lands together. Looking at how we can restore lands, we can again embrace wildlife habitat and really bring projects together that do encompass those public lands that you mentioned to have a more positive environmental effort.

Again, we are always looking for ways to partner. Most public land restoration work, again with the Forest Service, but we certainly want to look for those opportunities of collaboration.

Mr. ALLEN. Okay. Well, I am out of time.

I yield back.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

Before we adjourn today, I invite the Ranking Member to make any closing remarks that he may have.

Mr. LAMALFA. Could it be like on *Jeopardy* in the form of a question?

The CHAIR. It may be.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you.

Just one last one for the panel. I do appreciate your time and your follow up that you will be providing for the Members of this Committee today. And again, to Chair Spanberger thank you for making this happen today.

Coming back under EQIP where the farm bill created new authority known as the conservation incentive payments, we talked about simplified contracting authority. Many inquiries come in from our constituents about how this can be made to work and how they can also provide greater input on shaping these programs locally as region by region things are different crop by crop, *et cetera*.

Can you give us any guidance just real quick, I don't want to take the whole 5 here, but on how to best have locally-led input as tailored to local producers, *et cetera*?

Mr. LOHR. Thank you for your question, and the beauty of NRCS is we are locally-led. That has been our motto and our theme for almost 85 years, because all conservation begins at the local level.

These conservation incentive payments is a new feature that we will be rolling out in 2020, but I would certainly encourage the producers who have an interest to get involved with the local work group. Every district office of NRCS has a local work group that meet. They shape policy that gets pushed up to the State Technical Committee.

And as you mentioned perfectly, agriculture is so different, not only state to state, but locality to locality, so this is an opportunity for farmers to get involved with that local level and kind of share what is needed. What are the types of things that would make them be a more efficient and more effective farmer and then allow that information then to proceed up to the State Technical Committee to make those decisions on how best to implement those features.

So, thank you for your question.

Mr. LAMALFA. Okay, thank you.

I like to get as much as I can out of a panel when I have you here, so thank you for your indulgence, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Absolutely.

I want to thank our witnesses again today for their time. This conversation is essential as we increase collaboration between the USDA, Republicans and Democrats in Congress, and farmers across our districts and our country.

I am interested in exploring and expanding upon what works and I believe we have started down that path today.

We have had great conversations about carbon sequestration, identifying heir farms, biomass for energy, domestic timber consumption, easements, and climate hubs, and the value of really data-driven discussions and decisions.

And the programs we have been discussing today encourage farmers and landowners to pursue even more innovative ways of conserving our natural resources.

All at once we can make our production more economically viable and more sustainable all while hearing directly from crop and livestock producers about their concerns.

I thank Congressman LaMalfa. I thank all the Members of the Committee for being here today, and to the witnesses, thank you so much for your time and for your engagement.

Under the Rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional material and supplementary written responses from the witnesses to any question posed by a Member.

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:20 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[Material submitted for inclusion in the record follows:]

SUBMITTED QUESTIONS

Response from U.S. Department of Agriculture

Questions Submitted by Hon. Abigail Davis Spanberger, a Representative in Congress from Virginia

Question 1. On May 11, 2017, USDA announced the creation of the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area as part of a larger Departmental reorganization. FPAC now includes NRCS, FSA, and the Risk Management Agency (RMA). Can you give the Committee an update on the merger of FSA, NRCS and RMA under the same mission area? What challenges or benefits have you seen with this new structure?

Answer. Secretary Perdue established the FPAC Mission Area as part of the creation of the Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Mission Area as provided for in the 2014 Farm Bill. Serving common customers—the nation’s farmers and ranchers—FPAC was created to deliver commodity, conservation, credit, crop insurance, and disaster programs. Under the domestic agriculture-focused Mission Area, we can focus on improving customer service, improving and streamlining program delivery, and using technology to meet growing producer interest in digital solutions.

Since creation of the FPAC Mission Area in May 2017, the FPAC Business Center was established in October 2018 to provide enterprise-wide mission support to FSA, NRCS, and RMA, which retained their roles and responsibilities while benefiting from a realigned focus on service to farmers and ranchers.

A key success has been the creation of the *farmers.gov* online portal. When fully developed, our customers will have the option to transact business with FPAC agencies in an authenticated environment. Extensive information is available to the public through *farmers.gov*. In addition, FSA’s borrowers can view significant information regarding their lending activity and producers were also able to enroll online for the Wildfires and Hurricanes Indemnity Program (WHIP) and the Market Facilitation Program.

