Testimony

on behalf of the

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

with regard to

"Climate Change and the Agriculture Sector"

submitted to the

United States Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry

Pat Roberts, Chairman

submitted by

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National Cattlemen's
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Thank you, Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow, for allowing me to testify today. My name is Debbie Lyons-Blythe. I come to you as a landowner, cattle rancher and constituent to speak to you about climate change and what we are doing on Blythe Family Farms to address the issue. Blythe Family Farms, LLC is owned and operated by my husband Duane Blythe and me, along with our five grown children, who are all shareholders. We manage more than 5,000 acres of native grassland and crop ground in the Flint Hills of Kansas, where we run 300 cows and calves and an additional 250 heifers. The land where we live and raise our cows and family is where my husband's great grandparents settled in 1890, making our children the fifth generation to live and work on this land.

The beef cattle industry has a great story to tell in the climate conversation and the facts support that. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, direct emissions from beef cattle only represent 2% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the country. A recent study published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that emissions from cattle "were not a significant contributor to long-term global warming."

Cattle producers graze cattle on approximately 660 million acres, nearly one-third of the United States' land mass. In addition to providing grass for our cattle, pasture and rangeland provides the important climate service of sequestering carbon in the soil. Since our livelihood is made on the land, through the utilization of our natural resources, being good stewards of the land not only makes good environmental sense; it is fundamental for our industry to remain strong. Climate change policies that *unfairly* target cattle producers fail to recognize the positive role of cattle and beef in a healthy, sustainable food system and misguided policies can threaten the viability of our industry.

Threats from urban encroachment, natural disasters and government overreach impact our industry too and keep us from putting land stewardship into practice. Ranching has several positive effects beyond just the health of the soil and flora. Several species of wildlife, from large ungulates to small pollinators, benefit from the open spaces which working ranches provide. Preserving these large, unbroken landscapes is critical to habitat conservation and the ultimate success of local wildlife. When ranchers are regulated out of business, these vast lands are often divided and sold in small-acre parcels, greatly impeding the migratory habits of these species. Put simply, wildlife depends on the work that we do to maintain water sources, foster robust forage production, and keep landscapes intact.

Taking care of the land is a top priority for our ranch, as well as most ranches in the United States. The Kansas Flint Hills is a tallgrass prairie biosphere that used to stretch from Canada to Mexico, providing grazing for millions of buffalo, elk, deer and other wildlife. Today, because of urban encroachment, only four percent of the tallgrass prairie remains and that is due to the efforts of cattle ranchers. The native grass in the Flint Hills can grow to six feet high, with root systems more

than 20 feet deep. It has been proven that those deep roots are excellent at sequestering carbon in the soil—effectively pulling it out of our atmosphere. At my ranch, we implement grazing management strategies to improve grassland biodiversity, decrease weeds and invasive species, optimize wildlife populations, and reduce erosion—all factors that support the native prairie ecosystem. In addition, we have installed multiple solar pump powered wells to provide alternative water for cattle, protecting the riparian areas and allowing for better grazing management.

Additionally, we grow crops to feed our livestock and my husband's father was ahead of his time in the 1960's in using low-tillage or no-tillage methods. By keeping plant material growing in the fields throughout the year, we reduce weeds, retain water, and enhance soil fertility and organic matter. Since my son's return to the farm, we have grown more crops for our cattle with the implementation of cover crops and no-till farming to enhance our soil – these practices are proven to increase carbon sequestration.

Beyond improving the land, our ranch is an example of how cattle ranchers use various technologies to help the animals to increase efficiency, thereby mitigating environmental impact. This increase in efficiency and quality of cattle has always been a part of the rancher's toolkit. Through genetic testing, we determine which of our bulls is superior in the traits that enhance meat quality, feed efficiency, and growth—as well as mothering ability, docility, fertility and calving ease. Efficiency traits directly affect beef sustainability; an animal who will reach harvest faster and yet produce a high-quality meat product will impact the environment for a shorter period of time. I remember the first predictors of a cow's breeding potential in the 1980s were simple: we took the weights of each animal and used them to predict their mature size and the mature size of their calves. Today, we take a DNA sample either through blood or tissue and submit it to a lab to predict their genetic capability to produce calves with superior efficiency. Of course, not all ranchers have this technology available because of price and availability. But it is the responsibility of seedstock ranchers like me to provide the superior genetics that have been proven through technology. In other words, I raise registered Angus bulls that have been DNA tested and selected for these superior traits and I sell them to the area ranchers to breed to their cows and improve the entire calf crop for years to come. These technological enhancements are vital to increasing efficiency and therefore environmental impact of the nation's cowherd. This technology allows us to produce the same amount of beef today that we were producing in the 1970's with 33 percent fewer animals.

