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ACCESS TO CONSERVATION PROGRAMS BY HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED FARMERS AND RANCHERS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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ACCESS TO CONSERVATION PROGRAMS BY HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED FARMERS AND RANCHERS

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2019

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 11:22 a.m., in Room 1300 of the Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Abigail Davis Spanberger [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Spanberger, O'Halleran, Pingree, Axne, Plaskett, Peterson (*ex officio*), LaMalfa, and Allen.

Staff present: Prescott Martin III, Félix Muñiz, Jr., Alison Titus, Josh Maxwell, Ricki Schroeder, Patricia Straughn, Dana Sandman, and Jennifer Yezak.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ABIGAIL DAVIS SPANBERGER, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM VIRGINIA

The CHAIR. This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry entitled, *Access to Conservation Programs by Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers,* will come to order.

Good morning and thank you very much for being here today as we review access to conservation programs by historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Sustainable agriculture must be a welcoming and rewarding profession, especially for our historically underserved producers, which includes our minority, women, beginning, and veteran farmers and ranchers, as well as those who have limited financial resources.

Historically underserved farmers face a range of unique challenges. Some of their families have been farming for generations, but have faced discrimination and insufficient access to capital and credit. Others have limited farming experience or come up against misinformed stereotypes, and they may find that existing tools do not adequately meet their needs.

Title II programs seek to protect our soils, water, wildlife, and other natural resources, while improving production of food and fiber. Achieving this goal requires that we support our producers and account for the variety of challenges that they face.

Congress has enacted a number of policies designed to address the needs of historically underserved producers, specifically the 2018 Farm Bill built upon this effort, establishing additional tools

and incentives to overcome barriers and bolster across the board participation.

Data show us that historically underserved farmers and ranchers are increasingly accessing conservation programs. While this trend is encouraging, historically underserved producers continue to account for a disproportionately small share of agricultural producers relative to their numbers in the general population.

We must continue to invest in and shape conservation programs so that they better account for structural barriers and recognize the contributions of historically underserved farmers and ranchers. A continued emphasis on equity and the delivery of title II programs is needed to ensure broad participation in conservation programs.

I hope with this hearing we can delve into the substantial barriers that stand between historically underserved producers and full utilization of USDA conservation programs, that we can discuss the implementation of targeted policies included in the 2018 Farm Bill, and build a better pathway towards attracting more farmers to conservation programs.

In consultation with the Ranking Member, and pursuant to Rule XI(e), I want to make Members of the Subcommittee aware that other Members of the full Committee may join us today.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Spanberger follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. ABIGAIL DAVIS SPANBERGER, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM VIRGINIA

Good morning and thank you for being here today as we review access to conservation programs by historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Sustainable agriculture must be a welcoming and rewarding profession, especially for our historically underserved producers, which includes our minority, women, beginning, and veteran farmers and ranchers, as well as those who have limited financial resources.

Historically underserved farmers face a range of unique challenges. Some of their families have been farming for generations but have faced discrimination and insufficient access to credit. Others have limited farming experience or come up against misinformed stereotypes, and they may find that existing tools do not adequately meet their needs.

Title II programs seek to protect our soils, water, wildlife, and other natural resources while improving production of food and fiber. Achieving this goal requires that we support our producers and account for the variety of challenges they face.

Congress has enacted a number of policies designed to address the needs of historically underserved producers. Specifically, the 2018 Farm Bill built upon this effort, establishing additional tools and incentives to overcome barriers and bolster across-the-board participation.

Data shows us that historically underserved farmers and ranchers are increasingly accessing conservation programs. While this trend is encouraging, historically underserved producers continue to account for a disproportionately small share of agricultural producers relative to their numbers in the general population. We must continue to invest in and shape conservation programs so that they better account for structural barriers and recognize the contributions of historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

A continued emphasis on equity in the delivery of title II programs is needed to ensure broad participation in conservation programs. I hope with this hearing we can delve into the substantial barriers that stand between historically undeserved producers and fully utilizing USDA conservation programs, discuss the implementation of targeted policies included in the 2018 Farm Bill, and build a better pathway toward attracting more farmers to conservation programs.

The CHAIR. I now recognize Ranking Member LaMalfa for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG LAMALFA, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM CALIFORNIA

Mr. LAMALFA. Good morning and thank you to Chair Spanberger for calling today's hearing and being such a good working partner here, so I appreciate it.

Today we are reviewing access to the nation's voluntary conservation programs. Over the last 20 years, Congress has made significant investments to these programs by providing our farmers and ranchers the tools necessary to protect and conserve not only land but their way of life.

Congress has also made a conscious effort to make certain underserved producers, including the socially disadvantaged, limited resource, and beginning farmers and ranchers that are not overlooked when applying for assistance.

Since 2008, both the EQIP Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and the CSP, the Conservation Stewardship Program, have reserved five percent for new and beginning farmers to encourage the adoption of conservation practices by our next generation of producers. Additionally, another five percent is set aside for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in both programs to help provide access to this conservation funding.

It should be noted, over the last decade NRCS has exceeded these allocations and obligated over 16 percent of CSP funding, and nearly 33 percent of EQIP funding to beginning farmers and historically underserved producers.

Since 2014, Congress has also recognized the contributions of our men and women in uniform, by improving outreach and assistance to our veterans by authorizing a military veterans agriculture liaison at USDA, and by creating new programs and priorities to help in their transitions to careers in agriculture.

Recently, the 2018 Farm Bill improved upon all these efforts by encouraging USDA to provide outreach to historically underserved farmers and ranchers to boost participation in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and to provide advanced payments in EQIP, just to name a few.

I do want to mention that the deliberation of the last farm bill brought forward many concerns regarding access to land. There is a significant reason why the Conservation Reserve Program was reformed to eliminate government competition with farmers for productive land by reducing rental rates, as well as expanding the Transition Incentive Program, known as TIP. Additionally, NRCS has engaged partnerships through several cooperative agreements for outreach, and since 2012 they have worked in a collaborative effort to provide outreach and forest management technical assistance to the heirs and property landowners.

Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Partnership, which includes the Forest Service and the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, was initially a 2 year project in three states. Since then, the pilot has exceeded expectations and is in the process of adding new partners and more than doubling the number of states across the Southeast.

We have a great set of witnesses here today. I look forward to hearing the continued discussion on what can be done to improve this access to conservation programs for all producers. Indeed it is

very important in my own neighborhood there with the rice industry and the great environmental and wildlife benefits provided there.

I yield back. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Mr. LaMalfa.

The chair would recognize, or would request that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so witnesses may begin their testimony and to ensure that there is ample time for questions.

I would like to welcome our witnesses here today. Thank you so much for being with us.

It is my pleasure and privilege to welcome Mr. Irvin Dulaney White who farms in Louisa, Virginia, back home in the 7th District. Mr. White raises 250 cow-calf pairs, or raises 250 cow-calf pairs on an operation on eight different properties, totaling more than 2,000 acres. In addition to his cattle operation, he designs and installs rotational grazing systems, fencing, working pens, alternative watering systems, and stream crossings for farmers throughout central Virginia.

Our next witness is Ms. Kimberly LaFleur. Ms. LaFleur owns and operates a 112 acre cranberry farm and agritourism business in Plympton, Massachusetts. She is also the State Advisor and Program Director for the Massachusetts FFA Association, and an independent consultant to agricultural organizations. Ms. LaFleur serves as the Chair of the Plymouth County Conservation District's Board.

Our third witness is Quinton Robinson, Esq. Mr. Robinson is a native of Gordon, Georgia, where he grew up assisting his family with the production and marketing of vegetable crops. Quinton is a practicing attorney and serves as the Policy Advisor for the Rural Coalition.

Our final witness is LTC Andrew J. Sanchez, a 5th-generation operator and the majority owner of his family's cattle ranch in Sierra County, New Mexico. Mr. Sanchez served more than 8 years of active duty with the U.S. Navy, and currently serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the New Mexico Air National Guard.

