

**Written Testimony**  
**Submitted to**  
**U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**  
**May 13, 2025 Hearing**  
**Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation**  
**Submitted by Chad Ellis**  
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**Vice Chair, Partnership of Rangeland Trusts**

Chairman Boozman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a written statement on behalf of Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) and Partnership of Rangeland Trusts (PORT).

I am Chad Ellis Chief Executive Officer of Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT), an accredited statewide land trust created by landowners for landowners. I also serve as Vice Chair of the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts, which represents nine land trusts across twelve states in the West that focus exclusively on conserving working farms and ranches, and productive agricultural lands. Together, we help empower over 2,000 families that steward 3.2 million acres of working land that produce food and fiber, sustain rural communities, and provide clean air and water for all Americans.

In Texas, we are predominantly a privately owned state supporting over 139 million acres of working lands or 81% of the state's total land area. These lands are the backbone of our state's economy and a key contributor to our nation's food, fiber, and water security. Texas working lands are under increasing land conversion (i.e., non-agricultural development) pressure driven by unprecedented economic and population growth. According to Texas Land Trends, Texas loses 1,023 acres every day or 373,395 acres of working lands each year – about half the size of Rhode Island - primarily due to fragmentation, development, buildout of infrastructure including energy infrastructure and data centers and generational transition. Most of this loss occurs near urban areas, where agricultural lands are most productive and under the greatest pressure. Additionally, Texas has lost over 18,000 farms and ranches in the last five years. Socioeconomic trends are exacerbating the threats to agricultural lands. Over 40% of the nation's working land is owned by people over 65, so up to 370 million acres could be sold. And while many young people are interested in getting started in agricultural, the challenge of finding affordable land is keeping too many of them from starting successful ag businesses. The average appraised market value in Texas rose 55% since 2017, from \$1,951/acre to \$3,021/acre, and 505% from \$499/acre in 1997.

This trend is not unique to Texas. Nationally, American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat data shows that the U.S. lost or compromised 11 million acres of agricultural land between 2001

and 2016. That's equivalent to losing more than 2,000 acres every day. This report shows that, if this trend continues, another 18.4 million acres will be converted between 2016 and 2040 – an area nearly the size of South Carolina.

At TALT, we work with landowners to keep working lands working, intact, and in production, forever through voluntary conservation easements. These are legal agreements that restrict future development, while keeping land in private ownership and agricultural use. They are one of the most effective tools we have to address land loss, maintain rural economies, and support long-term food and fiber production.

However, these tools are only accessible to many landowners because of Farm Bill conservation programs like the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). These programs leverage federal investments with private and state resources to make conservation financially viable for farmers and ranchers.

In Texas, our easement projects have protected working lands that support beef cattle, sheep and goat operations, native prairies, timberlands, and wildlife habitat. Over 77 billion gallons of water are conserved on TALT held conservation easements annually. The rainwater that falls on these productive working lands is replenishing our groundwater, our aquifers, and ultimately providing the drinking water we rely on every day. That's the kind of return on investment Farm Bill programs make possible.

These are not just conservation programs, they're national security programs. They ensure that future generations of Americans have access to healthy food, clean water, and open space. They keep private working lands productive and in the hands of the people who know them best—ranchers, farmers, and foresters.

Supporting landowners in the stewardship of working lands is crucial to conserving healthy ecosystems, fostering resilient communities, and ensuring sustainable natural resources for generations. Ultimately, the future conservation of working lands is directly linked to private landowners who strategically steward these properties.

As Congress works to reauthorize the Farm Bill, we urge you to:

- Maintain robust funding for ACEP/ALE and RCPP, so landowners can voluntarily protect their land while keeping it in production (the demand for easements are at all-time high;
- Eliminate Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations from ACEP/ALE because compensation for the purchase of a conservation easement is not a subsidy payment but a conveyance of private real property right;
- Exempt conservation program payments from future AGI calculations. Payments made through ACEP or any other federally administered conservation programs should be excluded from AGI calculations used to determine eligibility to participate in Farm Bill programs;

- Reduce administrative burdens that delay project implementation and discourage participation, one valuable tool for streamlining implementation is through certified entities which recognizes exceptional land trusts and delegates authority to these entities;
- Support flexibility in program design, so that landowners and partners can effectively deliver these tools.

Chairman Boozman, your leadership on this Committee and your understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing working lands are deeply appreciated. Thank you again for the opportunity to share this testimony, and for your continued support of private land conservation.

### **Supplemental Resource: Key Trends Impacting Texas Working Lands**

#### **Land Use and Change:**

- Texas lost nearly 3.7 million acres of working lands to non-agricultural uses between 1997 and 2022, including 1.8 million acres in the last five years.
- Grazing lands have declined by 6.7 million acres since 1997.
- Infrastructure expansion—especially for energy and data centers—continues to drive land use change.

#### **Population Growth:**

- Texas is home to 8 of the 15 fastest-growing U.S. cities.
- Between 1997 and 2022, Texas population increased 55%, from 19M to 30M—over 1,100 new residents per day.
- 88% of growth occurred in the top 25 highest-growth counties.

#### **Land Values:**

- Average market value rose 55% since 2017 (from \$1,951 to \$3,021/acre).
- Since 1997, land values increased by 505%.

#### **Ownership Patterns:**

- Texas lost over 18,000 agricultural operations in the last five years.
- Average ownership size increased from 509 to 541 acres (2017–2022).
- 60% of operations are under 100 acres but make up only 3% of working lands.
- More than 1,000 operations over 2,000 acres were lost between 2017 and 2022.
- Aging landowners (65+) will drive the largest transfer of land wealth in U.S. history within the next decade.