Another success has seen a significant increase in the collaboration of the three agencies as we strive to increase service to producers. WHIP required extensive coordination of policy and data from FSA and RMA.

Under Secretary Perdue’s “One USDA” concept, we have also been able to use workload and other data, as well as our valuable county-level footprint to ensure that employee vacancies are placed in areas where they can be the most productive to service our customers.

Internally, we have consolidated mission support functions into a FPAC Business Center to provide enterprise-level service and to free FSA, NRCS, and RMA to focus on mission delivery. The Business Center is also working on improving service through continuous process improvement of hiring, budget, information technology, internal reviews, fleet management, and office leasing.

We have, for example, deployed vehicle sharing across the Mission Area which has increased utilization of our fleet. We have initiated an aggressive strategy to reshape and optimize our fleet including a fleet reduction effort in FY 2018 that eliminated 1,042 vehicles. We are working to achieve a fully optimized fleet by the end of calendar year 2019 where vehicles achieve the departmental standard for miles driven per year and/or expected days of use. An optimized fleet will ensure FPAC has the right type vehicle for the needed work and the return on investment from these vehicles is maximized for customer service and the taxpayer.

We are also reengineering internal business practices used by FSA, NRCS, and RMA to increase transparency, accuracy, and effectiveness of conducting internal operations which include manual and automated environments. These business practices range from Federal and non-Federal hiring, budget formulation and executive, development and implementation of agreements, internal reviews, and other disciplines. Though reengineering is comprehensive and painstaking, we anticipate significant improvements over the coming months.

Question 2. The 2018 Farm Bill provided extra tools to help farmers and ranchers tackle a variety of resource concerns. The Secretary, and rightly so, has focused a great deal of time and energy on customer service. However, staffing for both NRCS and FSA has continued to decline in recent years. What impact have these vacancies had on the ability to administer conservation programs?

Answer. The FPAC Mission Area, including FSA and NRCS, recognize the critical staff capacity needed at the field level to meet customer needs by delivery programs and services. Both agencies established targets to ensure that a minimum of 90 percent of the workforce is in field positions and 90 percent of all positions are at General Schedule (GS) grades 12 and below (that is, customer-facing positions). While national-level positions are essential to providing policy direction, program develop-

ment and administration, and oversight and accountability, customer-facing positions take precedence and represent the majority of FSA and NRCS hiring.

It is a significant challenge to achieve mission delivery expectations, including implementation of a new farm bill. There are currently 1,744 new hiring actions in progress in FSA and NRCS alone. Of these new hiring actions, 471 selections have been made and candidates are in the process of on-boarding into their new positions. At the same time, FSA has almost 800 temporary employees and student trainees on board, while NRCS has 367. By later in 2019, we expect both FSA and NRCS to be much closer to their authorized position levels.

Question 3. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized a new EQIP conservation incentive contract that provides annual payments for addressing priority resource concerns over several years. Mr. Lohr, are these new contracts available for the FY 2019 EQIP sign-up? How do these contracts differ from the CSP contracts? Have they had any impact on the FY 2019 CSP sign-up process?

Answer. NRCS plans to offer the new Incentive Contracts in FY 2020 upon publication of the EQIP interim rule. While the current interim rule is under review, NRCS is excited to offer this new enrollment opportunity to producers and is carefully examining options to ensure that it does not duplicate enrollment options available under the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). NRCS believes that the new Incentive Contracts can help bridge the gap between traditional EQIP contracts and CSP. NRCS believes that there are key differences between Incentive Contracts and CSP contracts such as contract length, specific targeting of resource concerns, and the extent of the operation that is included in the contract.

Question 4. Mr. Lohr, in the broader debate regarding energy and climate policy options, agricultural and land use activities have played a central role. Many of the voluntary, incentive-based, farm bill conservation programs provide assistance to producers for activities that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration. Can you provide some examples of successful practices?

Answer. Here are a few examples of how producers are helping conserve natural resources.