We will now proceed to hearing from our witnesses. Each of you will have 5 minutes to present testimony. When the light in front of you turns yellow, that indicates there is 1 minute left to complete your testimony.

Mr. White, would you please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF IRVIN D. WHITE, RANCHER, LOUISA, VA

Mr. WHITE. Yes, ma'am. Thank you, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and the distinguished Members of the Committee.

The first thing I want to tell you is just it is a real honor to be here. And as I was trying to get my thoughts together for this, which is obviously not something I am very good at, so excuse me for the first minute or so here. Hopefully I will get it all together. But talking to the farmers that I work with to try and get my thoughts together here, I talked to extension agents, I talked to Farm Bureau, I talked to the waitress at the Mexican restaurant we went to on Sunday night. And what was amazing is every one

of them thought that this was good, it was positive, and the respect they had for what you people do was, it was universal through all of them. I just want to tell you all that the people back home in my district, and I am sure all the other districts, are looking to you and are appreciative of what you do every day, and it is a big deal. Thank you for having me and I am sure the others as well are glad to be here and have an opportunity to bring something to hopefully shape things for the future.

My bio you talked through, I am kind of like a graduate of the Young and Beginning Farmer Program. I started farming in the late 1990s after I graduated from the University of Virginia, and I didn't grow up on a farm. I decided this is what I want to do, and it has been a long road. I had a great plan at 25 years old of how it was all going to work out, and I used the programs, I got through it, and I was like definitely by the time I am 35 I am just going to be farming, it is all going to be just roses. I am going to have a truck and a tractor and a few cows and I will just be on this farm. And now 20 years later it hadn't quite worked out but it is all great. I wouldn't change it for a minute.

But what I have been able to do with working with NRCS and the Soil and Water Districts and extension, is those people have helped me work my plan down and figure out a lot of things, and it is very important to keep this support. I mean, these programs are very, very good and used by farmers every day, and you know, getting that extra set of eyes out on the farm to help people hone in and work through ideas and how things change it is really making things better on the farm every day for people. It is—and the Young and Beginning Farmer Program is what I have come through. It is what I do all day every day, and getting out there and working with the young farmers now and helping them out to where things are always changing, the market conditions they can mess everything up, but if you are doing things right, if you use the conservation programs and you are building up your farm, you can weather these storms and keep moving forward.

I am sorry for flopping here, but I am going to give back the rest of my time and move on to Ms. LaFleur next to me.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. White follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF IRVIN D. WHITE, RANCHER, LOUISA, VA

1. Brief Overview of Farming Operation

After buying his first herd of cattle in 1998 with a Farm Credit loan, Irvin now rents over 2,000 acres across three counties where he raises about 250 cow-calf pairs on eight different properties. He also manages an additional 100 cow-calf pairs for landowner partners. Irvin's His forage-based operation

Implements rotational grazing, attempting to minimize additional feeding. Weather permitting, Irvin feeds hay for approximately sixty days per year. Currently, Irvin produces about half the hay needed to support the herd, the remainder is brought in from off-site. Irvin manages the forage first and foremost making sure his stocking rates are well below the carrying capacity of the land. His fertilizer regime is based on soil-testing, maximizing the use of poultry-litter where appropriate and use commercial fertilizer to bring up nutrient values where the litter falls short.

Irvin is building his herd to maximize upon the genetics of those cattle which thrive on the local forage, reducing the need of supplemental feed, with each generation showing better adaptation to the local environment. Currently, Irvin markets steer calves in tractor-trailer lots that have been we[a]ned and backgrounded working with the Central Virginia Cattleman's Association. The top-end of the heifers

are kept as replacements or are sold as breeding stock to other local producers. Throughout the years, Irvin has sold beef to friends and family. Irvin's long term goal for the cattle operation is to maximize local marketing and consumption of the farm-raised, grass-finished beef.

2. Personal Involvement in USDA Conservation Programs

As a fencing contractor and farm consultant, Irvin is personally involved in explaining and promoting USDA conservation programs to a wide audience, from third generation farmers to investment bankers and corporate attorneys looking to live out their pastoral dreams in retirement. On a daily basis, he explains how programs would be implemented on their farms, the benefits these practices can have on their operation and management, and he provides a solid picture of the financial benefits offered by most of the programs.

As a farmer, Irvin has personally participated in EQIP and CSP. As a tenant farmer, he has assisted with the enrollment of the landowner's property in EQIP, CREP, and CSP. The various conservation practices that have been implemented with these programs in addition to stream and division fencing along with an alternative watering system are as follows: nutrient management, waste utilization through a poultry litter transport program (taking poultry litter from adjacent high phosphorus counties and applying to pasture according to a nutrient management plan), pasture improvement using pasture conditioning scores, stockpiling forages, native grasses/legumes, prescribed grazing, and critical area planting.

3. Challenges and Opportunities for New/Beginning Farmers

Challenges:

Overall, new/beginning farmers face a suite of challenges, even just one of which might be enough to defer a dream of agriculture. In general, the biggest issues beginning farmer face are:

- Limited capital resources, lack of cash.
- Variable input cost and fluctuation in market returns (Beginning Farmers aren't as resilient to volatility).
- Land ownership limitations:
  - Development pressure and corporate interest ownership is increasing leading to:
    - land not being affordable/available.
    - inability to get long term leases.
    - less incentive to make improvements in production, infrastructure and equipment.
- Most beginning farmers still rely on *off* farm employment for income which can limits the ability to sustain and grow their farm enterprise.

Opportunities:

New farmers are early adapters, willing to try new, innovative approaches and serve as examples to help educate others in the agricultural community. They provide a great opportunity for research and experimental farming.

4. Farm Bill polices which impact beginning farmers

Challenges:

Time Allowance for New/Beginning Farmers:

The USDA provides the following points of definition for a Beginning Farmer/Rancher:

- *Has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years. This requirement applies to all members of a legal entity, and who*
- *Will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.*
- *In the case of a contract with an individual, individually or with the immediate family, material and substantial participation requires that the individual provide substantial day-to-day labor and management of the farm or ranch, consistent with the practices in the county or state where the farm is located.*
- *In the case of a contract made with a legal entity, all members must materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch. Material and substantial participation requires that the members provide some amount of the management, or labor and management necessary for day-to-day activities, such*

that if the members did not provide these inputs, operation of the farm or ranch would be seriously impaired.

This 10 year window is often not an adequate length of time for a new farmer to get off the ground. There are various contributing reasons:

- Lack of awareness of government conservation programs in the beginning farmer community. Farmers are often several years into their farming operation before they learn of these conservation opportunities. They can end up "aging out" before completing all the work that needs to be done.
  - Young farmers who were raised and participated in the agricultural community are best served by this current structure. They have an established network for support, and they are able to easily access the assistance needed.
  - Individuals who are new to farming not only need to gain technical knowledge, they must find their place and their connections within this often closed-off community.

Proposed solution:

Don't start the clock when the producer plants his first seed/buys his first cow. Either push back the start date of the 10 year window to when the first USDA conservation contract is signed, when the farm is registered with FSA, or apply a completely different metric like establishing a threshold for success, such as farm-based income.

Existing Resource Concern-Based Eligibility

Having eligibility based on existing resource concerns can be an impediment to new farmers who want to wisely manage their natural resources from the start. Until there is a problem, they are not eligible for funding. In addition, it is not uncommon for beginning farmers to install conservation programs on their own before becoming aware of governmental programs. New farmers coming from a diverse background often come to farming as a result of research and observation filled with ideas they wish to try. They come to the field ready to implement what they have heard about and studied. It would be beneficial to new farmers to be able to take these improvements into consideration—either as points on an application or for potential reimbursement. Finally, new farmers often only have access to small tracts of land. These smaller areas have fewer resource concerns just based on size. In addition, scoring projects for EQIP where points are awarded based on a whole-farm approach can create such large projects as to be cost-prohibitive to the new farmer.

