



*Testimony to the United States Senate Committee on the Budget
Cultivating Stewardship: Examining the Changing Agricultural Landscape*

June 7th, 2023

Presented By:

Brent Johnson

President

Iowa Farm Bureau Federation



Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the Committee - thank you for the opportunity to comment today. My name is Brent Johnson, and I am a fifth-generation farmer from Calhoun County, Iowa. I also serve as President of the Iowa Farm Bureau. The Iowa Farm Bureau represents 154,000 members across the state of Iowa, and I am pleased to offer my testimony today on their behalf.

Farm Bureau policy is crafted by our grassroots members: these are hard-working Iowa farmers who take time away from their operations and busy schedules to volunteer in their communities, participate in our organization, and advocate for the betterment of agriculture and the environment. These folks recognize the value of a voluntary, market-based system of incentives for planting crops and adopting sustainable farming practices. In interacting with our members, several themes have become apparent in what they view as necessary for successful policy in incentivizing climate solutions.

First, policy which addresses proactive measures to influence climate conditions cannot be one-size-fits-all. Every individual region, state, county, and farm can explain ways in which any given climate policy may or may not work for them. Every farm is unique in its financial capabilities, landscape, and resources. Each farmer knows what works best on their land, and it is imperative that our federal policy recognize and reflect that. Second, any policy debate should acknowledge the effect of the contributions, efficiency gains, and impact agriculture has had on reducing climate impact. Third, priority must be given to funding for effective voluntary conservation programs. Much of the current success of agriculture's sustainability model must be attributed to voluntary stewardship investments and practices, such as those in the Farm Bill.

Iowa – A Leader in Conservation

Agriculture is no stranger to the conversation about climate and sustainability. Iowa farmers play a critical role in promoting soil health, conserving water, efficiently using nutrients, and caring for their animals. For decades, they have embraced innovative technology thanks to investments in agricultural research and adopted climate-smart practices to improve productivity, enhance sustainability, and provide clean and renewable energy.

Iowa farmers have been a consistent leader in these efforts. In terms of protecting the land, Iowa producers are active participants in government and voluntary programs. Iowa ranks first nationally in CRP acres as a percentage of state area, as well as first in the use of buffer strips, grass waterways, filter strips, pollinator habitats, bioreactors, saturated buffers, and constructed wetlands. Additionally, conservation tillage and no-till represent 74% of all the tillage types in the state. We are ranked 3rd in no-till acres, and first in conservation tillage acres. Iowa also had nearly 3 million acres of cover crops in 2021, which represents an increase of over 300% since 2009. Iowa also has 506,100 terraces stretching 85,320 miles which would circle the world nearly 3.5 times.

In terms of protecting our water, through the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, data shows that farmers have reduced phosphorus loss by 27% since the 1980s. This has also been achieved through a voluntary, incentive-based approach. This is largely due to the conservation practices Iowa producers have implemented on their farms to reduce runoff and soil loss. We have 246,100 water and sediment control basins stretching 12,209 miles, 340,248 acres of contour buffer strips, 85,056 acres of strip cropping, and 103,814 ponds all aimed at conserving water. We also have 195 water quality wetlands built (or under development) since 2003 which protect 212,471 acres of watersheds within the state. These wetlands are responsible for removing 3,046,240 pounds of nitrogen a year from our surface waters.

As you can see, Iowa farmers are certainly doing their part, and that trend continues when you begin to look at the country as a whole. America's farmers see agriculture as part of the solution to our climate challenges, and the data



already shows us doing so. According to the EPA, U.S. agriculture contributes around 10% to overall greenhouse gas emissions by economic sector. Thanks to farmers' dedication to conserving natural resources, that share drops to negative 2% when additional carbon absorbing practices are factored in. More than 140 million acres of U.S. farmland are used for conservation efforts and wildlife habitats—an area is equal to the size of California and New York combined.

Efficiency Gains – Feeding and Fueling More with Less.

Over the last 70 years, U.S. agricultural production has nearly tripled while the amount of resources used (including land, energy, and fertilizer) has remained relatively stable. Compared to 1990, farmers would have needed almost 100 million additional acres to harvest the same amount of corn, cotton, rice, soybeans, and wheat that they produced in 2018.

Livestock emissions continue to make up less than 4% of overall GHGs by economic sector. Meanwhile, U.S. farmers have increased production while decreasing per-unit emissions. In the past nearly 30 years dairy and milk production has increased 48% while per-unit emissions for dairy have declined by almost 26%, beef production has increased 18% while per-unit emissions have fallen more than 8%, and pork production has increased 80% while per-unit emissions have dropped nearly 20%.