- **Soil Health:** NRCS recommends ten practices to boost soil health, which improve soil organic matter; reduce emissions from soils and equipment; and promote healthier soils nationwide.
- **Nitrogen Stewardship:** Farmers are reducing nitrous oxide emissions and providing cost savings by focusing on the right timing, type, placement, and quantity of nutrients.
- **Livestock Partnerships:** Producers are using anaerobic digestors, impermeable covers, and other practices on dairy and swine operations. Anaerobic digestors are facilities that provide biological treatment of animal waste in the absence of oxygen. They help manage odors, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce pathogens, and capture biogas for energy production.
- **Grazing and Pasture Lands:** Ranchers using prescribed grazing systems can manage for better forage as well as more climate-friendly and more resilient grazing lands.
- **Private Forest Management:** In working forests, NRCS helps forest landowners use sustainable forestry practices that yield healthier, more diverse forests which provide for better harvests and wildlife habitat and sequester carbon.
- **Conservation of Sensitive Lands:** Through ACEP and CRP, NRCS and FSA are helping conserve wetlands, grasslands, valuable farmlands, and other sensitive landscapes. Restoring these lands to native vegetation helps with carbon sequestration.
- NRCS is also using the Conservation Innovation Grants and other programs to better quantify outcomes of these practices as they relate to carbon sequestration and air quality, as well as better prepare producers who want to participate in environmental markets.
- NRCS is a core partner in the USDA Climate Hubs, which ensure that farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners have access to the best science-based information on management practices, decision tools, and climate and weather data and trends. They are assisting all USDA agencies in disseminating information online and through networks and demonstration plots.

Question 5. NRCS conservation practice standards have long served as the foundation for agricultural conservation activity in this country. The farm bill requires NRCS to review each conservation practice standard and evaluate opportunities to increase flexibility in their application and use. Can you tell me what you are doing to ensure the agency is updating the current conservation practice standard process

to enable an adaptive management process that works for more farmers and is able to keep up with the rapid technological change and the drive for innovation and experimentation in the field?

Answer. Each national conservation practice standard is to be formally reviewed at least once every 5 years from its date of issuance or date of review. There are 169 conservation practice standards and 13 innovative trial practice standards.

Currently, NRCS is performing an expedited review of every national conservation practice standard as required by the 2018 Farm Bill. NRCS released a *Federal Register* notice soliciting public feedback on any current conservation practice standard on March 29, 2019. In addition, NRCS held a public hearing and is offering review opportunities with State Technical Committees, partners, and any other interested parties.

NRCS received more than 100 comments on the *Federal Register* notice and is now reviewing comments and updating the standards. The expedited review and update are targeted for completion by December 2019.

Question 5a. States can identify high-priority conservation practices to be eligible for higher 90 percent payment rates through EQIP. Will NRCS provide guidance to states on the types of practices eligible for higher 90 percent payment rates?

Answer. Determining the amount of financial assistance available is a two-step process:

Step 1:

- NRCS uses payment schedules to document estimated incurred costs and foregone income to arrive at a payment rate; and
- Interdisciplinary teams develop regional scenarios to produce State-specific payment schedules.

Step 2:

- The NRCS Chief delegates authority to the State Conservationist, with input from State Technical Committees, partners, or other stakeholders to set the payment percentage for each program within each State and payment schedule; and
- State Technical Committees and Local Work Groups make recommendations specific to:
 - Practices and program payment percentages for conservation programs that support program objectives and State and local priorities; and
 - Program payment percentages documented in practice payment schedules and maximum payment.

Questions Submitted by Hon. Collin C. Peterson, a Representative in Congress from Minnesota

Question 1. Staffing for both NRCS and FSA has declined over the years. There is now an unusually large number of vacancies in local field offices. What impact have these vacancies had on the ability of both agencies in the administration of conservation programs and activities for farmers and ranchers? What actions is the Administration undertaking to address the vacancies and staffing shortages? Are the current resources meeting the demands of farmers and ranchers? How could they be improved?

Answer. NRCS's authorized staffing level was 10,800 positions in FY 2018. This reflected approval of 400 new, customer-facing positions in field offices. The President's FY 2019 Budget Request for NRCS reduced this figure by 882 positions because NRCS transitioned these mission support positions and associated funding to the newly established Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Business Center.

We have a multi-pronged plan to aggressively address the Mission Area's hiring needs which includes:

- Adding temporary surge support within human resources to address the remaining hiring actions and reduce the number of vacancies;
- Establishing open continuous announcements for common positions, such as Soil Conservationist, Soil Conservation Technician, and Engineers. By current certificates of eligible candidates, NRCS hiring managers can more readily identify, select, and on-board qualified staff for these critical positions;
- Reengineering business processes to streamline Federal and non-Federal hiring procedures to improve timeliness, efficiency, and effectiveness;
- Digitizing manual hiring processes to improve FPAC's accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness by building consistent processes, roles, and responsibilities into system workflows[;]

- Leveraging robotic process automation and other artificial intelligence tools, where appropriate, to achieve even greater accuracy, timeliness, and efficiencies especially for data extraction and entry; and
- Standardizing position descriptions which streamlines classification of jobs and posting vacancy announcements.