Government Collaboration/Efficiency of Operations

Once aware there are governmental conservation programs and resource professionals available to a new farmer, navigating the matrix of acronyms and agency roles can be a full-time job. With budget cuts reducing educational staff (through such organizations as the Cooperative Extension), there is a greater burden and work load placed on local SWCD and NRCS staff. Encouraging partnership across Federal and state agencies would reduce the stress and challenge to any farmer. Accessibility to a local USDA office and staff can be challenging due to office location, number of available staff and hours of operation. Co-located offices, a streamlined system for paperwork and enrollment, and similar program requirements would offer a greater service to the agricultural community. A centralized clearinghouse to guide a new farmer through the agencies and where to go for help would be a tremendous start. Keeping these agricultural experts funded would be even better.

Ownership of Land Requirements

New farmers more than most struggle with the control of land requirements within USDA programs. Unless coming from an agricultural or wealthy background, land ownership is not a reality for most new farmers. Piecing together rented to land to have a large enough operation to be profitable is an incredible hurdle. Maintaining Control of Land for contract terms and especially practice lifespan is challenging on rented/leased property. In addition, until a farmer is implementing these conservation practices on their own land, it is a large financial risk/investment to install infrastructure such as fencing and water systems on land which they may not farm the following season.

Lack of Innovation of Programs

New farmers who have chosen the field of agriculture are usually those who have researched and studied their future profession. These individuals are ripe with ideas and ready to experiment. Often the government programs and practices are not quickly responsive to new or innovative farming practices.

Opportunities:

Agricultural Assistance from Passionate Experts

New/beginning farmers have access to free, local, experienced, technical assistance through local USDA offices and staff. In addition, the 2018 Farm Bill created a National Beginning Farmer Coordinator position at USDA as well as designated coordinators in each state to assist with outreach.

Connecting New/Beginning Farmers with Land

FSA land contract guarantees are a tool to help retiring farmers get assurances on the future of their land and financial interests when selling to a new farmer or rancher—and to help new and beginning farmers enter into rent-to-own situations. In addition, increases in funding for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Transition Incentives Program from $33 million to $50 million over the next 5 years includes $5 million for dedicated outreach to connect retiring farmers with beginning farmers, veterans, and farmers of color. The bill also expands eligibility to all CRP contract holders, not just retiring farmers.

Flexible Funding Structure/Higher Reimbursement Rates for Beginning Farmers

Between FSA's willingness to work with those not able to get traditional funding to higher reimbursement rates and NRCS's flexibility with reimbursement rates and timing, the farm bill presents many economic incentives for new farmers. For example, the 2018 Farm Bill ensures that all beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers enrolling in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) have the option to receive 50 percent of their cost-share payment up front for material costs, labor, equipment rental, *etc.* In addition, the same historically disadvantaged groups may be eligible for increased payment rate to support implementation of conservation practices and conservation plans. USDA also offers beginning farmers with limited capital the flexibility to spread out the implementation of a project/contract over several years. Also, Beginning Farmers have access to a special Beginning Farmer Fund Pool (5% of total allocation in each state). Given that funding is competitive it gives them a little advantage having access to their own fund pool while getting started to not have to compete with well-established farmers with previous program participation history and experience. In short, a minimum of 5% of NRCS annual funding goes directly to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers including Beginning Farmers. This means that a higher percentage of financial assistance is paid to beginning farmers.

Continued Support for Farmers Beyond Basic Infrastructure

From both a financial and a management perspective, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) makes a huge difference in a farming operation. Once the majority of the infrastructure has been installed, the CSP payment can carry a farmer through necessary maintenance and improvements to reach their management goals. Having a moderate annual payment is a great help to keep a farmer moving toward full-farm conservation. In addition, the annual review is a great opportunity for a farmer and NRCS staff to interface and evaluate goals and management. More annual practices with associated annual payments would help the practices with longer contracts be better maintained and better utilized.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much, Mr. White. I understand completely. I am sure you noticed I fumbled a couple of the words in my opening statement as well, but I am so grateful that you are here.

Mr. WHITE. Yes.

The CHAIR. We certainly do this more often and we all make mistakes, but I thought your opening statement was fantastic and I thank you so much for being here.

Mr. WHITE. The farmers back home said if I could just get you all to sit in the back of the truck and we go for about a 2 hour ride, I could really explain things a lot better.

The CHAIR. Well, as a Virginian, be careful what you ask for, Mr. White. Thank you so much for your comments.

And, Ms. LaFleur, you may begin whenever you are ready.

STATEMENT OF KIMBERLY J. LAFLEUR, OWNER AND OPERATOR, MAYFLOWER CRANBERRIES, PLYMPTON, MA

Ms. LAFLEUR. Good morning, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me this morning to testify on the important topic of access to conservation programs by the historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

My name is Kim LaFleur and I, along with my husband, Jeff, own and operate Mayflower Cranberries, a 112 acre cranberry operation and agritourism business in Plympton, Massachusetts. I am the State Advisor and Program Director for the Massachusetts FFA Association and I am proudly serving as the Second Vice President for the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Jeff and I are first-generation farmers who grow for Ocean Spray, our farmer-owned cooperative, consisting of more than 700 cranberry growers. We are proud that Ocean Spray has committed to becoming the first fruit cooperative in North America to verify 100 percent of its crop as sustainably grown. To meet this goal, Ocean Spray is benchmarking our bogs to the Farm Sustainability Assessment, a tool developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform.

Criteria we seek to meet include protecting and improving the natural environment, protecting and improving the social and economic conditions of farmers, as well as the efficient production of safe, high-quality products. The importance of this commitment belies a 2019 harvest that saw the second-largest drop in production in over 50 years, largely due to atypical and unpredictable weather and climate.

As first-generation farmers, Jeff and I have been able to take advantage of important Federal resources to improve conservation outcomes. While conservation practices and technologies are critical to preserving our wetlands and bogs, they are often expensive investments, especially for first-generation farmers. This is where access to USDA programs is imperative.

Our ability to implement conservation practices was as a result of the relationship we had with our local conservation district. Outreach activities conducted by the district resulted in a conservation plan for every cranberry operation in the region. We received the benefit of highly-specialized farm plan for our unique crop to protect water quality and enhance water conservation, and our farm plan provides a road map on which we use to make management decisions.

At the heart of conservation programs is access. Producers need access to information, technology, financial and technical assistance.

Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the nation. Farming here is becoming ever more difficult, as we compete with an increasing population that is competing for the same limited land resources for housing and recreation.

Conservation technical assistance is also limited, but when coupled with underserved producers, it makes the delta to be able to serve this need even wider.

Through my work with FFA members, I see firsthand a generation of young women who are wanting to have a career in produc-

tion agriculture but lack the financial and technical resources to do so. In Massachusetts, 65 percent of our members are female, but yet we don't see that translate into the agricultural workforce. Direct outreach must occur to help bridge the gap from interested in agriculture to working in agriculture if we want to ensure that women play a greater role, moving forward. USDA can and should do more to reach the historically underserved populations within and outside the conservation space.

One of the greatest barriers to access for all producers is when a producer's local USDA Service Center lacks adequate capacity to both process program applications and conduct needed outreach. This barrier is even greater for historically underserved producers who may not be familiar with the opportunities provided through USDA to help their operation. USDA must consider the extra outreach to these producers when conducting workload analysis to determine needed staffing.

Congress must continue to provide the needed funding and oversight to NRCS so that NRCS can reach producers where they are, rather than hope that they enter a USDA Service Center.

