



The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
Washington, DC 20510

Re: The Farm Bill 2023: Conservation And Forestry Programs hearing before the U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Date: March 5, 2023

The National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) thanks the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry for holding this hearing on farm bill conservation programs. Drought, floods, and an overall changing climate 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 and the ongoing Western drought through soil health practices and provide other ecosystem services to build on-farm climate resilience. Farm bill conservation programs are critical elements to support producers to implement these practices, as well as improving access to land for the next generation. We thank the Honorable Debbie Stabenow and John Boozman 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, conserving water, and protecting environmental resources 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 2022 national survey of our coalition, over 73% of respondents reported experiencing at least one climate impact, such as rising temperatures or changing precipitation patterns, on their farm in the past year. Similarly, 88% of young farmers attribute the changes in weather events they're experiencing to climate change.¹ Young farmers, particularly Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC)

¹ Sophie Ackoff, Evan Flom, Vanessa García Polanco, David Howard, Jessica Manly, Carolina Mueller, Holly Rippon-Butler, Lytisha Wyatt, "Building A Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from

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.

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 conservation and climate resiliency, however, many young and BIPOC farmers are not using these programs. Only 49% of our national survey respondents reported using federal programs, and 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.² The USDA must expand accessibility by prioritizing the design and modification of new and existing programs that resource farmers and encourage a new generation of farmers to conserve water and address climate change. Intentional outreach must also take place, and this outreach will require resources and trust-building.³

Time and administrative burdens were also reported to be a significant barrier to accessing these programs.⁴ 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. Young Farmers recommends establishing a small farm initiative to help meet the conservation needs of small farming operations — and thereby BIPOC producers, women, and beginning producers — through dedicated funding and a simplified application process. Creating this pool would allow more young and BIPOC producers to access EQIP funding and increase the pace of getting conservation dollars on the ground with a streamlined application.

Additionally, 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,

the National Young Farmer Survey," National Young Farmers Coalition, August 2022, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NationalSurveyReport22-1.pdf>.

² Sophie Ackoff, et al., "Building A Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey," National Young Farmers Coalition, August 2022, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NationalSurveyReport22-1.pdf>.

³ National Young Farmers Coalition, "2021 Climate Policy Recommendations," May 2021, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/2021/05/2021-climate-recommendations/>

⁴ Sophie Ackoff, et al., "Building A Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey," National Young Farmers Coalition, August 2022, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NationalSurveyReport22-1.pdf>.

USDA should fund peer-to-peer educational, networking, and technical assistance and fund community organizations, producer groups, Tribes, acequias, and other entities that already hold considerable conservation knowledge. Building on existing farmer-to-farmer education to help producers overcome the cultural, knowledge-based, and risk-related barriers they face is a cost-effective way to increase adoption of conservation practices.

Recent efforts to improve the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) will increase accessibility for young, marginalized farmers and are a step in the right direction.⁵ The lack of access to affordable, quality land, as farmland, agriculture, and working lands conservation 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. 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 Debbie Stabenow and John Boozman 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

⁵ 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>