It is a significant challenge to achieve mission delivery expectations, including implementation of a new farm bill, at current staffing levels, but aggressive actions are underway to fill critical field positions. There are currently 1,744 new hiring actions in progress in FSA and NRCS alone. Of these new hiring actions, 471 selections have been made and candidates are in the process of on-boarding into their new positions. At the same time, FSA has almost 800 temporary employees and student trainees on-board, while NRCS has 367. By later in 2019, we expect both FSA and NRCS to be much closer to their authorized position level as they catch up on historic and new attrition and the rate of hiring exceeds the attrition rate.

Question 2. Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) is the backbone of USDA's farm bill conservation programs. Through CTA funding, NRCS field staff is able to work directly with farmers to develop and implement personalized conservation plans. Please describe how CTA supports conservation practices on farms and ranches across the country.

Answer. CTA Program funding is used to:

- Provide conservation technical assistance to individuals or groups of decision makers, and to communities, conservation districts, units of State, Tribal and local government, and others to voluntarily conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources;
- Provide collaborative community, watershed, and area-wide technical assistance with units of government so they can develop and implement resource management plans that conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources at appropriate scales;
- Provide conservation technical assistance to help agricultural producers comply with the Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and wetlands conservation (WC) compliance determinations required under Farm Bill Conservation Compliance requirements;
- Provide conservation technical assistance to aid private landowners in complying with other Federal, state, Tribal, and local environmental regulations and related requirements, and prepare them to become eligible to participate in other Federal, state, and local conservation programs;
- Collect, analyze, interpret, display, and disseminate information about the status, condition, and trends of soil, water, and related natural resources so people can make informed decisions for natural resource use and management;
- Assess the effects of conservation practices and systems on the condition of natural resources; and
- Develop, adapt, and transfer effective science-based technologies and tools for assessment, management, and conservation of natural resources.

Question 3. The President's FY20 budget proposal cuts 10%, or more than \$70 million, from the Conservation Technical Assistance program. How would this proposed cut impact conservation on the ground?

Answer. NRCS is committed to delivering conservation service and assistance in the most efficient and effective manner possible. Through our programs we are now able to leverage in-kind contributions, cost-sharing, and matching funds that enable our agency dollars to go much further and with a wider impact.

Question 4. Specific to general CRP, the most recent signup was conducted in FY16 with a record low acceptance rate of contacts at 18%. What plan does the Department have to utilize outreach and education efforts perhaps with stakeholders to optimize acceptance rates? Additionally, how does the Department plan to incorporate state-by-state CRP allocations to bolster acceptance rates?

Answer. The acceptance rates were reflective of the large number of applications received and the limited number of available acres remaining under the CRP enrollment cap. Currently, 22.4 million acres are enrolled in CRP which leaves 1.4 million acres available for enrollment.

FSA is implementing a comprehensive communications plan for CRP including news releases, social media, and outreach. State allocations will be considered with the rollout of the CRP regulation implementing the 2018 Farm Bill.

Question 5. As you know, I think we need a commonsense approach to easements. We should not spend Federal money to create private hunting reserves for indi-

vidual landowners. We need better long-term management of easements, including farm bill easements. And, it needs to be clear who is responsible for managing the land. How will you get the word out to state partners and NRCS offices about better management of land under easement?

Answer. When NRCS purchases an easement from a landowner, the agency does not pay full market value of the property. Rather, it pays for the bundle of rights it is purchasing from the landowner. Upon enrolling their farmed or converted wetland into NRCS' easement programs, the landowner reserves the right to undeveloped recreational use, such as hunting, fishing, and nature watching, and the right to control who accesses the property (other than NRCS). While landowners receive benefits through protecting their land with an easement, they also relinquish certain property rights. Once enrolled, these easements are restored and managed in a manner that provides large scale public benefits such as improving water quality, reducing flooding, recharging groundwater, sequestering carbon, creating habitat for threatened and endangered species, and protecting biological diversity. NRCS is currently updating its easement stewardship policies and designing staff and partner training on easement stewardship topics including the monitoring, enforcement, and long-term management of conservation easements. As NRCS's easement portfolio grows, so will the workload necessary to manage and maintain those protected acres and NRCS has increased the percentage of appropriated easement funds used to manage existing easements accordingly.