One of the answers to improved access to conservation programs may lie in front of us. With 3,000 conservation districts nationwide, this locally-led delivery system has been in place for more than 80 years. Districts have a rich history of working with NRCS and provide education and leadership opportunities. They work side by side with NRCS staff at the local level; however, there is an opportunity to enhance this relationship to provide increased access to programs to underserved producers.

In a historically male-dominated industry, there are still changes that are needed to ensure access is equitable to all. However, through strong partnerships and outreach with underserved communities, the path towards a solution becomes clear. As a female producer, I don't want a seat at a special table. I want a seat at the same one as everyone else.

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

[The prepared statement of Ms. LaFleur follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KIMBERLY J. LAFLEUR, OWNER AND OPERATOR, MAYFLOWER CRANBERRIES, PLYMPTON, MA

Good morning, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify this morning on the important topic of USDA's conservation programs and the ability of historically underserved producers to access these programs. My name is Kim LaFleur, and I—along with my husband, Jeff—own and operate Mayflower Cranberries, a 112 acre cranberry farm and agritourism business in Plympton, Massachusetts. Jeff and I are first-generation farmers, and it is our hope that someday our two sons will decide to take over the family business that we have created. Although we have only farmed our bogs since 2009, they have been in production for more than 100 years and are our most critical asset. Their health and vitality determine ultimately how sustainable our operation will be.

Both my personal and professional life have deep ties to agriculture and conservation. I am the State Advisor and Program Director for the Massachusetts FFA Association. FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America, is a career and leadership development youth organization for students studying agriculture at the high school level. I am also proudly serving as the Second Vice President for the National

Association of Conservation Districts. This role has provided me with the unique opportunity to advocate for locally led conservation programs across the nation.

Jeff and I are also proud to grow for Ocean Spray, an agricultural cooperative owned by more than 700 cranberry growers. Ocean Spray is the leading producer of cranberries in the United States with a wide variety of cranberry products. The farmer-owned cooperative model Ocean Spray employs is unique in that we as the growers are also the owners of the business. Thus, when we are working the land, harvesting cranberries, and marketing our product, we are doing so as part of a larger business that employs hundreds of farmers and workers across the country. As grower-owners, we remain committed to sustainably producing cranberries in order to protect our bogs and the lands around them.

We are proud that Ocean Spray is committed to becoming the first fruit cooperative in North America to verify 100 percent of its crop as sustainably grown. To meet this goal, Ocean Spray is benchmarking our bogs to the Farm Sustainability Assessment, a tool for sustainable farming developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform. Criteria we as growers and as a cooperative seek to meet include protecting and improving the natural environment, protecting and improving the social and economic conditions of farmers, as well as the efficient production of safe, high quality products. The implementation of conservation programs on the farm is directly tied to our ability to be certified as sustainable. The sustainability certification will allow us to better market our product to consumers.

As first-generation farmers, Jeff and I have been able to take advantage of important Federal resources to help us make our operation both financially and environmentally sustainable. Cranberry growers—like many other producers across the country—are good stewards of the land, and we want to implement farming practices and technologies that not only save our operation money but also improve conservation outcomes. It is also important to remember that cranberry farmers grow the berries in wetlands; thus, we depend on healthy wetlands that could sustain another hundred years of cranberry production. While conservation practices and technologies are critical to preserving wetlands and bogs, they are often expensive investments for farmers, especially first-generation farmers. Therefore, it is critical for Congress to continue to fully fund USDA conservation programs, such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Innovation Grants. Investing in these grant and cost-share programs will ensure beginning and first-generation farmers will be able to continue to protect the lands we depend on.

As mentioned, our operation has a total of 112 acres, of which 23½ acres are cranberry bogs. The remaining acreage consists of reservoirs, wetlands, and upland buffer areas that all support the bogs and our production. We believe in protecting the land and use technology to do so. Through the EQIP program we have implemented practices to improve irrigation efficiency, water quality and pollinator habitat. Our farm conservation plan provides a road map on which we use to make management decisions. We use precision irrigation technology to report soil moisture data, plant stress levels and weather information to the Internet in real-time. The monitoring stations, which run on solar power, send in-field data to the cloud. From that point, Jeff and I can access the data from our phones or computers and receive text alerts and notifications when field conditions dramatically change. This smart, precision agriculture technology not only saves us time in measuring soil moisture by hand, but it also allows us to reduce our water usage. Since we started reducing our water usage, we also noticed that the quality of the berries has improved. This allows us to grow higher quality fruit while also reducing our environmental footprint.

Another way we conserve water and reduce input costs is through the use of automated sprinkler systems. During early spring, and again in the fall near harvest, we protect our berries from the frost by applying water through our sprinkler irrigation system. These systems have sensors in the vines that monitor temperatures, and we can control the system using the Internet. We are not the only cranberry growers who have implemented this conservation practice, though. In fact, as part of a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Conservation Innovation Grant, the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association worked with growers like Jeff and I to implement irrigation technology. We save money and use less water by starting our pumps closer to the actual frost temperature. If not for the Conservation Innovation Grant from the USDA, we may not have been able to install this type of system. Therefore, it is important for Congress to continue to fully fund the grants and monitor their implementation by USDA over the life of the 2018 Farm Bill to ensure these types of technologies can be implemented by other growers. Also, irrigation automation systems are approved as a cost-share practice in USDA's EQIP. This means that Massachusetts cranberry growers can receive EQIP funding to implement these water and cost-saving systems in their bogs.

Our ability to incorporate these conservation practices was as a result of the relationship we had with our local conservation district. Recognizing an unmet need for conservation plans for our unique crop, a partnership was formed between the cranberry industry and state and Federal agencies. Growers such as ourselves received the benefit of highly specialized farm plans developed by conservation district staff to protect water quality and enhance water conservation. The outreach activities conducted by the district resulted in a conservation plan for every cranberry operation in the region.

At the heart of all these conservation practices is access. Producers need access to information, technology, financial and technical assistance. Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the nation. Farming here is becoming ever more difficult with an increasing population that may or may not be connected to agriculture and are competing for the same land resources for housing and recreation. Opportunities for new farmers in general, and especially the historically underserved, are limited. Conservation technical assistance is limited to begin with, but when coupled with underserved producers, it makes the delta to be able to serve this need even wider.

Through my work with FFA members, I see firsthand that there is a generation of young women who are wanting to have a career in production agriculture but lack the financial and technical resources to do so. In Massachusetts 65% of our members are young women, yet we do not see that translate into the agriculture workforce. Direct outreach must occur to help them bridge the gap from interested in agriculture to working in agriculture if we want to ensure that women play a greater role moving forward. Increasing opportunities for women in agriculture needs to be more than a few yearly conferences, webinars and email blasts. USDA can and should do more to reach the historically underserved populations within and outside the conservation space.

One of the greatest barriers to access for all producers is when a producer's local USDA service center lacks adequate capacity to both process program applications and conduct needed outreach. This barrier is even greater for historically underserved producers who may not be familiar with the opportunities provided through USDA to help their operations. USDA must also consider the extra outreach to these producers when conducting workload analyses to determine needed staffing and Congress must continue to provide the needed funding and oversight so NRCS can reach these producers where they are, rather than hope they enter a U[SD]A Service Center.

One of the answers to increased access to conservation programs lies in front of us. With 3,000 conservation districts nationwide, this locally led conservation delivery system has been in place for more than eighty years. Districts reach urban, rural and suburban communities. Conservation districts have a rich history of working with NRCS. They work side by side with NRCS staff at the local level. However, there is an opportunity to enhance this relationship to provide increased access to programs to historically underserved producers.

Conservation districts also provide education and leadership opportunities for producers. I am the first woman to serve as an officer of the National Association of Conservation Districts. That is not a statistic that I typically mention. I want my time in this leadership role to be based on my merits, not on my gender. However, the fact that I am a female in a leadership position in a heavily male dominated industry is not lost on me. I owe it to those who came before me who did not have this opportunity to ensure our voice is always on the same playing field. Those who will come after me depend on it.

