

## Senate Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Glen Chown and I am the Executive Director of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, a regional land trust based in Traverse City, Michigan. Traverse City is called the Cherry Capital of the World because it is one of the most globally unique and agriculturally diverse growing areas of the country and grows a monumental quantity of sweet and tart cherries.

To begin, I would like to thank Senator Stabenow for her leadership and vision in championing historic investments to protect our Great Lakes and address climate change impacts while also preserving important habitat and supporting outdoor recreation, our way of life, and our economy. The list of the senator's accomplishments in conservation and agriculture is long, with each playing a critical role in protecting our land and water resources.

I'd also like to thank Senator Boozman for being here today to learn how Farm Bill programs support Michigan agriculture. Senator Boozman has always been a champion of conservation in Arkansas and I look forward to working with you to continue to prioritize critical wetland habitat and the restoration of migratory bird and other wildlife ecosystems.

There has always been bipartisan support for programs that protect our farms, our ranchlands, our outstanding growers, and our coveted freshwater resources, and we are pleased that this vital bipartisan spirit continues under your leadership. With you two leading the way on the *Growing Climate Solutions Act*, it passed out of the Senate on a sweeping 92-8 vote. On behalf of the land trust community nationwide, please know how much we appreciate your leadership and appreciate your bipartisan approach as we tackle the important global food security issues that are at the top of all of our minds.

To underscore the importance of strengthening conservation programs in the upcoming 2023 Farm Bill, I want to share a brief summary of our Regional Conservation Partnership Project. This would not have been possible without Senator Stabenow's leadership and Congress' significant investments in the Farm Bill Conservation Title.

In 2015, a unique collaboration of two tribal nations, federal and state agencies, and nonprofit organizations called the Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative came together to accomplish the following:

- Improve water quality in northwest lower Michigan's portion of the Great Lakes Basin
- Recover degraded wildlife habitat
- Improve fish stocks and reconnect aquatic habitats
- Enhance tribal subsistence fishing
- Permanently protect productive family farms, including wetlands and inland streams
- Ensure future agricultural productivity, viability, and ecosystem health.

Together, these partners have and continue to increase to 26% the total amount of working agricultural land under permanent conservation easement in one of the fastest developing areas in the Great Lakes basin. These permanent protections on family farms are accomplished through voluntary agreements and, unlike past agricultural programs, are designed to permanently buffer critical streams, wetlands, and surface waters.

This additional land protection and stream restoration work will help protect a major portion of the network of globally rare cold and cool water, groundwater input, and sandy substrate habitats connected by large forested corridors that deliver the highest quality water inputs and comprise the backbone of resiliency for the Great Lakes.

Protection of water quality and re-connection of aquatic habitat in this region is vital as these natural resources underpin two major and interdependent portions of Michigan's economy – agriculture and tourism.

Our region clearly has the potential to be an example of what can be done, right now, to address food security and climate change, and the federal government can be assured that there is a network of organizations in place to make it happen. We have the necessary elements to make it work: prime agricultural lands; enthusiastic skilled farmers; a direct sales and distribution network; training and mentoring programs for new and beginning farmers; and local farmers willing to serve as test sites and mentors. For all of this to successfully come together, we must have federal program and financial support.

Our region has much in place, but continuing this work and ensuring we retain our agricultural lands and keep our farmers and ranchers viable hinges on a strong Farm Bill conservation title.

Programs such as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program provide the resources for land trusts such as ours to work with willing landowners to put conservation easements on their properties. This is a win for all Americans — it helps keep working lands in production for now and forever into the future. That need has been important for decades, with conversion of farmland and other working lands taking place at an alarming rate. Today, the risks of losing our ability to grow food and fiber here at home are even more evident as food security issues appear around the globe in response to the war in Ukraine. We must do everything we can to ensure that farmers and ranchers have the tools and resources they need to keep these lands in production and to be able to earn a living.

In addition, the corresponding Regional Conservation Partnership Program provides the “secret sauce” to address these challenges head on. RCPP enables innovative public-private partnerships to utilize the NRCS programs, including

easement programs, to conserve working lands, address water quality, and other important natural resources issues on farms.

I have underscored the importance of specific programs that conserve our farms and ranches which are under continued threat of conversion to other uses. These easement programs work hand in hand with the suite of conservation programs in the Farm Bill that are critical to addressing the variety of resource concerns and farmer needs on the ground. These include the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and Conservation Stewardship Program. Together, these programs meet farmers at their current level of ability and interest and help them achieve their conservation goals. They are critical to a resilient future.

Meanwhile, I should point out that even though ACEP and RCPP are critical tools, the demand for these programs far exceeds the funding. Congress should authorize additional funds so that farmer demand can be met. The Land Trust Alliance is collecting data to determine how many farms and ranches are at risk due to inadequate ACEP funding last year. To date, we are aware of at least 34 qualified projects in Texas, Arizona, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other states that would have conserved more than 131,000 working acres of farm, grasslands, and ranches. In addition, these dollars would have leveraged at least \$80 million in matching funds. This snapshot presented today does not represent the whole picture, but it does give a sense of what's at risk for our country without robust funding for these important programs.

Senator Stabenow, I applaud you for recognizing the need for increased funding for farm bill conservation programs. The \$28 billion in new funding for the farm bill conservation title as part of the reconciliation package shows your strong commitment to ensuring a viable agricultural community here in Michigan and across our country. Let's work together to get that bill passed and get these dollars flowing to our local communities and farmers.

In addition, there are opportunities for the 2023 Farm Bill to improve easement programs so that they can be even more effective. While great strides were made to streamline ACEP in the 2018 Farm Bill, the implementation has not been entirely smooth and we have suggestions for improvement in this upcoming bill.

First, we would like to work with you to clarify that certified entities can draft their own deed terms, eliminate the ALE plan requirement that served as an impediment to conserving farms and ranches, and allow land donation and expenses to satisfy the match requirement.

The ability to recognize exceptional land trusts as certified entities was established in the 2008 Farm Bill. With this provision, Congress intended to streamline implementation of the ACEP program. To date, only seven entities have been certified. We recommend clarifying the certification application and enrollment process and expanding it so that certified entities are recognized across all NRCS easement programs, including RCPP. Trusted partners can leverage limited NRCS resources and make federal dollars stretch farther, ensuring programmatic dollars are allocated to strong projects on the ground.

Second, even with an increased utilization of partnerships, the NRCS continues to be understaffed. It's important for Congress to provide the funding needed to build staff capacity to deliver results. The land trust community is working with the agency to identify ways to eliminate and streamline approval processes. For example, upon implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill, the final ACEP rule added hurdles and undermined congressional intent by doing things such as making a cash match a national ranking criteria for ACEP or making ALE plans a state ranking criteria. These arbitrary requirements only increase the difficulty for the agency and partners to deploy federal resources to local projects.

Third, we recommend a new easement program for forested lands that is separate from ACEP and does not compete with ACEP for funding. We further recommend

enhancement of the Healthy Forest Reserve Program by creating a stand-alone Forest Conservation Easement Program that ensures private forestland remains intact and in production, allowing them to continue providing numerous benefits to rural and urban communities.

Finally, it goes without saying that it is critical to ensure that all landowners have access to farm bill conservation programs by reducing barriers to historically underserved landowners.

Thank you, Senators, for taking the time to hear from northern Michigan as you draft the 2023 Farm Bill. We are profoundly grateful for your leadership, your vision, and your commitment to strengthening the Farm Bill conservation programs that provide so many benefits to all Americans across this great country from sea to shining sea.