



Prepared Testimony of:

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& Forestry**

**“Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation”**

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Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Lynn Tjeerdsma. I am a farmer, rancher, and retired public servant, and I currently serve on the Board of Directors for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever (PF & QF). It is a privilege to testify today on behalf of PF & QF's members, partners, and the hundreds of farming and ranching families we work with every day.

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever make up the nation's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to upland habitat conservation. With more than 490,000 members, supporters, and partners and over 750 local chapters, we are dedicated to the protection of America's uplands through habitat improvement, public access, education, and advocacy. Our unique grassroots model empowers local communities to drive conservation efforts, raising and spending funds locally to deliver measurable results on the ground. Since its creation in 1982, PF & QF (also known as "The Habitat Organization") has dedicated more than \$1 billion to 580,000 habitat projects benefiting 28.8 million acres.

We work in partnership with thousands of private landowners, farm and ranch families, state wildlife agencies, and federal partners like the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA). Each year, our team of more than 480 wildlife biologists and conservation professionals, many of whom are co-located in USDA field offices, help producers plan and implement conservation practices that are both wildlife-friendly and economically viable.

Most of this work has been made possible by programs supported by the farm bill's conservation title. These voluntary, incentive-based, locally led programs are essential to our mission and to the future of working lands and habitat conservation in America.

I know this from personal experience. Farm bill conservation programs have improved the sustainability of my farming operation, protected my fragile acres, improved my soil's health, and reduced wind and water erosion on the landscape. In addition, they have provided ample wildlife habitat, resulting in sporting opportunities for me, my son, and grandsons. The technical assistance I have received thanks to the farm bill has also proven invaluable in choosing the best practices for my operation and achieving my goals.

Having both overseen the Conservation Reserve Program and other Farm Service Agency conservation programs while Assistant Deputy Administrator and drafted legislative text for conservation programs while working on farm bills in the office of Senator John Thune, I strived to "practice what I preached". I've installed multiple conservation practices under multiple programs on my land, so I could prove to myself and others that they really do work as intended. Without a doubt, I know conservation can successfully complement crop and livestock production, which is why it is critical to have a robust conservation title in the next farm bill.

PF & QF view the farm bill not only as critical conservation policy, but as a practical tool that benefits producers, rural communities, and the hunting and outdoor recreation economy. The policies you shape here have real, lasting impacts on the land and the lives of the people who

steward it. With this in mind, I would like to highlight some of the key perspectives on conservation raised by our members, volunteers, staff, and farmer and rancher partners.

### **Voluntary and locally led conservation is key and must continue in the next farm bill**

The success of farm bill conservation programs lies in their voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led structure. Producers trust these programs because they are rooted in science, respect private property rights, and are designed to be flexible. Continued investment in conservation planning and technical assistance is essential for this trust and success to continue. Strengthening partnerships with state wildlife agencies, conservation districts, and local communities will multiply impact and improve the farm bill's outcomes.

### **A five-year farm bill with meaningful investments in conservation is critical**

It will be no surprise to this committee that a top priority today for PF & QF is to pass a bipartisan, comprehensive, five-year farm bill with meaningful investments in conservation as soon as possible.

The 2018 Farm Bill expired over a year and a half ago, at a time when America's agricultural producers are facing increasing market uncertainties, supply chain expectations, and land development pressures. Farmers and ranchers are working without an adequate safety net and with looming questions about how they will manage and fund the essential activities that will modernize their operations and make them more resilient.

Although many of the conservation programs funded through Title II of the 2018 Farm Bill have long-term authorization, others, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP), are dependent upon passage of a new farm bill to guarantee they can continue. Landowners enrolled in these programs likewise depend on the certainty of their contracts and the ability to plan and make land use decisions at the appropriate time of year.

