

Testimony

on behalf of the

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

with regard to

“Conservation and Forestry: Perspective on the Past and Future Direction for the 2018 Farm Bill”

submitted to the

United States Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry

Pat Roberts, Chairman

submitted by

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**National Cattlemen's
Beef Association**

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Thank you Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow for allowing me to testify today on conservation and the farm bill.

My name is Barb Downey. My husband, Joe, and I own and operate the Downey Ranch in the Flint Hills of Wabaunsee County and Riley County, Kansas. This land is comprised mostly of virgin tallgrass prairie and has been an ideal location for our registered and commercial Angus cow herd. We work to diligently maintain and improve the varied ecosystems found on the ranch which sustains our cattle and provides abundant habitat for wildlife.

U.S. cattle producers own and manage considerably more land than any other segment of agriculture— or any other industry for that matter. Cattle producers graze cattle on approximately 666.4 million acres of the approximately 2 billion acres of the U.S. land mass. In addition, the acreage used to grow hay, feed grains, and food grains add millions more acres of land under cattlemen’s stewardship and private ownership. Some of the biggest challenges and threats to our industry come from the loss of our natural resources. The livestock industry is threatened daily by urban encroachment, natural disasters, and government overreach. 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. We strive to operate as environmentally friendly as possible, and it is through voluntary conservation programs that ranchers will continue to be a proud partner with the government to reach our environmental conservation goals.

A major item on the mind of many cattle producers is the development of the 2018 Farm Bill. Farm Bill programs have a lasting effect, and sometimes a dramatic impact, on producers. This hearing today is about conservation, so I will focus my testimony on that, but I would be remiss as a cattle producer if I didn’t mention the livestock industry’s need for a more robust foot-and-mouth disease vaccine bank. An FMD outbreak has the potential to cause catastrophic economic losses to not only livestock producers, but also to the feed industry, auction markets, slaughterhouses, food processors; not to mention that we would be shut us out of export markets. The economic consequences would be astronomical, and our current FMD vaccine bank is insufficient. So please consider supporting an enhanced FMD vaccine bank. Thank you for letting me veer off topic for a moment, now back to conservation.

Producers pride themselves on being good stewards of our country’s natural resources. The Downey Ranch employs various conservation practices, some of which we put in place by utilizing NRCS programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (or EQIP).

The EQIP is improving habitat for grassland-nesting birds, like the lesser prairie chicken we have on our ranch land, which is under consideration for listing as threatened or endangered species. This program is enhancing the health of grazing lands, improving water quality, improving soil quality, and reducing soil erosion. One important feature of EQIP has been its focus on livestock operations, and we would like to see continued funding to preserve this

program in the 2018 Farm Bill. Federal funds spent on conservation are a good investment in our country's natural resources and the sustainability of agriculture and wildlife.

During the extensive drought in 2011 and 2012, our springs and ponds dried up and we knew we had to change the way we did things. We undertook an effort to improve our drought resilience by adding water storage on our landscape. We also put measures in place to ensure that cattle do not have unrestricted access to the creeks and ponds. A public recreation area is located just 2 miles downstream and thousands of people, including our family, wade and swim in its waters each year. We move our cattle across these creeks via restricted crossings in parts of the creek that have solid rock bottom so little sediment is disturbed. We also installed controlled access drinking points on our stock ponds so cattle can't erode the banks, and we put terraces around the ponds so that any water from the cattle areas are filtered through the grasses rather than the ponds. These ponds have clear water, and are home to a varied population of fish and lots of wildlife.

We used the EQIP program to install 6 of our 8 controlled access ponds. The success of our ponds led Senator Jerry Moran, other legislators, the state director of the KS NRCS, and others from NRCS in DC to come out to ranch and tour it. The ponds are a cost-effective way to provide beneficial effects for water, wildlife, and cattle.

At Downey Ranch, we employ rotational grazing which controls the horn fly population and allows the prairie grass to regenerate nicely. We use an approach that replicates bison herd movement over the prairie in the 19th century, running one big group of cows through different pastures. As a result, we've seen species that are typically grazed out coming back to the ranch. Eastern Gamma Grass, Catclaw Sensitive Briar, Leadplant and other indicator species are growing strong in our pastures.

Another key to improving the grass on our ranch is brush control. Encroachment of trees, brush, and noxious weeds like the Sericea Lespedeza, represent the single largest threat to the Tallgrass Prairie ecosystem. We use a variety of ways to reduce brush including prescribed burns and mechanical treatment. We have been a community leader in promoting and using online smoke prediction tools in order to comply with the state's Smoke Management Plan. This is done to keep cities and regions downwind of a prairie burn from violating EPA air quality standards.

The main point I'd like you all to take away from this hearing is that the "voluntary" part of the conservation programs is what truly makes it work for ranchers. We've had success using some of these conservation programs, but just because this system works for us does not mean it's right for everybody. It's important that we keep these programs funded to safeguard their continued success, and above all else - these programs must stay voluntary. A one-size fits all approach that accompanies top-down regulation does not work in my industry. If these programs were to become mandatory, the rules and regulations that farmers and ranchers would be

subjected to would make it harder for them to utilize the unique conservation practices that help their individual operations thrive.

Economic prosperity and conservation go hand in hand and we are always looking for new, innovative conservation programs that will have tangible benefits for the environment, and help to improve our ranching lands. USDA's voluntary conservation programs have been a great asset to cattle producers and it is important that these programs are implemented in a practical, producer friendly, and voluntary manner for years to come to ensure that cattle producers will continue to have the ability to do what we do best – produce the world's safest, most nutritious, abundant and affordable protein while operating in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Ranchers across the country maintain open spaces, healthy rangelands, provide wildlife habitat and feed the world. Together we can sustain our country's natural resources and economic prosperity, ensuring the viability of our way of life for future generations. I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you have.