In a historically male-dominated industry, there are still changes that are needed to ensure access is equitable to all. However, through strong partnerships and outreach with underserved communities, the path towards a solution becomes clear. As a female producer I don't want a seat at a special table. I want a seat at the same one as everyone else.

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much.

Mr. Robinson, you may begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF QUINTON N. ROBINSON, ESQ., POLICY ADVISOR, RURAL COALITION/COALICIÓN RURAL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. ROBINSON. Good morning, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry.

I serve as the Agriculture Policy Advisor for the Rural Coalition. We are a community-based organization and we advocate on behalf of limited resource and minority farmers and ranchers across the United States.

Thousands of hardworking farm families share their economic victories with the Rural Coalition on a daily basis. These families also express their frustrations caused by programmatic hurdles that make it impossible to survive in today's increasing competitive markets and adapting technology on the farm.

The Rural Coalition operates as a grassroots model and we listen closely to the farmers that we represent who are by and large multicultural farm families. And we, over the past 40 years, have made great attempts to inform the Congress about new legislation and administrative improvements in USDA's programs that make life on the farm easier for limited resource producers.

I will just say very clearly that the farmers and ranchers that we represent are hardworking farm families. They are law-abiding citizens and we believe that they play a very critical role in helping our nation maintain and expand its role as the world's paramount leader in the production and marketing of an abundant, safe, and affordable supply of food and fiber.

I want to, in my comments, highlight some of the improvements in the 2018 Farm Bill that I believe will go a very long way in improving the conservation needs and the economic and social well-being of the farmers that we represent.

These improvements in the law make conservation practices more attainable for small and limited resource farmers and ranchers, but if the farmers that we represent, whether it is say a rancher from Oklahoma or a row crop producer from Arkansas, would really say to you today, "Thank you for the opportunity to hear their voices, and once again to thank you for the efforts that you made in the 2018 Farm Bill to make conservation programs more attainable to limited resource farmers and producers."

Now a bit about the conservation challenges and the set-aside funding in the farm bill and how that all works. Similar to all producers, minority farmers and ranchers face conservation challenges on their farm enterprises, whether it is cow-calf operation, organic vegetables, and more recently, industrial hemp. And the farm bill provides for five percent set aside for overall funding for NRCS, five percent set aside for new and beginning farmers, and five percent set aside for socially disadvantaged farmers, and most of the State Conservationists around the country who use these funds will tell you that they utilize all of their funds on an annual basis.

But the farmers have a regulatory right, if it is a new and beginning farmer, a veteran farmer, or a minority farmer, to up to a 90 percent cost-share. And within this 90 percent cost-share, a farmer that we represent, they will get a 50 percent advance payment upfront, they are responsible for the next 40 percent, and then that

40 percent is reimbursed. And one recommendation that I would make clear here today is that in many cases some of the farmers that we represent will have difficulties coming up with the 40 percent, and one thing that we are working with NRCS is to, for the State Conservationist and the Secretary, to use their regulatory flexibility to waive that 40 percent in the appropriate circumstances so that the conservation practice is not eliminated because the farmer can't come up with the cost.

And so with that, I will end my remarks and I look forward to answering any of the questions that the Committee may have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Robinson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF QUINTON N. ROBINSON, ESQ., POLICY ADVISOR, RURAL COALITION/COALICIÓN RURAL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Good morning, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the House Agriculture Committee, Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry.

I am Quinton N. Robinson, Esq. and I serve as the Agriculture Policy Advisor for the Rural Coalition which is a network of community-based organizations advocating on behalf of limited resource, and minority farmers and ranchers across the United States. Thousands of hard-working farm families share their economic victories with the Rural Coalition daily. These families also express their frustrations caused by programmatic hurdles that make it impossible to survive in today's increasing competitive markets and technology adaptation on the farm.

The Rural Coalition operates on a grass roots model that listens closely to the farm program concerns of our multicultural farm families and make attempts to create new legislation or administrative improvements at the USDA and other relevant Federal agencies.

For more than 40 years, the Rural Coalition has effectively worked with the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate on legislative proposals involving farm credit, civil rights and conservation which is the topic of today's hearing. The minority farmers and ranchers that we work with are hard working, law abiding citizens and play a critical role in the helping our nation maintain and expand its role of as the world's paramount leader in the production and marketing of an abundant, safe and affordable supply of food and fiber.

I want to specifically highlight improvements in the 2018 Farm Bill that will go a long way in improving the economic and social well being of family farmers. These improvements in the law make conservation practices more attainable for small and limited resource farmers and ranchers. I want to thank you for your invitation to the Rural Coalition to be here today to share our thoughts about access to conservation programs for minority, limited resource and new and beginning farmers and ranchers.

Conservation Challenges and [Set-Aside] Funding Allocations

Similar to all producers, minority farmers and ranchers face farm related conservation challenges in farm enterprises such as cow-calf operations, organic vegetables, and more recently industrial hemp production.

The 2008 Farm bill initially addressed some of the funding related challenges by authorizing NRCS conservation funding [set-asides] for minority and new and beginning farmers and ranchers. For example, NRCS ensures that 5 (five) percent of the allocated conservation dollars are used to assist beginning farmers or ranchers; and 5 (five) percent of the allocated dollars are used to assist socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. These set a side allocations assist minority farmers and ranchers with a host of critical conservation practices that protect the soil, water and air quality. For example, minority and new and beginning farmers and ranchers utilize the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to remove invasive species such as the eastern red cedar. Hmong poultry producers use EQIP funding to conserve energy in poultry house operations.

The current NRCS cost-share program for minority, and new and beginning farmers and ranchers is quite helpful in that the program allows for 90% cost-share on NRCS acceptable conservation practices. The program is structured in a manner that provides eligible farmers a 50% up-front payment from NRCS, and a 40% reimbursable payment from NRCS once the eligible farmer has paid out of pocket 40% percent of the costs of the approved conservation practice. Although a minority or

new and beginning farmer is responsible for only 10% of the costs of the conservation practice, the 40% reimbursable costs remains a burden for some farmers within this category. Our farmers recommend that USDA waives the 40% reimbursable costs in those circumstances where a farmer can show hardship.

2018 Farm Bill Improvements

Ensure Fair Access to USDA for Producers Farming on Heirs Property (FSA, NRCS, NASS)

Sections 12615, 5104 and 12607 of the 2018 Farm Bill Conference Report are intended to assure USDA affords fair access to its programs for farmers and ranchers who operate farms on "heirs property." The final language ensures that more farmers—especially African-American farmers and farmers of color operating on land with undivided interests—can finally access critical USDA programs that enable them to protect the soil and water; and continue to operate viable farms that feed their communities.

When landowners pass on without leaving a will or a succession plan to transfer ownership of the land or assigning an executor to divide the property among all living inheritors, "***Heirs Property***" is created, which can destroy wealth for the next generation. "***Heirs property***" then becomes *intestate,* and the laws of the state control to whom ownership is passed. Multiple descendants the become *tenants in common,* with each having a fraction of the undivided interest in the land. Land so held lacks a clear title, and therefore cannot be sold without court action such as a partition sale. Family members who may wish to still farm the land may be left unable to buy out other heirs.

Currently, producers operating on undivided heirs property are also unable to produce a valid deed or lease necessary to secure a farm number with USDA. Without a farm number, these producers are ineligible for most USDA programs.

The new farm bill language should be implemented promptly in consultation with the groups most familiar with the issues. It would expand access to critical Federal farm programs by helping more families resolve longstanding heirs property issues through a pilot relending program to clear land titles while protecting the rights of all heirs. It would also assure that the many farmers—especially African-American farmers and farmers of color operating on land with undivided interests—can now secure Farm Numbers and access USDA programs that enable them to protect the soil and water; continue to operate viable farms that feed their communities; and pass the farming vocation and farmland on to future generations.