Question 6. How will you implement the 2018 Farm Bill change authorizing incentives to increase public access to WRP and WRE land?

Answer. NRCS is in the early stages of developing the next Voluntary Public Access Program—Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) funding announcement and is incorporating into the announcement the 2018 Farm Bill incentive to increase public access to lands enrolled through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE) component of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). On May 6, 2019, NRCS also incorporated this priority for increasing public access to WRP and WRE in the VPA-HIP regulations through publication of the Miscellaneous Conservation Provisions Interim Rule.

Question 7. What is the status of the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) and when can we expect the Department to announce a signup period?

Answer. FSA continues to analyze the provisions of SHIPP under the 2018 Farm Bill and will make announcements on plans to implement the pilot subsequent to publication of the CRP regulation this fall.

Questions Submitted by Hon. Marcia L. Fudge, a Representative in Congress from Ohio

Question 1. Mr. Fordyce, the amount of land owned by African Americans has plunged over the past century, from an estimated 15 million acres to about 2 million nationally. According to the USDA, heirs property has been the leading cause of black involuntary land loss. The 2018 Farm Bill included a provision enabling farmers operating on land with undivided interests to secure FSA farm numbers and thereby qualify for farm and conservation programs. Mr. Fordyce, do you know who these farmers are and are you making contact with them?

Answer. Regulations are still being written to specifically address the new heirs property Farm Bill Provision in Section 12615. Once program regulations are written and finalized, the Outreach office will conduct extensive outreach with national stakeholders and our 2,124 County Outreach Coordinators and 51 State Outreach Coordinators will conduct outreach and informational sessions in States and counties across the country.

Question 2. I appreciate all the work NRCS does to provide reliable, up-to-date information regarding the delivery of conservation programs. I also know NRCS is developing and expanding tools and metrics to assess baseline conservation levels and improvements over time at the landscape and field levels. Mr. Lohr, can you provide an update on the different ways through which NRCS is currently working to improve and coordinate conservation data collection? How do these efforts align with 2018 Farm Bill programs and related changes NRCS is rolling out in the year ahead?

Answer. Since 2003, NRCS and its partners have conducted CEAP studies to quantify the environmental effects of conservation practices and programs and to improve our understanding of how to manage agricultural lands while also promoting environmental quality and wildlife habitat.

By using a combination of national data sets, in-depth farmer surveys, assessments at multiple scales, and modeling techniques, CEAP has been able to docu-

ment the benefits of voluntary conservation and to better target limited programmatic resources to where they will have the greatest impact.

Question 3. Farmers and ranchers across the country, and in my district, are looking to access conservation assistance and benefit from many of the important changes included in the 2018 Farm Bill. During this time, it is critical that we are working to reach out to and support those who have historically struggled to access USDA assistance. This includes beginning, socially disadvantaged, limited resource, and veteran farmers and ranchers. I am pleased that the farm bill includes several important provisions to support these producers, including much needed improvements to the EQIP Advance Payment option, which provides all eligible participants the option to receive at least 50 percent of their EQIP cost share up-front. This important step ensures these farmers and ranchers have the support they need to cover the up-front costs associated with implementing critical conservation practices. I understand that under the 2014 Farm Bill, many states did not offer the advance payment option, even though it was available nationwide. Mr. Lohr, can you provide an update on how NRCS is working to promote these improvements and the availability of the EQIP Advance Payment option, including education for field staff?

Answer. The 2018 Farm Bill changes the advance payment amount from “not more than” to “at least” 50 percent and adds a notification requirement for producers to be notified at the time of enrollment of the advance payment option, and that the producer’s election be documented. In FY 2019, NRCS is making available advance payments at 50 percent in coordination with the notification and election requirements. NRCS will address the availability of greater than 50 percent as part of interim rule publication and FY 2020 implementation.

Questions Submitted by Hon. Tom O’Halloran, a Representative in Congress from Arizona

Question 1. As you continue to develop the interim final farm bill rules, will you recognize that a goal of the farm bill is to provide the tools and flexibility to meet the needs of drought-stricken areas in the west, consistent with legislative history?

Answer. FSA and NRCS are aware of the unique needs of producers who have suffered due to drought and other disasters. We will continue to make every effort to provide the tools and flexibility needed by farmers and ranchers in these areas of the country consistent with the law.

