

Testimony before
The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry of the United States Senate

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

Submitted by
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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Ohio’s own Senator Brown and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the issue of conservation practices in Ohio and the importance of conservation programs in the Farm Bill. My name is Adam Sharp and I have the privilege to serve as the Executive Vice President for the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, helping represent Ohio’s largest general farm organization and nearly 165,000 members. I also farm in partnership with my two brothers on our dairy farm and row crop operation growing corn, soybeans, wheat and hay in south central Ohio.

The environmental challenges we face in Ohio are well documented, particularly related to nutrient issues and water quality. I am proud of how focused Ohio’s farmers are in working to address nutrient run-off issues and I appreciate the opportunity to share with you the value of our state partnerships supported by federal conservation programs. From what I share with you today, I hope that one key component you take away is that Ohio is unique and successful because our conservation efforts have been an amazing demonstration of all sectors and entities working together as one for the collective good.

The agricultural community is committed to addressing water quality issues through numerous combined and individual measures. There is extensive research being conducted both in the lab and in the field. Farmers have invested tens of millions of dollars of their own money in establishing voluntary conservation practices on their farms. Between 2006 and 2012, they have voluntarily reduced phosphorous applications in the Western Lake Erie Basin (WLEB) by more than 13 million pounds.* As farmers are stepping up to implement conservation practices now, they are committed to finding additional solutions in the future.

Part of those partnerships include working with organizations such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with conservation tools provided through the Farm Bill such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) or through programs such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). As an organization that promotes working lands programs over retirement land programs, programs

like EQIP and RCPP fit right in line with our organizational policy. While we are all aware of the importance of the funding of these programs, let me take a minute to share just how unique this partnership is with USDA-NRCS and Ohio and how critical these programs are to preserving water quality.

Demonstration Farms:

Ohio Farm Bureau is collaborating with USDA-NRCS along with other partners in creating only the second in the nation Demonstration Farms project. This project is located in the heart of the WLEB along the Blanchard River focusing on conservation efforts. The farm organizations involved with this endeavor have voluntarily taken on this project as have the three farmers – two row crop and one swine – whose acreage is being used. This total \$1 million, 5-year project, funds EQIP approved practices. Approximately 75% of the funding is from USDA-NRCS and 25% is from Ohio Farm Bureau.

These demonstration farms are serving as models for new innovations that reduce and prevent agricultural runoff and those discoveries will be shared with farmers across the watershed and the region, land management agencies, policy makers, the media and the public. These conservation practices are being implemented by EQIP dollars and display the best models available for other farmers to incorporate on their fields.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP):

Ohio's agriculture and conservation organizations also took an active role in supporting the Farm Bill's Regional Conservation Partnership Program and committed resources to this public-private partnership. Farmers have been eager to participate in this voluntary program that allows them to implement on-ground conservation practices for sediment and nutrient management. The EQIP programs under RCPP are the perfect combination of allowing farmers to keep land in production while practicing effective conservation measures.

We appreciate that Congress, and this committee specifically, saw the importance of these programs. These dollars were used for critical on-farm needs including animal waste systems and storages, lot covers and roofs, controlled drainage structures, cover crops, drainage water management, nutrient management plans, waterways, crop rotations and multi-year cover crops.

In 2015, USDA awarded \$17.5 million to a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP-Tri State WLEB) in the western Lake Erie watershed. The targeted approach focuses efforts on the 855,000 acres that have been identified as the most critical areas to treat within the larger 7-million-acre watershed within Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. The RCPP project: 1) expands access to public and private technical assistance, 2) supports new and ongoing innovative conservation practices, and 3) provides expertise for modeling and evaluating outcomes to farmers in critical sub-watersheds. The 5-year multi-state project includes more than 40 collaborating public and private sector organizations with representation from Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana, state and local governments, as well as non-profit entities, universities, and private sector businesses committing an additional \$28 million to the project.

Edge-of-Field Research:

A critical partnership is with the Ohio Farm Bureau, Ohio Corn and Wheat, Ohio Soybean Council, Ohio Agribusiness Association and others that joined together with USDA-NRCS to fund a project of over \$2 million to conduct edge of field research throughout the state to better learn how to prevent nutrients from escaping from fields. The combined efforts of Ohio's agriculture community with the Ohio State University and USDA researchers now have important baseline data, measures, practices and results. The information being collected is invaluable and will be used to modify Ohio's Phosphorus Risk Index as well as help identify effective management practices.

While the findings are under continuous evaluation, preliminary results about how phosphorous leaves the field include:

- Controlling erosion continues to be important. Particulate bound phosphorus makes up over 73% of the total phosphorus in surface runoff and over 52% of the total phosphorus in tile flow.
- There is a strong relationship between soil test phosphorus levels and the amount of particulate bound phosphorus transported off site in surface runoff.
- Fertilizer application is a high-risk practice – timing and placement are important.
- Incorporation of fertilizer during or after application can result in more than a 90% reduction in phosphorus runoff.

These programs would not have been possible without the financial commitment of Farm Bill dollars along with the significant matching investment by Ohio's farmers. Some recent data provided by USDA-NRCS highlight that partnership well and the tremendous work taking place to improve nutrient management and water quality.