In addition, these conservation programs are extremely popular and perennially oversubscribed. In 2020 and 2022, roughly three out of every four farmers who applied to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) were turned away due to a lack of funding. Even with the historic investments in working lands conservation made possible through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA), demand for these programs far outpaces supply. Although PF & QF recognize current objectives to shrink the federal deficit and cut spending, we urge this committee to incorporate the remaining IRA funding into the conservation title baseline to meet demand. This move has strong bipartisan support, as shown in both House and Senate farm bill proposals during the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. Now is not the time to shortchange our farmers and ranchers.

Further, PF & QF are concerned about recent proposals to drastically reduce the amount of Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding available for agricultural producers to help implement conservation practices on their operations. America's farmers are famous for wanting "a hand up, not a handout." Few things better embody this concept, and the efficient and effective use of the taxpayer's dollar, than the ability for *any* producer to walk into their local

USDA Service Center and receive expert assistance at no-cost from NRCS staff or from an affiliate or technical assistance provider, such as Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. This committee, through the farm bill and other authorities, should do everything possible to ensure America's producers can continue to receive technical assistance. This will ensure resiliency for our nation's lands and wildlife, agricultural operations, food supply, and rural communities.

Robust voluntary conservation programs not only help farmers and ranchers manage profitable agricultural operations today, but they also support the anticipated generational transfer of 360 million acres of farm and ranchland by 2030. These programs, and the technical assistance offered through NRCS, help experienced and new producers alike to reduce risk, ensure stable incomes, and assist with the large-scale capital expenditures needed to steward their agricultural operations well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

PF & QF sincerely appreciate the work this committee and your partners on the House Agriculture Committee have done to prepare for a new, bipartisan farm bill, and we understand the political and policy challenges that have prevented a new farm bill from moving forward. I strongly urge the committee to move a farm bill through the committee as soon as possible, and PF & QF stand ready to assist however possible.

### **The Conservation Reserve Program is part of the farm—and wildlife—safety net**

Now in its 40<sup>th</sup> year, CRP remains one of the most effective conservation tools available to farmers, ranchers, and landowners. CRP provides voluntary incentives to shift environmentally sensitive acres into conservation cover, improving soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat, usually for 10-15 years at a time. It is a foundational piece of rural America's environmental and economic landscape.

Just as importantly, CRP serves as a key component of the farm safety net, particularly in times of economic uncertainty, market volatility, and extreme weather. For many producers, CRP provides a stable, predictable income stream that complements land in active crop production, providing risk management and resilience against commodity price swings, increased input costs, and nature's unpredictability, helping to sustain operations during challenging times.

The program also plays a vital role during times of drought and natural disaster. Emergency haying and grazing provisions under CRP offer critical forage resources when pasture and feed supplies are strained. These flexibilities support livestock producers and rural communities when they need it most, without compromising long-term conservation goals.

For many wildlife species living in agricultural landscapes, thriving populations depend on the voluntary conservation efforts of farmers, ranchers, and landowners. The grassland, wetland, and forest ecosystems created and enhanced through CRP have provided essential habitat for pheasants, quail, pollinators, deer, waterfowl, songbirds, and other wildlife on and among working landscapes. This can be a boon to hunters and other wildlife enthusiasts, who can track the rise and fall of their favorite species to the number of CRP acres enrolled in a given area. Whether on a pivot corner beyond the reach of irrigation, on highly erodible soils, a stream buffer, or other agricultural lands, the perennial cover created through CRP can provide the

essential nesting, brooding, escape, and winter habitat needed to sustain and even grow a wildlife population.

Despite CRP's clear value, recent years have shown a troubling decline in enrollment in the General and Continuous signups. Complicated application processes, uncompetitive rental rates in certain regions, and inconsistent management have deterred participation, even among producers who support the program's goals and have interest in participating. For CRP to be successful, it must better reflect local market conditions and provide flexible, producer-friendly tools to encourage broader adoption.