Question 2. Further, do you recognize recent unanimous Congressional approval of Drought Contingency Plan authorizing legislation, to support those seven state agreements, as demonstrating Congressional intent to address drought in the West? Particularly the Lower Basin States?

Answer. USDA is committed to working with the Department of the Interior as they implement the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan and enter into contingency plan agreements with the seven States.

Question 3. Farmers in my district agreed to the DCP agreement, which included substantial voluntary forbearance of Colorado River surface water, in anticipation of Federal support for the plan. Can they trust NRCS to use the flexibility provided by the 2018 Farm Bill programs, such as EQIP, RCPP and Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, to support communities in my district and state in a regionally equitable manner, that helps achieve the goals of the Drought Contingency Plan? I trust that you and the NRCS can be counted on to use every tool at your disposal to support that plan, and to generally address Western drought issues.

Answer. NRCS recognizes the importance and complexity of addressing the needs of the agricultural community in the face of the long-term drought and the recently approved Drought Contingency Plan. Our leadership and staff in Arizona are working closely with farmers and other stakeholders in Maricopa and Pinal Counties most affected by anticipated reductions in water deliveries from the Colorado River. Specifically, they are working to develop flexible approaches to using our conservation authorities to address water quantity and other resource challenges that may include RCPP, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, EQIP, CSP, CRP, and ACEP.

Questions Submitted by Hon. Chellie Pingree, a Representative in Congress from Maine

Question 1. The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) currently has over 70 million acres enrolled, helping producers improve their land through financial and technical assistance. This is an important program that was reauthorized by the 2018 Farm Bill. However, the President’s FY 2020 budget proposal calls for eliminating CSP entirely. Mr. Lohr, can you talk about the impact that would have on conservation?

Answer. Although the President’s budget proposes to eliminate funding for new enrollments and re-enrollments in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) in favor of conservation programs that have more documented positive outcomes, the President’s Budget provides a total of \$4.95 billion for NRCS conservation programs, including \$4.2 billion in mandatory conservation programs. In addition, the President’s Budget also proposes to provide \$1.67 billion to support new contracts, existing contracts, and reenrollments.

Question 2. How many NRCS positions have been eliminated in the last 5 years?

Answer. Positions have not been eliminated; however, like other Federal agencies, NRCS incurs attrition of staff each fiscal year because of retirements, employees moving to jobs with other entities, or separations for disciplinary or performance reasons.

The table below shows the attrition for NRCS since FY 2014, including the “year-to-date” for FY 2019.

Fiscal Year	Amount
2014	952
2015	820
2016	848
2017	845
2018	970
2019	472
Total	4,907

The average per fiscal year (not including partial FY 2019) is 887[.]

NRCS’s authorized staffing level was 10,800 positions in FY 2018. This reflects approval of 400 new, customer-facing positions in field offices. The President’s FY 2019 Budget Request for NRCS was reduced this figure by 882 positions because NRCS transitioned these mission support positions and associated funding to the newly established Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Business Center.

We have a multi-pronged plan to aggressively address the Mission Area’s hiring needs which includes:

- Adding temporary surge support within human resources to address the remaining hiring actions and reduce the number of vacancies;
- Establishing open continuous announcements for common positions, such as Soil Conservationist, Soil Conservation Technician, and Engineers. By current certificates of eligible candidates, NRCS hiring managers can more readily identify, select, and on-board qualified staff for these critical positions;
- Reengineering business processes to streamline Federal and non-Federal hiring procedures to improve timeliness, efficiency, and effectiveness;
- Digitizing manual hiring processes to improve FPAC’s accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness by building consistent processes, roles, and responsibilities into system workflows[;]
- Leveraging robotic process automation and other artificial intelligence tools, where appropriate, to achieve even greater accuracy, timeliness, and efficiencies especially for data extraction and entry; and
- Standardizing position descriptions which streamlines classification of jobs and posting vacancy announcements.

Question 3. How much funding has NRCS provided to support the USDA Climate Hubs during each of the last 5 years?

Answer. USDA Climate Hubs Program is supported by multiple agencies across the Department. NRCS funding to support the USDA Climate Hubs for the last five years is below:

	2015 Obligations	2016 Obligations	2017 Obligations	2018 Obligations	2019 Annualized CR
Total Climate Hub Funding	3,354,000	2,731,000	2,348,000	2,539,000	2,703,000

Questions Submitted by Hon. Doug LaMalfa, a Representative in Congress from California

Question 1. Section 2504 of the 2018 Farm Bill gives USDA interim authority to operate the conservation programs under the 2014 Farm Bill regulations for the re-

mainder of this fiscal year. The purpose is to continue conservation delivery while working towards implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill changes. Will the department have the conservation programs up and running under the new rules by the end of September?