Another way that our ranch, and many others in America, are directly impacting the environment in a positive way is by "upcycling". First of all, cattle are amazing in that they can eat grass, which is inedible to humans, to create a high value, nutrient dense protein product. In addition to that already amazing ability, cattle are able to "upcycle" -- use by-products of other industries that used to end up in the trash and feed it to our cattle. At my farm, we upcycle a by-product of ethanol production called distillers grain. Previously it was taken to a landfill or dump site and discarded.

But beef nutrition researchers found that it could be fed in measured quantities to cattle, providing a new source of protein and beef nutritionists began helping us formulate rations to actually use this new resource instead of discarding it as waste. This provides protein to the cattle and keeps a large amount of material from ending up in a landfill, preventing the generation of additional greenhouse gases. Distillers grain is merely one example. There are many by-products that are fed to cattle to enhance their diet in a safe and efficient manner, including potato peelings in Idaho, bakery trimmings near a pizza factory, and even by-products of chocolate near Hershey, Pennsylvania. Do you remember the news story about the truck load of discarded Skittles candy that was taken to a dairy farm to be used as feed? Some people questioned why we would feed candy to cows, but a cow's rumen is filled with specialized bacteria that needs a variety of sugar to live and be able to digest the grass and plant material she eats. Skittles can be good for cows and better still those discarded candy pieces didn't end up in the trash!

Ranchers continually work to improve the health and well-being of their animals, using new technologies and innovations. In terms of sustainability and climate, antibiotics are an important technology that maintains healthy cattle which allows the animals to utilize feed and water resources efficiently. A sick animal takes longer to gain weight and/or reproduce and that results in larger environmental footprint. Judicious and responsible use of antibiotics ensures that we will be able to protect animal health and raise animals in the most environmentally-friendly way we can.

Blythe Family Farms is engaged in the climate conversation on a national level as well. We are a founding member of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, a multistakeholder organization that brings together the beef supply chain, partners from allied industries, and NGOs to demonstrate and improve beef sustainability. I have served on the board of the organization and am the co-chair of the organization's outreach arm that aims to educate and engage the beef supply chain about beef sustainability.

When the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) began conversations, it was a tremendously different focus than conversations from years ago. Past conversations revolved around top-down arbitrary expectations that were truly not helpful or nationally scalable due to geographic differences across the country. USRSB changed this. It began from a discussion on how we, as members of the beef value chain, can directly and measurably impact sustainability. To do this, it brought together cattle ranchers and feedyards, who comprise the majority of the membership in the USRSB, along with retailers like McDonald's, Arby's, Wendy's, and others, as well as beef packers and processors, and non-governmental organizations and universities. Ranchers have been an integral part of the conversation from the beginning and have been delivering the message to improve our individual ranches and the entire ranching community. USRSB recently released its Framework for Beef Sustainability and is encouraging operations all along the beef value chain to measure their individual impact of key areas in sustainability which

we identified as: Water Resources, Land Resources, Air & Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Efficiency & Yield, Animal Health & Wellbeing, and Employee Safety & Wellbeing.

The Roundtable is an example of ranchers leading the way in a conversation. Cattle ranchers took the initiative to identify their unique footprint in beef sustainability, demonstrating their positive contributions to landscapes, wildlife populations, rural communities, our nation's economy, and a global food supply. But we also reflected on opportunities where we can improve. It demonstrates our commitment to doing right by the land, responsibly raising animals, caring for the people who raise beef, and making money to support our families and the next generation of beef producers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. The U.S. cattle industry is proud of its history as stewards of our nation's natural resources. The industry takes very seriously its obligation to protect the environment while providing the nation with a safe and affordable beef supply. Cattle producers are America's original conservationists, and we work hard every day to ensure that we can pass our operations on to the next generation. Our family, and America's cattle producers, are committed to remaining environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable for generations to come.