Farmers aren't just adopting eco-friendly solutions; they are also growing solutions through clean and renewable energy. Homegrown biofuels are playing a significant role in reducing emissions on our roads. According to a study by Harvard and Tufts University and Environmental Health and Engineering, Inc., increased utilization of biofuels under the RFS has led to a 980 million metric ton reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between 2008 and 2020. Which is the equivalent to taking 18 million cars off the road annually.

Agriculture as a Partner

Farmers have been able to be at the forefront of climate-smart practices because of the voluntary, market-based approaches taken by various federal and state programs. The priority going forward should be to build on those successes. Government mandates are not the solution. Additionally, our climate goals cannot be achieved by farmers or the ag industry alone. Should family farms be forced to bear the burden of solving our nation's climate issues, they would disappear. Environmental sustainability lacking long-term farm viability and profitability is not sustainability at all. However, if agriculture is viewed as a partner, rather than the sole industry tasked with solving these issues, there is potential for tremendous progress and success.

Our traditional voluntary and market-based approach has allowed American agriculture to lead the world in climate-smart farming. This is evidenced by the fact that U.S. agriculture contributes only 10% of our nation's overall emissions, while globally, agriculture accounts for 24% of emissions. What we need now is increased investment in agricultural research, advancing innovation and technologies that can move us forward faster. It is important that, as Congress drafts a farm bill, farmers and ranchers are respected and seen as partners in the development and implementation of climate-smart policies.

The Farm Bill

The farm bill is a critical tool to ensure our nation's food supply remains secure in all seasons. We must modernize it to meet the challenges facing farmers today. The farm bill is key to sustainable advancements in U.S. agriculture being achieved through an array of conservation programs and investment in research, which is urgently needed as we work to feed a growing population using fewer resources. We believe that a farm bill based on voluntary,



market-driven, and science-based outcomes is what is needed to best serve our nation's ag producers and our environment.

Managing on-farm risk is critical to keeping food on our tables. We all depend on the success of American agriculture, so it's important for America's farmers and ranchers to be supported by strong farm programs in the face of weather disasters, high supply costs, and inflationary pressures. The two previous farm bills both included significant farm program reforms to ensure government support is market-oriented and serves as a safety net. Crop insurance is critical to the sustainability of our farms and our environment. Simply put, a robust crop insurance program is vital to our survival.

The 2018 farm bill, called the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, expanded conservation programs designed to help farmers and ranchers improve water quality and wildlife habitats and populations, protect natural resources, and provide many other benefits to surrounding ecosystems. Of the \$867 billion of mandatory funding required for farm bill programs over 10 years, \$60 billion is allocated for the conservation title of the farm bill, equal to 7% of the bill's total projected mandatory spending in that timeframe.

The conservation title has provided farmers and ranchers with voluntary, market-based incentives to adopt various conservation practices through land retirement programs like CRP, and working lands programs like EQIP and CSP. While the 2018 farm bill increased enrollment limits in CRP, the actual number of acres enrolled has declined. The adjusted CRP rental rates implemented in the 2018 farm bill better align the program with current local farmland market conditions to prevent the government from barring farmers and ranchers from accessing prime farmland. So far, this change has encouraged farmers to install resource-conserving practices on environmentally sensitive farmland and helped keep highly productive land in production, using good stewardship practices that can preserve soil and water. Working lands programs like EQIP and CSP have allowed private land to continue to be in production and have provided cost-share assistance to implement conservation practices. However, the demand for these programs has consistently outpaced the amount of funding provided in the 2018 farm bill.

In the next farm bill, we would like to see Congress maintain funding for federal conservation programs which maintain environmental benefits. In doing so, we would like Congress to prioritize working lands conservation programs over retirement lands programs and streamline the NRCS conservation practice approval process. We would also like to see the CRP program maintain its acreage cap for enrollment and maintain the county rental rate cap to a percentage of average county rental rates, encourage prime farmland to come back into production but retain program support for marginal land, and prioritize water quality and soil health benefits over wildlife protections.

As for the working land provisions, we would like to see EQIP funds be focused towards livestock producers, and allow for increased flexibility when addressing local and regional challenges, such as groundwater sustainability and drought relief, resilience, and preparedness. We would also like to see greater flexibility within the CSP program to increase accessibility in general for farmers.

Conclusion

Iowa farmers, such as myself, want to care for and preserve their land so future generations can live the legacy we live today. We want to be responsible stewards of our available resources while providing food and fuel for our nation and the world. We take both of those responsibilities seriously, and we look forward to working with this committee, and the rest of Congress, to make sure that is possible, not only for the farmers of today, but also those of the future.