Answer. FSA continues to work at analyzing the numerous changes to the text and structure of the Conservation Reserve Program statutory language and intends to publish the regulation in the fall of 2019.

NRCS program teams are actively working on our new regulations and plan to have them all in place for the FY 2020 program enrollment periods.

Question 2. For many of America's farmers and ranchers, their nearest NRCS office isn't even in their county. In the last 10 years, offices across the nation have closed, significantly limiting access to vital conservation resources. These roadblocks create a bottleneck in the process as money sits at USDA waiting to be utilized. What are you doing to ensure that agricultural producers are provided greater access to funding and technical assistance?

Answer. NRCS has more than 2,500 offices in communities nationwide with almost 8,000 employees in field locations who provide information, tools, and direct assistance to producers with conserving, maintaining, and enhancing their natural resources for the betterment of their individual agriculture operations and their communities.

In February 2018, FPAC released *farmers.gov*—a dynamic, mobile-friendly website that delivers information, tools, and first-hand advice built around the needs of the people who grow the nation's food, fiber, flora, and fuel. The external website serves as the customer gateway and informational counterpart to an authenticated, transactional portal where USDA customers can apply for programs, process technical and financial transactions, and manage accounts. USDA has built *farmers.gov* around customer needs and ideas through a streamlined, farmer-centered approach—bringing the most usable information together in a new way.

In March 2018, FPAC initiated a study to analyze its geographic footprint, workload, and productivity relative to customers' needs and locations. The Optimally Productive Office (OPO) study and tool provides for a data-driven evaluation of our customers and their needs, including their demographics, geographic locations, physiographic characteristics of their lands, and line(s) of business. It answers core questions such as:

- Where are our customers, what are their greatest needs, and how does that drive FPAC workload;
- Are FPAC employees productive;
- Which offices are servicing customers most efficiently and effectively relative to its peers;
- Are FPAC offices optimally located and staffed to deliver quality customer service (to both current and potential customers);
- How can we optimize resources (*e.g.*, staff, vehicles, office spaces) and improve upon our ability to meet customer expectations for quality service and technical outputs; and
- Given customer locations and needs, are we utilizing current office space efficiently and in a cost-effective manner?

The primary outputs of the efforts are robust dashboards. The dashboards do not simply summarize rate data, they are sophisticated analytical tools that integrate a wide array of data sets, each with tens of thousands of data points, to show relationships and trends across otherwise disparate sources.

The first phase of OPO, Productivity and Staffing, focused on historical customer demand (*i.e.*, workload by program and activity), office productivity, and employees' geographical distribution. This allows FPAC leaders to focus hiring on where customer need is greatest and where leaders can ensure employees can be most productive.

FPAC used this data to direct the distribution of over 3,000 hiring actions in FY 2018 and is doing the same in FY 2019. Additional metrics, including an average of 93 percent of hiring at GS-12 and lower grades, ensures that positions were deployed where the customer-facing need is greatest.

The next phase of OPO, Geographic Footprint and Asset Allocation, will quantify potential customers and unmet demand, analyze FPAC's geographic footprint relative to existing and potential customers, and optimize utilization of office spaces. The resulting tool will enable FPAC leaders to optimally deploy and manage their resources across the country.

Question 3. One thing we can all agree on is the importance of voluntary conservation. It allows agricultural producers to improve the quality of their soil and water, while also providing important benefits to the community and environment. NRCS programs provide the opportunity for farmers and ranchers to improve their practices without burdensome regulation. However, over the years, farmers have shied away from using conservation practices due to an increase in red tape and decrease in available technical assistance. How do you believe that the conservation planning process can be made more efficient and effective?

Answer. NRCS is developing software known as the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to make the conservation planning process more efficient and effective. CART incorporates the current nine steps of NRCS conservation planning, as well as the programmatic ranking for Farm Bill program financial assistance. CART provides one software platform to field-office staff to work with a customer on assessing the resource concern, addressing the resource concern with a conservation activity, and determining all applicable Farm Bill financial assistance program(s) to help finance the installation of the conservation activity.

Question 4. While cost-share conservation programs are vital to America's agricultural producers, these programs are often ineffective without robust technical assistance. What are you doing to ensure that NRCS's Conservation Technical Assistance program remains strong and continues to grow?