That's why we strongly support the CRP Improvement Act, led by Majority Leader Thune and Ranking Member Klobuchar, which modernizes the program to meet today's conservation and economic needs. The bill would bolster CRP by improving access to grazing, maximizing enrollment options for producers, and addressing implementation issues under the 2018 Farm Bill. Importantly, the bill would restore cost-share for required mid-contract management activities, provide cost-share for grazing infrastructure, and permanently establish the highly successful State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative under Continuous CRP. Finally, the bill would increase annual payment limitations to account for inflationary and rising land value pressures. These payment limits have not been adjusted since CRP was originally created in 1985.

We also encourage policies that incentivize the enrollment of marginal lands, such as highly erodible acres or areas less suitable for crop production, where CRP delivers the greatest conservation and economic return for farmers. Tailoring incentives and rental rates to encourage enrollment of these marginal and environmentally sensitive acres ensures that CRP will remain a smart, efficient investment in our working lands. Elements of the Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot (SHIPP) could also be incorporated into nationwide implementation of CRP to strengthen the program's role as part of the farm safety net.

CRP works. With thoughtful improvements and strong Congressional support, it will continue to deliver conservation results, economic resilience, and wildlife benefits across rural America.

### **The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program supports farmers, hunters, and rural economies**

Another key component of the farm bill's conservation title is the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, or VPA-HIP. This program provides grants to states and tribal governments to provide incentives and protections to private landowners who voluntarily open their lands to the public for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation while simultaneously supporting habitat conservation. Access to quality habitat remains one of the top barriers to hunter participation, simultaneously straining our nation's hunting heritage and the American system of wildlife conservation funding, which depends on hunters and anglers for sustained funding. VPA-HIP directly addresses this issue, opening millions of acres of private land to the public and strengthening the ties between working lands and outdoor recreation.

The economic benefits of VPA-HIP are real and measurable. Hunting and fishing on these lands generate billions in consumer spending, support rural tourism, and create jobs in small

communities. In states with robust access programs, such as South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, we've seen increased license sales, expanded habitat stewardship, and thriving rural economies; local initiatives, such as the Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition in South Dakota and Nebraska Community Access Partnership, have formed to capitalize on the promise of more birds and more hunters for their communities. A 2021 study by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies found that local economies received an average of \$8.13 in economic activity for every \$1 invested through VPA-HIP. This rural spending is a key component of the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy, which generates over 5 million quality, high-paying jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

We strongly support the VPA Improvement Act, led by bipartisan Senators Bennet, Daines, and Marshall, which would triple funding for the program from \$50 million to \$150 million in the next farm bill. This investment is not only a win for hunters and anglers, but also a win for farmers, landowners, small businesses, and rural vitality.

### **The Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Working Lands for Wildlife benefit agricultural operations and the broader landscape**

Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) empower producers to integrate conservation into their active operations by offering cost-share and management incentive payments. The practices offered through EQIP not only improve wildlife habitat but also enhance soil health, boost water quality, and increase resilience to drought and flooding.

One of the most effective models within EQIP is Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), a partnership between USDA and conservation organizations like Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. WLFW uses a science-based, landscape-scale approach to target conservation practices in areas where they will provide the greatest benefit for both agricultural producers and high-priority wildlife species.

For the northern bobwhite quail, WLFW has been a game changer. Once one of the most abundant upland game birds in the country, bobwhite populations have declined drastically due to habitat loss and landscape fragmentation. Through WLFW, EQIP provides targeted financial and technical assistance to help landowners implement habitat-friendly practices, such as prescribed fire, native grass and forb establishment, and edge feathering, that not only benefit quail but also improve grazing systems, pollinator habitat, and soil productivity.

In the West, WLFW's private lands conservation efforts played an important role in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2015 decision that both the Greater sage-grouse and the Bi-state sage grouse were not warranted for listing under the ESA. That's because of WLFW's innovative approach that provides regulatory predictability to landowners, ensuring that no matter the legal status of a wildlife species on their property, they can keep their working lands working with an NRCS conservation plan in place.

PF & QF's biologists, precision agriculture specialists, prescribed fire specialists, and other field positions are proud to work alongside NRCS field staff to assist landowners in developing conservation plans under EQIP and WLFW that are tailored to their unique landscapes and

operations. This approach demonstrates how conservation and production can go hand-in-hand when programs are voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led.