In order to participate in USDA programs, producers must demonstrate control of the land to secure a farm number and access to Federal farm, credit and conservation program benefits. Currently, producers operating on heirs property are unable to secure a farm number and therefore access to most USDA program, including commodity programs, microloans, EQIP, or NAP or other risk management and disaster programs.

Some producers who utilize Commodity Programs authorized under title I have been allowed to access these programs using a process of self-certification of the farmer's authority to farm that land. Our constituents have informed us, however, that due to encumbrances related to heirs property, hundreds of producers unable to access the food and agriculture programs they need to achieve sustainability.

The issue of Heirs Property has generated much attention with regard to housing and ineligibility for assistance from FEMA and flood insurance following natural disasters for those residing in homes held with undivided interests. A Uniform Partition of Heirs Property model statute was developed and has now been adopted in 12 states,[1] and is pending in several more. Similar laws in other states protect the rights of heirs property interests.

Rapid implementation of the new legislation is also of critical importance in areas that have recently experienced natural disasters, including in the U.S. Virgin Island and Puerto Rico where many producers lack clear title to their land. The statutory changes require the USDA Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources and Conservation Service to recognize these or other instruments to provide for a legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the interests in the property (or the heirs), including allowing farmers operating on heirs property to participate in critical USDA programs and services.

Section 12615 requires the Secretary to accept certain alternate forms of documentation to enable operators farming on land lacking a clear legal title due to heirs property issues to receive farm numbers from USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)

[1] **Editor's note:** there is no corresponding footnote for the reference (*1*) in the statement as submitted by the witness.

and thereby qualify to participate in USDA farm, credit and conservation programs. The statute requires that USDA, in states that have in force a Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Statute, provide a farm number and program eligibility to farm owners and operators farming on land that has an assigned administrative authority representing more than 50% of the interests in the property; and to identify similar alternate forms of documentation as evidence of control of the land for the purposes of participating in FSA and NRCS for farmers and ranchers.

Emergency Loans: Modernizations and Enhancements to Farmer Eligibility

The new language will allow emergency loans to farmers even if a farmer has been previously granted debt write down. Prior to the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, a farmer cannot receive a USDA "Emergency Loan" if at any time after 1996 the farmer participated in a USDA Farm Service Agency primary loan servicing agreement that included debt write down or debt forgiveness.

The frequent implementation of the debt "write-down" rule has an undue negative impact on socially disadvantaged in dire need of emergency loan. The 2018 natural disasters in North Carolina and California demanded modernization and enhancements in emergency loan programs. Indeed, farmers encounter multiple disasters that coincide with crop losses caused by environmental degradation, or low farm gate income caused by a global trade disruption.

The Senate amendment amends section 373(b)(2)(B) to exempt write-downs and restructurings under section 353 from what is considered "debt forgiveness" for the purposes of applying the debt forgiveness loan eligibility limitations. **(Section 5306).** The House bill contained no comparable provision. The Conference substitute adopts the Senate provision. **(Section 5307).**

We have recommended that the Secretary take a dual approach in order to speedily implement emergency loan eligibility. First, the Secretary should immediately issue a proposed rule to amend 7 CFR 764.352(b) which governs emergency loan eligibility requirements. Secondly, we have recommended that the FSA hand book identified as 3 FLP (Rev. 2) be amended at Page 10.1 to 10.2 to inform field staff and farmers and ranchers that a previous direct or guarantee loan write down is no longer a bar that prohibits a future application for an emergency loan. The Secretary should further make clear that emergency loan funds can be used to pay off or replace automobiles or higher interest credit cards that were frequently used prior to the disaster designation to finance farm operations. So long as otherwise permissible, the Secretary should further remove prohibitions for direct emergency loans in scenarios where farm loan borrowers have graduated from direct farm loan program with a past history of a guaranteed loan loss claim paid by FSA to a guaranteed lender.

These farm bill improvements are related to effective participation in NRCS conservation programs and their speedy implementation will make minority participation in conservation programs much more effective.

Thank you. I look forward to any questions from the Committee.

The Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural is an alliance of farmers, farmworkers, indigenous, migrant and working people from the United States, Mexico, and beyond working together since 1978 with the shared values of unity, hope, people, and the land. Rural

Coalition/Coalición Rural members share the belief that rural communities everywhere can have a better future and that community-based organizations who have long served the needs of rural communities and people have a fundamental role in building that future. Investments in their work will provide important returns to our economy, our environment, and our society.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Sanchez, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF LTC ANDREW J. SANCHEZ, (RET.), USAF; FARMER/RANCHER, SIERRA COUNTY, NM

Mr. SANCHEZ. Thank you, Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, Members of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry for this opportunity to testify on opportunities and benefits available to military veterans in agriculture.

I am the fifth generation to operate my cattle ranch in Sierra County in rural southern New Mexico, and this land was originally homesteaded in the territory of New Mexico in the late 1800s. My

family has been running cattle there ever since, and I am currently in the process of purchasing the land from my father, Adam Sanchez.

When I was young I wanted a life of adventure and a chance to fly and saw minimal opportunity in Truth or Consequences or Alamogordo where I graduated from high school. My parents recognized they couldn't change my mind, and I joined the Navy at 17. I served as an active-duty Naval flight officer for 9 years and my service took me around the globe. All this led me back to the place where I have always considered home, and that is rural New Mexico.

Now I operate the farm where I was raised and I see the same desire to escape in my children, and like my parents, I pray that I can instill just a bit of that calling that will bring them back to the land where their family legacy thrives.

As a young man my sole ambition was to find a way to leave the ranch and find success in the larger world. Now I am faced with the same decisions that my father had to make, which is to how do I raise my family without losing this legacy.

My grandfather was the last generation to successfully live on the ranch. My dad had to work close enough to commute to the ranch on weekends and holidays and I would spend summers living with my grandparents at the ranch until they passed. I became the chief operator of my ranch in 2011, and I am the sole provider for my wife and two children, at that time, and now three, and the farm income is not enough to support my family. As is the case with many Americans, I was forced to find off-the-farm work, and in my case I joined the New Mexico Air National Guard.

Returning to the farm full time, I faced the same obstacles that many beginning farmers confront. The ranch was somewhat neglected and I had to rebuild it. I first applied for EQIP as a beginning farmer and rancher when I needed a new well which stopped pumping in the late 1980s. I was awarded this grant, and upon finishing that project I knew that it wouldn't be enough to fully revive the ranch. I applied again in 2014 for a second grant to run additional pipeline and another drinker and additional storage, which was critically needed to ensure greater forage coverage and keep the cattle from overgrazing certain areas.

My application was denied for 2 years due to the amount of points on the EQIP request. This was despite the USDA NRCS helping me compile more projects in the proposal and increasing the point value, and it wasn't until I applied using my veteran status that I was awarded the grant.

My status as a military veteran afforded me the benefit of competing with fewer applicants for this EQIP and it also awarded me the supplementary payout to put in the additional storage. Most importantly, it allowed me to complete this additional $38,000 in projects without putting my family's livelihood at risk.

However, due to the timing restrictions in the definition under the 2018 Farm Bill, next year I will no longer be eligible for USDA veteran benefits, as I will have been out of the Navy for 10 years.

The USDA Veteran Program modified in the 2018 Farm Bill had a direct positive impact on farmer veterans. I elaborate on them in my written testimony. However, the change in the definition, *vet-*

eran farmer/rancher, prevents a wide swath of farmer veterans from profiting from these benefits. The new statute defines a *farmer/rancher* as one who served in the Armed Forces, has not operated a farm or ranch, or has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years, and who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10 year period. The data on veteran farmers does not support such a change, as a large number who enter agriculture more than 10 years after having left the military. Most of them are still quite young. As a result of this language, a large number of the targeted audience will not have access to these benefits.