Answer. The CTA Program has a long history as NRCS' conservation planning program and the backbone to the Agency's core mission, helping to develop and deliver conservation technologies and practices to private landowners, conservation districts, Tribes, and other organizations. Through the CTA program, NRCS helps land managers develop comprehensive conservation plans that include activities that reduce soil loss from erosion; address soil, water quality, water conservation, air quality, and agricultural waste management concerns; reduce potential damage caused by excess water and sedimentation or drought; enhance the quality of fish and wildlife habitat; improve the long-term sustainability of all private lands, including cropland, forestland, grazing lands, coastal lands, and developed or developing lands; and facilitate changes in land use as needed for natural resource protection and sustainability.

Question Submitted by Hon. K. Michael Conaway, a Representative in Congress from Texas

Question 1. It is estimated that by 2050, the global demand for food will be 60 percent higher than it is today. To meet this daunting challenge, it is essential that farm conservation programs promote technologies that will help growers produce more with less, while preserving water and other natural resources.

Cloud-based remote telemetry data systems for irrigation scheduling help growers maximize efficiency and increase productivity in a scalable and cost-effective manner. For example, in field trials Omaha-based Lindsay Corporation found that remote telemetry with cloud-based irrigation scheduling allowed growers to realize:

- A 3% increase in corn *yield* (driving profit of \$25 per acre);
- A 17% reduction in *water usage* (saving more than 9.25 million gallons on a 130 acre field);
- A \$10/acre reduction in *energy costs*; and
- A 75% reduction in *time* spent going back and forth to the fields (another \$5/acre saved).

The 2018 Farm Bill states that USDA may provide EQIP payments for water conservation scheduling. The accompanying report goes on to state that USDA should recognize remote telemetry data systems for irrigation scheduling as a best management practice. I sincerely hope that NRCS' irrigation efficiency conservation practice standard is updated to incorporate this important water and energy saving tool.

What is NRCS' timeframe for updating its conservation practice standards?

Answer. Each national conservation practice standard is to be formally reviewed at least once every 5 years from its date of issuance or date of review. There are 169 conservation practice standards and 13 innovative trial practice standards.

Currently, NRCS is performing an expedited review of every national conservation practice standard as required by the 2018 Farm Bill. NRCS released a *Federal Register* notice soliciting public feedback on any current conservation practice standard on March 29, 2019. In addition, NRCS held a public hearing and is offering review opportunities with state technical committees, partners, and any other interested parties.

NRCS received more than 100 comments on the *Federal Register* and is now reviewing comments and updating the standards. The expedited review and update are targeted for completion by December 2019.

Question 1a. How does NRCS plan to educate states and growers about changes to its conservation practice standards and about the benefits of technology such as cloud-based remote telemetry data systems for irrigation scheduling?

Answer. NRCS reviews and revises its Conservation Practice Standards on a 5 year cycle. In conducting these reviews, comments are solicited both internally from NRCS state offices and publicly through a *Federal Register* Notice. Comments are taken into consideration and applied to the standards as necessary. Once finalized, national standards are released through an announcement of changes to the *National Handbook of Conservation Practices* and placed on an NRCS webpage. NRCS state offices then have 1 year to adopt the new national version of the standard and add additional criteria to address state laws and rules, as well as soils and climate. NRCS State offices work with their respective State Technical Committees on the adoption of new standards and criteria.

NRCS operates the Soil Climate Analysis Network (SCAN), a national network consisting of 221 stations that measure soil moisture, soil temperature, air temperature, precipitation, and many other climatic parameters and provide this data in near real-time on the internet. In areas where a SCAN station is in proximity, the data can be used to manage irrigation, thereby reducing water use. The data also can be used to determine when to plant based on soil temperature, access to fields based on soil moisture, and many other crop management practices.

Question 1b. Is NRCS working to incorporate water conservation scheduling payments for technology such as cloud-based irrigation scheduling tools into its EQIP regulations?

Answer. The 2018 Farm Bill offered many new opportunities for NRCS to target water conservation. One such provision is the addition of water management entities (such as state irrigation districts, groundwater management district, Acequias, or similar entities) which focuses on addressing water management issues across a larger landscape. This provision also includes the opportunity for NRCS to provide payments to producers or water management entities through EQIP to adopt scheduling practices that balances crop water needs and available water supplies with other water conservation needs (such as protecting in-stream flows). NRCS will be incorporating these new opportunities into the EQIP interim rule and implementation guidance.