We urge the Committee to maintain strong funding for EQIP, including ensuring that at least 10% of EQIP funding goes towards wildlife practices, and to continue supporting targeted initiatives like Working Lands for Wildlife. These programs help producers manage working lands in a way that benefits both their operations and the broader landscape.

### **The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program provides certainty against development pressures**

Through voluntary conservation easements, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners protect native grasslands, wetlands, and agricultural working lands that are critical to both wildlife and rural economies. PF & QF strongly support continued investment in ACEP, as these easements provide long-term conservation certainty while keeping land in private ownership and agricultural use. They are especially valuable for protecting intact prairies, wetlands, and other habitats that are increasingly at risk from development or conversion.

Voluntary grassland easements, like those enrolled under the Grasslands of Special Significance option, have proven to be a highly effective tool for conserving large tracts of native rangeland in areas like the Great Plains, where these landscapes support not only pheasants, quail, and other wildlife, but also livestock operations and rural livelihoods. These working landscapes are increasingly threatened by fragmentation and land-use changes. ACEP provides a mechanism for landowners to conserve them while continuing traditional uses like grazing.

Likewise, wetland easements provide critical benefits for wildlife, water quality, and flood mitigation. By restoring and permanently protecting wetlands, ACEP helps conserve some of the most productive ecosystems in North America.

As with EQIP and CSP mentioned above, the demand for voluntary easements routinely exceeds available funding. We encourage the Committee to support robust funding and streamlined implementation of ACEP, while maintaining its voluntary, producer-focused framework. Continued support for these easements ensures that high-priority habitats can be protected for the long term, benefiting wildlife, water, and working farms and ranches alike.

### **Public-private partnerships scale conservation through collaboration**

Delivering conservation on working lands through strong public-private partnerships is extraordinarily effective. PF & QF have long believed that conservation is most successful when it's local, collaborative, and rooted in relationships between producers, agencies, and trusted partners.

Our Farm Bill Biologist Program exemplifies this model. With trained wildlife biologists in USDA Service Centers across the country, we provide boots-on-the-ground technical assistance to producers interested in implementing conservation practices. These biologists work side-by-side

with NRCS and FSA staff to help producers navigate conservation programs, develop conservation plans that reflect their goals, and implement practices that are both effective and operationally practical.

This collaborative model strengthens USDA's capacity, increases enrollment in conservation programs, and ensures outcomes are both locally relevant and scientifically sound. Many of our biologist positions are supported through partnerships with state agencies, conservation districts, and other nonprofit organizations, showcasing the power of cooperation in advancing shared goals.

Additionally, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) continues to be a powerful mechanism for leveraging private investment and local expertise to achieve large-scale resource conservation. Through RCPP, we're able to work hand-in-hand with producers, conservation districts, state agencies, and commodity groups to implement targeted, results-driven projects that are grounded in science and tailored to local needs. These partnerships allow us to address resource concerns at scale, while respecting the voluntary, incentive-based framework producers value.

These public-private partnerships would also benefit from better data management and utilization to further inform land use decisions and implementation of conservation practices, as well as to make it possible to measure and report on outcomes. That is why PF & QF support the Agriculture Innovation Act, led by Majority Leader Thune and Ranking Member Klobuchar. This bill would enable USDA to use, in a manner that protects producer privacy, the data it collects from farmers to return to growers a better understanding of the benefits of conservation, whether near-term soil health gains or longer-term resiliency.

We urge the Committee to continue its support for public-private partnerships, including strong funding for RCPP. Success depends not only on program funding, but on having trusted professionals working in local communities who can build trusted relationships, guide producers through the process, and ensure conservation practices are implemented efficiently and effectively, in a way that works for the land and the grower's bottom line.

## **Conclusion**

The farm bill conservation title is an investment in rural America's future. It supports farmers and ranchers, enhances biodiversity, and helps safeguard the natural resources that sustain our agricultural economy.