- Between **2009 and 2014**, NRCS provided almost **\$57 million to fund over 2,000** conservation contracts on over **435,000 enrolled acres** in the Western Lake Erie Basin.
- During fiscal year **2015**, the **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)**, which provides funding for agriculture through Farm Bill programs, **funded \$1.7 million** for nutrient and sediment reduction projects on **over 100,000 acres** in targeted agricultural watersheds in the Great Lakes basin. These projects are estimated to prevent over 160,000 pounds (72.5 metric tons) of phosphorus from entering the Great Lakes annually. Federal agencies and their partners also funded urban runoff projects that are anticipated to capture an average annual volume of more than 37 million gallons of untreated urban runoff per year. These projects reduce flooding, increase green space in urban areas, and return vacant properties to productive use.
- In **FY 2015**, **NRCS funded 99 EQIP** contracts for \$3,353,195 in the **Ohio WLEB**.
- In **FY 2016**, NRCS launched a new funding **WLEB Initiative** and strategy, with support from Ranking Member Stabenow, Senator Brown and Senator Donnelly, based on the findings of their special study evaluating the impacts of voluntary conservation in the western basin of Lake Erie and conservation treatment needs. The Initiative helps

landowners reduce phosphorus runoff from farms by more than 640,000 pounds (290 metric tons) each year – 175,000 pounds of which is in the form of soluble phosphorus – by effectively doubling the acres under conservation in the western basin of Lake Erie watershed over the course of the 3-year investment.

- In the first year of the WLEB Initiative, **\$20.7 million in EQIP** program funds was allocated; **79 percent of these dollars went to Ohio farms** (\$16,306,828).
- To date in **2017**, Ohio NRCS has contracted **over \$6 million in EQIP** with nearly \$1 million additional in approved or pre-approved status. There were 472 applications needing \$33.3 million (in fund pool including RCPP EQIP, WLEB EQIP and GLRI).

In addition to the Edge of Field Study, farmers are also committed to coordinating water research and programming through our land grant's "Field to Faucet" initiative as well as through increased educational opportunities. Ohio Farm Bureau, Ohio Corn and Wheat, Ohio Soybean Council and Ohio Agribusiness Association have also funded four new OSU staff to work with farmers to develop Nutrient Management Plans in the WLEB and one new staff to work with retailer 4R certification.

The industry lead 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program covers nearly 1.9 million acres in the WLEB that are now under guidance of Agriculture Retailers and Nutrient Service Providers that have voluntarily earned certification from the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program.

I would also be remiss if I did not lift up Healthy Water Ohio. This is an initiative led by the agricultural community that included a voluntary and diverse partnership of stakeholders charged with developing a 20- to 30-year water resource management strategy for Ohio. Healthy Water Ohio has representatives from business and industry, conservation and environment, finance, food and farming, lawn and horticulture, municipal water systems, public health, recreation and tourism, research, education and outreach.

The group conducted multiple information gathering sessions throughout the state and conducted meetings with water quality experts and public officials. The final report from Healthy Water Ohio provides a roadmap of innovative research, policy, education and infrastructure proposals along with an implementation schedule. Voluntary implementation of components of the report has begun including the pursuit of a Water Trust that can fund a variety of water-related needs such as research, monitoring and improvement of gray and green infrastructure.

While the results of the various edge of field studies are beginning to show us possible solutions, we also know that the measures farmers are taking to reduce run-off voluntarily are also showing success. USDA-NRCS produced a Special Study Report titled "Effects of Conservation Practice Adoption on Cultivated Cropland Acres in Western Lake Erie Basin, 2003-06 and 2012" (March 2016). This study was designed to quantify the environmental benefits that farmers and conservation programs in the WLEB provide to society. The report, based on farmer survey data in the Basin, shows that voluntary conservation is making significant

headway in reducing nutrient and sediment loss from farms. Even so, there is opportunity to improve conservation management across the basin and no single conservation solution will meet the needs of each field and farm.

Key findings of the survey on conservation practices in the WLEB include:

- 99% of the cropland acres are managed with at least one conservation practice
- 70% of the nitrogen applied is removed by crop harvest
- 58% of the cropland acres are managed with phosphorus application rates at or below crop removal rates
- The cost of conservation practices in place represents a significant annual investment. Regardless of funding source (federal, state, local or private) the annual regional investment in conservation is \$277 million or \$56.98 per acre.
- No single conservation solution will meet the needs of each field and farm. WLEB croplands are diverse in terms of soils, farm fields, farming operations and management, which creates differences in conservation needs and potential solutions. Field-scale conservation planning and conservation systems are needed to accommodate different treatment needs within and across farm fields, while maintaining productivity.
- Additional progress in nutrient and erosion control will depend on advanced precision technologies directed to unique zones or soils within field boundaries.

I appreciate the opportunity to address you today and provide just a brief overview of the efforts Ohio's farmers are making to ensure a long future of clean water in our state. We sincerely value the partnership we have been able to form over the years with USDA-NRCS and appreciate all of your efforts to provide access to federal conservation programs through the Farm Bill. We support the Committee's efforts to prioritize these working lands conservation programs in the upcoming 2018 Farm Bill. Together we can continue to make a difference.

If you want to learn more about our numerous efforts go to www.farmersforwater.com or www.blancharddemofarms.org.

* USDA-NRCS Special Study Report titled "Effects of Conservation Practice Adoption on Cultivated Cropland Acres in Western Lake Erie Basin, 2003-06 and 2012". (March 2016)