I am a sailor, I am an airman, I am a farmer. I fought for our nation's freedom and I continue to fight to feed my nation and preserve the way of life that is slowly dying. The USDA Veteran Preference Programs are essential in keeping rural America alive, for our veterans, like me, come from small towns and return to these small towns after service.

In closing, I would like to recommend the following: continued support of USDA, VA's, and DOD's effort to educate and encourage veteran opportunities in agribusiness, continue to fund USDA programs addressing veterans, especially the conservation programs, consider modifying the definition of *veteran farmer/rancher* to remove: "who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10 year" period.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of LTC Sanchez follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LTC ANDREW J. SANCHEZ, (RET.), USAF; FARMER/RANCHER, SIERRA COUNTY, NM

Executive Summary

Personal Information:

- Current majority owner and operator of my family's ranch in Sierra County, New Mexico.
- Ranches 2,000 acres of private and BLM land with 60 head of cattle.
- Previously served as active duty officer for 9 years in U.S. Navy.
- Currently serve as the Deputy Group Commander of the 150th Operations Group.
- Utilized EQIP benefits available through USDA, NRCS.
- Member, Farmer Veteran Coalition.

Recommendations:

1. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DOD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agribusiness.
2. Continue to fund USDA's programs addressing veterans, especially the conservation programs under title II.
3. Consider modifying the definition of "veteran farmer or rancher" to remove the "who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10 year" period restriction.

Testimony

Thank you, Members of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry for the opportunity to testify on the opportunities and benefits available to military veterans in agriculture.

I am the fifth generation to operate a cattle ranch in Sierra County in southern rural New Mexico. This land was originally homesteaded in the territory of New Mexico in the late 1800s. My family has been running cattle there ever since, and I am currently in the process of purchasing the land from my father, Adam Sanchez. However, when I was young and wanted a life of adventure and a chance to fly,

I saw minimal opportunity in Truth or Consequences or Alamogordo, where I graduated high school. My parents recognized they could not change my mind and agreed to let me join the U.S. Navy at age 17.

I served as an active duty Naval Flight Officer for 9 years. My service took me around the globe on multiple deployments, where I was exposed to many cultures and the diverse cross-section of the world. I enjoyed fellowship with local community members in huts in Asia Pacific and with dignitaries at fancy receptions in Poti, Georgia. I became close with my fellow Americans, whom I only met due to my service. All this led me back to the place that I've always considered home, rural New Mexico.

Now that I operate the farm where I was raised, I see the same desire to escape in my children, and like my parents, I pray that I can instill just a bit of that calling that will bring them back to the land where their family legacy thrives. As a young man, my sole ambition was to find a way to leave the farm and find success in the larger world. Now I am faced with the same decisions that my father had to make. How do I raise my family without losing this legacy?

My grandfather was the last generation that successfully made a living on the ranch. My dad had a 25 year Civil Service career on White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base and worked close enough to commute to the ranch on weekends and holidays. I would spend summers living with my grandparents at the ranch until they passed. I then lived there with my great aunt and worked for what little profit the cows would bring each year. Sometimes, it was just enough to cover the bills and taxes. I became the chief operator of the ranch in 2011. I was the sole provider for my wife and two kids, and the farm income was not enough to support our family. As is the case with many American farmers, I was forced to find off-farm income. In my case, I joined the New Mexico Air National Guard.

When I returned to the farm full-time, I faced the same obstacles many beginning farmers confront. The ranch had been somewhat neglected, and I had to rebuild it. It was at this time that I first applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) as a Beginning Farmer/Rancher. I needed a new well, which had pumped its last ounce of water when my grandparents ran the ranch in the 1980s. I was awarded this grant, but upon completion of the project, I realized it fell far short of what would be required to revive the ranch. In 2014, I applied for a second grant to run a pipeline; add another drinker and additional storage that was critically needed to ensure a greater forage cover; and keep the cattle from overgrazing the areas so close to the water. My application was denied for 2 years due to the low amount of points on my request. This was despite my USDA agent helping me to compile more projects to my proposal, thus increasing my points. However, in my district, the competition is just too fierce, and not until I used my Veteran status, was I awarded the grant.

My status as a military veteran has afforded me the benefit of competing with fewer applicants for the EQIP. It also awarded me a supplementary payout to put in the additional water storage and drinker. This project allowed me to retain the 60 head, and I have also seen an increase in elk, deer, and other native wildlife. Most importantly, this allowed me to complete the additional $38,000 project without putting my family's livelihood at risk. However, due to the timing restrictions on how a veteran farmer or rancher is defined in the 2018 Farm Bill, next year I will no longer be eligible for USDA veteran benefits as I will have been out of the Navy for 10 years.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Farmer Veteran Coalition's role in this process. I attended their annual conference in 2018 and their founder explained the veteran provision in the 2014 Farm Bill then directed me to the USDA–NRCS table to learn how to apply. It is not just veterans like me who do not know of the veteran preference priorities, but also many USDA employees are not aware of them. In the 2018 Farm Bill, there has been more funding appropriated to outreach and raising awareness which should increase knowledge of these programs.

The USDA veterans programs modified in the 2018 Farm Bill have a direct positive impact on farmer veterans. Veterans are given preferences under certain programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Reserve Program Transition Incentives Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The 2018 Farm Bill added preference for veterans receiving financial and technical conservation assistance for pilot programs. Veteran farmers and ranchers were also included as part of a new definition of an underserved producer, which allows them additional aid in the Federal Crop Insurance Program. Finally, it extends benefits to veterans for down payment loans, reduced interest rates on guaranteed loans, disaster assistance coverage, and increased educational focus from the Food Safety Outreach Program and the Federal Crop Insurance Education Program. The bill expanded advocacy and outreach to veterans through the Office

of Partnerships and Public Engagement and the Military Veterans Outreach Liaison Office. It further requires additional data collection and a dedicated USDA website with information for veterans about USDA programs and support which will certainly raise awareness of these veteran benefits.

However, as I mentioned above, amending the definition of the term "veteran farmer or rancher" prevents a wide swath of farmer veterans from profiting from these benefits. The statute defines a farmer or rancher as one who has served in the Armed Forces (U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and the reserves) and "has not operated a farm or ranch; or . . . has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years" or who first obtained status as a veteran "during the most recent 10 year period." The data on veteran farmers does not support such a change as large numbers enter the agriculture sector more than 10 years after they have left the military, most of whom are still quite young. As a result of this language, a large number of the targeted audience will not have access to these benefits.

I am now exploring rural business loans through the USDA. Since I have returned to New Mexico, the National Guard armory in Sierra County was dismantled because the population is too small to support the Guard. Several stockyards have closed, and it is more and more challenging to make a living in my region. I, with the help from my local New Mexico Veteran Business Outreach Center (VBOC), am trying to turn my small cow/calf operation into a profitable direct-to-consumer business, but it is challenging to say the least.

Like the military, neighbors in rural America depend on each other, and we are in this fight together. This includes: Maj Zamora, a Maintenance Officer in the National Guard who runs his family hay farm in Tome; MSgt Justice, with whom I deployed in OEF and runs his family farm with his father in Los Lunas; and Mike Carr, an Vietnam-era Army Veteran and fellow Farmer Veteran Coalition member, who works an all-veteran cooperative farm near Taos. We are all trying to preserve this Legacy of service, not only on the battlefields, but in our rural American heartland. I am a Sailor, an Airman, and a Farmer. I fought for freedom, and I continue to fight for a way of life that is slowly dying. USDA's Veteran preference programs are essential in keeping rural America alive as many of our veterans, like me, come from small towns and return to these towns after their service.

In closing, based on my experience as a farmer veteran, I would recommend the following for your consideration:

1. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DOD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agribusiness.
2. Continue to fund USDA's programs addressing veterans, especially the conservation programs under Title II.
3. Consider modifying the definition of "veteran farmer or rancher" to remove the "who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10 year" period restriction.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much for your testimony.

