



The Honorable David Scott
Chairman
House of Representatives Committee on
Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson
Ranking Member
House of Representatives Committee on
Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Abigail Spanberger
Chairwoman
House of Representatives Committee on
Agriculture, Subcommittee on Conservation and
Forestry
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Doug LaMalfa
Ranking Member
House of Representatives Committee on
Agriculture, Subcommittee on Conservation and
Forestry
Washington, DC 20515

Re: In Regards to the Farm Bill Conservation Programs Hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

Date: February 2, 2022

The National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) thanks the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture for holding this hearing on farm bill conservation programs. Climate change is an increasing and persistent threat to agriculture, disrupting food production across the country and the rest of the world. The agricultural sector, however, is uniquely poised to be able to directly mitigate the disastrous effects of climate change through practices that sequester carbon in the soil and provide other ecosystem services to build on-farm climate resilience. Farm bill conservation programs are critical elements in combating climate change as well as improving access to land for the next generation. We thank the Honorable David Scott, Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson, Abigail Spanberger, and Doug LaMalfa for holding this hearing to discuss impacts of and opportunities for improving farm bill conservation programs.

The National Young Farmers Coalition works closely with young farmers across the country to assist them in building resilience to climate change through training, building farmer networks across the U.S., and advocating for policy change at the state and federal level. Our campaigns focus on key issues, identified by our members, to address the major obstacles young farmers face.

In a 2017 national survey of our coalition, 66% of respondents reported experiencing unpredictable weather and 53% attributed those changes to climate change.¹ Furthermore, in a 2020 survey of policy issues, our members across the country identified addressing climate change as their number one priority.² Young farmers, particularly Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) farmers are on the frontlines of experiencing and responding to this crisis. Our farmers have experienced increased pest pressure, uncertainty and severe fluctuations in water supply, and increased rates of disease, with seemingly no end in sight. Young farmers have lost crops and sustained damage to their farms due to extreme weather events, have had disrupted growing seasons, suffered severe economic losses, and have shut down operations due to droughts and unsafe conditions from uncontrolled wildfires.

Further compounding this issue is the lack of access to affordable, quality land, as farmland, agriculture, and the climate crisis are deeply intertwined. Land is the foundation of nourishment and resiliency and is the number one tool available to farmers in the fight against climate change. Land that is stewarded plays a critical role in climate change mitigation and resilience, yet accelerating trends of farmland loss are occurring disproportionately on soils rated highest for productivity, versatility, and resiliency.³ Additionally, the dispossession of land from BIPOC individuals and the ongoing consolidation of land into the hands of fewer and fewer owners makes this issue all the more difficult for BIPOC farmers. Secure land tenure is critical to farmers' ability to remain in the field long-term and to making deep-rooted and long lasting climate interventions. Despite being heavily affected by climate change, farmers have the transformative power to sequester carbon by using climate-smart methods including planting cover crops, using no- and reduced-till methods, and managed grazing. By incorporating these methods and others like them, farmers can simultaneously provide healthy food to their local communities – but they can only do so with access to land.⁴

Farm bill conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) are all tools that can assist farmers in achieving climate resiliency, however, many of our farmers are not using these programs. Only 46% of our national survey respondents reported using federal programs, and first-generation farm owners in particular were less likely to have used federal programs.⁵ The number one reason cited by our farmers is that they're not using these programs because they do not know about them – a sentiment that has been echoed over and over again. The USDA must expand

¹ Sophie Ackoff, Andrew Bahrenburg, and Lindsey Lusher Shute, Building a Future with Farmers II, National Young Farmers Coalition, November 2017, www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NYFC-Report-2017.pdf.

² National Young Farmers Coalition, “2021 Climate Policy Recommendations,” May 2021, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/2021/05/2021-climate-recommendations/>

³ Julia Freedgood, Mitch Hunter, Jennifer Dempsey, and Ann Sorensen, Farms Under Threat: The State of the States, American Farmland Trust, 2020.

⁴ Holly Rippon-Butler, Land Policy: Toward a More Equitable Farming Future, National Young Farmers Coalition, 2020, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/land/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LandPolicyReport.pdf>.

⁵ Sophie Ackoff, et al., “Building a Future with Farmers II,” November, 2017, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/>.

accessibility by prioritizing the design and modification of new and existing programs that resource farmers and encourage a new generation of farmers to fight climate change. Intentional outreach must also take place, and this outreach will require resources and trust-building.⁶

Time and administrative burdens were also reported to be a significant barrier to accessing these programs.⁷ In addition to farm work, many of our farmers have other concurrent responsibilities—supplemental jobs, caretaking, education, etc.—and do not have the time or bandwidth to spend on laborious application processes. There is also the perception among young farmers that these programs were not made for them, and therefore are not appropriate for their operations. Young farmers are operating small, diversified farms, and many have stated that they do not feel as if these farm bill programs will work for them. USDA officials and technical assistance providers often lack the cultural competency to advise young farmers because of the type of operations they run. To support the next generation of young farmers and ranchers, transition productive farmland, and revitalize our nation’s rural communities, considerable progress must be made in the way that USDA serves young farmers.

Recent efforts to improve EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) will increase accessibility for young, marginalized farmers and are a step in the right direction,⁸ however more work needs to be done to fully enable farmers to invest in on-farm conservation. By increasing the transparency of programs that help historically underserved farmers and ranchers gain access to land and other government services, we can begin the important work of addressing the climate crisis and investing in a sustainable and resilient future with farmers leading the way.

Young Farmers would like to thank the Honorable David Scott, Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson, Abigail Spanberger, and Doug LaMalfa for convening this hearing to discuss farm bill conservation programs. These programs are critical for combating climate change and improving access to land. We look forward to working with you to find ways to make these programs work for young, beginning, and BIPOC farmers.

Sincerely,

Lotanna Obodozie
Climate Campaign Director
National Young Farmers Coalition

⁶ National Young Farmers Coalition, “2021 Climate Policy Recommendations,” May 2021, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/2021/05/2021-climate-recommendations/>

⁷ Sophie Ackoff, et al., “Building a Future with Farmers II,” November, 2017, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/building-a-future-with-farmers-ii/>.

⁸ National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, “Release: NRCS Announces Improvements to CSP and EQIP,” January 2022, <https://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/release-nrcs-announces-improvements-to-csp-and-eqip/?emci=b33d4109-4475-ec11-94f6-c896650d4442&emdi=6758de67-5b75-ec11-94f6-c896650d4442&ceid=13968734>