

Testimony of Steve Ewald

Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

“Growing Jobs and Economic Opportunity: 2023 Farm Bill Perspectives from Michigan”

Good morning Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman. Thank you for the opportunity and invitation to testify before you today.

My name is Stephen Ewald, I am the owner and operator of Ewald Farms, near the Village of Unionville in Tuscola County. There, along with my wife Dana and my son Luke, we operate a certified organic cash crop farm comprising of nearly 2200 acres. We grow a variety of crops including yellow and blue corn, winter wheat, soybeans, navy beans, black beans, great northern beans, small red beans and dark red kidney beans. We strive to be diversified and nimble in crop choice as to satisfy customer demand while maintaining an important crop rotation that allows the use of various cover crops to help protect and build our delicate soil. I have been a farmer most of my life with memories of working with my mother and father at a very young age. In 1999, faced with the challenges of working off the farm, and trying to make enough money farming to be considered legitimate, I decided to move toward organic production. Although it was not an easy journey, it worked out well and in the 23 years since, I have not looked back. I also had the help of a fine small, rural bank that made it possible to bridge the gap between conventional and organic production.

I currently serve as Vice Chair of the Michigan Bean Commission and Chairman of the Production Research Advisory Board. I also serve on the Michigan Farm Produce Insurance Authority Board representing dry bean growers. I also currently serve as chairman of the Board of the Organic Farmers of Michigan, which is a group of more than 70 certified organic farmers in mid-Michigan formed to help them market some of the best quality food grade soybeans, edible beans, and grains produced in the U.S.

I believe that agriculture has a place for all types of farmers. Food security through environmentally responsible, domestic production and distribution in my opinion should be viewed as the number one priority in America. No one should have to worry about the basic necessity of life, Food. The American farmer is up to the task. We do however, need consistent access to affordable financing opportunities as well as efficient, affordable means of insuring our crops and property. The 2023 Farm Bill can and should include incentives for sound environmental practices that can be implemented by most growers. I myself have utilized the CREP program, cover crop seed reimbursement, ARC/PLC and the crop insurance subsidy, and the organic certification subsidy.

Organic farmers in particular, utilize specialty cover crops to help maintain and build soil quality. This is extremely important for organic growers because of the avoidance of synthetic nutrient fertilizer inputs. We do not have the option of conventional nitrogen fertilizer such as urea or anhydrous ammonia to kick start our corn and wheat crops. This can sometimes limit yield and or quality levels of grain. Instead, we utilize manures and composts, which are in short supply as well. Thanks to Senator Stabenow’s leadership, the 2018 Farm Bill included permanent, mandatory funding for organic research, which could encourage research on organically permitted products that would utilize atmospheric nitrogen. The 2023 Farm Bill could also encourage research on organically permitted insecticides and fungicides to help the producer cope with the influx of climate related disease and insect pressure. The 2023 Farm Bill could certainly contain support for the breeding of natural cross seed varieties that may better compete with the newest seed technologies built in a gene lab. Crop insurance can also be an important risk management tool for producers, but I encourage the Committee to work to ensure this tool works for organic producers and I appreciate your efforts, Senator Stabenow, to expand this program to more types of production in past Farm Bills. I am very concerned with imports of fraudulent organic products that do not meet the same high standards as U.S. organic farmers and undercut domestic organic growers like me. It is critical that USDA quickly implement the 2018 Farm Bill provisions to ensure organic importers have all the tools and enforcement actions necessary to combat organic fraud at ports and in domestic markets.

In my closing, I will plead with the writers of the 2023 Farm Bill, to incorporate funding and language, that will build a stronger base for all organic agriculture through better biological product development programs for nutrient availability, increased production of natural fertilizers, better access to breeding lines for organic seed companies, continued and renewed support for organic research at universities such as MSU. Continued funding for dry bean research in variety, disease resistance and placement of this protein rich food in food programs of our nation and beyond our borders. We still struggle with even medium speed internet access, so the continued push for rural broadband is a must. We all live in a beautiful but somewhat fragile world and I believe all farmers want to produce the most while doing no harm. It would be wonderful for all to heal our world with some old and some new highly sustainable practices. Let farmers be farmers, we are good at it, it's in our blood. Help us where you can, thank you for time.