On behalf of Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, I want to thank the Committee for its longstanding bipartisan support of conservation. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the next farm bill strengthens these vital programs for the benefit of wildlife, producers, and the public alike.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

## Appendix: PF & QF CRP Priorities

### Key Principles

- **Increase acres enrolled in CRP and put the program on a trajectory toward historical enrollment levels in priority landscapes** at both the state and national level.
- **Maintain the statutory requirement to ensure an equitable balance** among the conservation purposes of soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife habitat.
- **Keep perennial cover and long-term contracts (10+ years) as the core function of CRP to ensure soil, water, and wildlife benefits continue.**
- **Ensure robust enrollment for all signup types.**

### Rental Rates

- **Restore and increase rental rates to promote enrollment and fairly compensate landowners for enrolled land.** The 2018 Farm Bill reduced rental rates to 85% and 90% for General and Continuous signups, respectively, resulting in decreased interest and loss of acres in the program.
- **Within General CRP only, encourage enrollment of marginal lands by increasing rental rates for less productive soils.** Currently, rental rates are weighted based on the productivity of the soils in the contract, with less productive soils receiving lower rental rates. Increasing rates for these soils will better incentivize enrollment of marginal lands in the General signup.
- **Within Continuous CRP (including CREP), restore rental rates to 100% of the county average rental rate.** The practices in Continuous signup are focused on environmentally sensitive lands, and rental rates should be set in a way that fairly compensates producers for enrolling these lands in high priority practices and initiatives.
- **Increase entity limitation on annual rental payments to \$125,000 per year to account for changes in land value, inflation, and other economic factors.** The current entity limitation of \$50,000 per year has not changed since CRP was first authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill.

### Cost-Share, Incentives, and Management Requirements

- **Maintain, at a minimum, the existing statutory levels for cost-share and incentive rates** to ensure the established cover provides the multiple resource benefits and habitat benefits for which it was enrolled. Cost-share for establishment of cover is currently authorized for 50% of the cost of the practice, with Continuous CRP contracts receiving an additional practice incentive payment of up to 50% of the practice cost and a signing incentive payment of 32.5% of the first year's rental payment.
- **Continue to require necessary management of cover where needed** to ensure soil, water, and wildlife benefits continue for the length of the contract, including for reenrollments. Incorporate state and regional recommendations for eligible mid-contract management activities and criteria for cover management.

- **Restore cost-share for required mid-contract management activities**, including for contracts enrolled under the 2018 Farm Bill. The authority was removed late in negotiations for the 2018 Farm Bill without knowledge or support from the conservation community.

### **State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)**

- **Maintain the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement initiative in Continuous CRP.** In 2019, USDA made an administrative decision to move SAFE to General signup, which significantly reduced the interest in and impact of SAFE enrollments. This decision has since been reversed administratively, but it is critical that SAFE remain as part of Continuous CRP in the future.
- **Restore the waiver authority to exclude acreage enrolled under SAFE and other Continuous practices from the 25 percent county acreage cap.**

### **Haying and Grazing**

- **Promote grazing over haying as a tool for management and enhancement of CRP cover by providing cost-share for establishment of grazing infrastructure**, including fencing and water distribution, if grazing is included in the approved conservation plan. This may include boundary fencing when the land is enrolled without adequate fencing. This cost-share should not prohibit or negatively impact the producer's ability to reenroll in CRP.
- **Restore limits on emergency haying to no more than 50% of contract acres each year and ensure appropriate restrictions remain in place during and after the primary nesting season for emergency and non-emergency haying.** Current policy allows the entire contract to be harvested in an emergency each year after the primary nesting season with no payment reduction.

### **Grassland CRP**

- **Improve Grassland CRP to better target lands at risk of conversion and high-quality habitat**, including prioritizing enrollment of expiring CRP acres.
- **Provide additional cost-share authority on lands enrolled in Grassland CRP** for establishment and management of the vegetative cover to increase forage quality and environmental benefits.