Members will now be recognized for questioning in order of seniority for Members who were here at the start of the hearing, and after that we will recognize Members in order of their arrival. And I first recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Sanchez, I have a quick follow-up question for you. When you were talking about the data regarding veterans who are not able to access the programs because their veteran status, that 10 year timeframe, expires. In your experience and from what you have seen, is that for veteran farmers who come into generational family farms but may not take over ownership? What are some of the reasons why that 10 year period, from what you have seen, will run out?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, ma'am. From what I have seen during the TAP (Transition Assistance Program) and the exit out of the military, there is a big education process on going into agriculture. A lot of people find it on their own, I guess. For me it was just what I grew up doing. I didn't really decide I was going to go back there and it took me—so I got out in 2009 and it took me 2 years to real-

ly find my way back to actually doing it. And so that 10 year gap, there is a lot of different reasons that they don't return immediately, but falling under the minority and underserved, I am Hispanic for a lifetime, African-American for a lifetime, and when I hang up that uniform I am a veteran for a lifetime. I don't know why we have a 10 year ending date on that status.

The CHAIR. And you mentioned that you were initially denied for 2 years until you realized that there was the veteran aspect. Was it prior to that you did not realize that that was an opportunity for you to apply under the veteran program?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, ma'am. I applied as a beginning farmer rancher for the first one, but I didn't realize they had veteran specific set aside until I talked to the Farmer Veteran Coalition and they educated me by saying, "Hey, you need to apply for as a veteran," and then that was also one of the underserved categories that I could apply to separately.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much. I think that speaks to some of the points that Ms. LaFleur was making regarding education about these issues.

My next question is for Mr. White. Thank you very much for being with us. Some of your operations are based in Louisa County, within the district I am proud to represent, so I am particularly appreciative that you are here. Appreciative you are all here, but it is good to see a fellow Virginian.

Beginning farmers play a key role in agriculture and conservation, and in Virginia's 7th Congressional District ⅓ of our producers are new and beginning farmers. According to the Census of Agriculture, the number of new and beginning farmers in the U.S. increased by 82 percent from 2012 to 2017, and this is an encouraging trend. But the Census also revealed that the number of farmers who reported operating for a period of 6 to 10 years declined by roughly seven percent, suggesting that if entry into agriculture is challenging, actually staying in agriculture is even more challenging.

Can you speak from your experiences to the role of conservation programs in helping farms to remain financially viable as they attempt to thrive? And what else can we be doing to ensure that these programs are helping farmers stay profitable and resilient?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, ma'am. The first part of that has a lot to do with timing of what was happening in the farm economy: 2012, 2013, 2014, as people were getting in, were going into a peak of commodity prices. Beef cattle prices were going up and then everything kind of tanked a little bit here, which we are dealing with the downside now. With cattle and crop and all, you have to look at the long-term and see these programs. They are working, they are helping, but there is going to be certain classes of young farmers that might not succeed because of outside market forces, and you don't want to write off the program as not working because this class of young farmers coming in had a hard time. You know, the outside economy was a large contributing factor to what got them.

The CHAIR. Thank you for the context on that. And so, generally speaking, as you perceive it, the elements of the conservation programs that you yourself are engaged with in terms of fencing and

helping nearby ranchers in central Virginia, do you see those as a path for which farmers and ranchers can pursue to ensure that they are creating greater sustainability for their farms?

Mr. WHITE. Most definitely. What you do on the farm, the improvements you make, the conservation for sustainability, that is all like your savings account on the farm. You build up your soil, you build up your infrastructure, and when the market treats you good you are making money and you keep going. If you are always taking away from the farm, you are depleting and it doesn't matter whether the market is going up or down, you are going down. But, the savings you put into the farm, the infrastructure you build, all that sustainability that you build up is going to be what helps the farm in the long-term. Don't let the snapshot take away from the programs in general, because the programs are good.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, would you like to make a statement? Thank you.

Thank you very much. I now recognize Ranking Member LaMalfa, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you again. I appreciate the panel and, Irvin, hey, I am just a dirt farmer who has got a tie now, so don't worry about how this works. Okay? So, just plow through. I appreciate you all being here.

Ms. LaFleur, first of all, I am fascinated by what you do way up there in the Northeast. I grow a crop in a flooded field situation myself, but it is not anything like what you do, rice *versus* cranberries. I have a couple questions, but I want to ask you one more on a production basis. How deep do you keep those bogs with water, and I am sure it varies as you harvest and such.

Ms. LAFLEUR. Well, contrary to popular belief, the cranberries actually grow dry. They actually don't like to be too wet, so unless we are actively protecting for frost in the—or deep freeze in the winter or harvest, the bogs remain dry.

Mr. LAMALFA. And you keep the vines year after year? It is not an annual in any way, right?

Ms. LAFLEUR. Yes, sir. Some of the vines on our property have been growing since the 1880s.

Mr. LAMALFA. Wow. Amazing. Okay. Well, I guess that would define the word *sustainable* at least in one way. That is what I wanted to ask you about a little bit are the practices that are required to be certified as sustainable. Is it a mandated thing? Is it something that the producers and their association come up with, or is there a certifying entity outside that says you meet some standard for what sustainability would be? I know you said 100 percent across the whole industry, which is pretty remarkable.

Ms. LAFLEUR. We are using the Farm Sustainability Assessment Tool, and certified by an outside entity, which is looking at the conservation practices that growers implement. Our typical practices involve water quality, water conservation, and pollinator habitat. And those can be anything from the construction of tail water recovery areas, bypass canals, water control structures, sanding practices, *et cetera.*

The practices for the sustainability certification are actually up to the individual producer in which ones they implement. However, their ranking, and this tool uses a gold, silver, bronze ranking sys-

tem, how they rank depends on the number of practices that they implement.

Mr. LAMALFA. What is the value of that score for the industry or the individual producer as far as marketability or favor amongst regulators. How do you quantify that?

Ms. LAFLEUR. Well, it is really two-fold. It is the environmental aspect of sustainability, doing the right thing taking care of our water resources. We farm in a wetland. We use water resources pretty intensively. Making sure that our water resources and we are using that water smartly is important.

The economic side of it is just as important as it enhances our ability to market our crop. The American public is looking more and more into the business practices of cooperatives like Ocean Spray, or really any producer, and looking at their business model and their plans and how their farmers deliver the product to them. Ultimately, the marketability and how we are able to brand our products with our ultimate goal of being 100 percent sustainably grown. Again, it is a lofty goal but one that, we as grower-owners, members of Ocean Spray, have committed to.

Mr. LAMALFA. Well, talk a little bit about the outreach aspect. I would like to hear from a couple of you on that if we have the time.

Are we doing two rounds? Okay. We will have time.

What does the outreach look like? Now, are you talking to people that are not in farming at all and you want to get them involved, or is the outreach more about people that are in agriculture, maybe their family was, and maybe they are not aware of some of the conservation? What are the different tiers of outreach in effect? How are you finding people to outreach to, *et cetera?*

Ms. LAFLEUR. Well, for us, at our conservation district level, our outreach involves both producers and non-producers. As I mentioned, we live in a pretty densely-populated state. We farm literally within view of our neighbors. They see and have an opinion about everything that we do. So, conservation, at the heart, is about doing the right thing, but at the same time it is also making sure that that right thing puts us in a position where we can avoid regulators coming in and telling us how we must do things, because we have taken those advance steps to make sure that we are farming in a smart way, again, using water resources smartly, minimizing inputs again saves time, saves labor, it all comes down to the bottom line.

Outreach efforts are, we use social media a lot. We do trade association meetings as another great outreach effort in order to reach the current producers. But to reach the next generation, we have a lot of people who are interested in agriculture, but they are afraid or don't know where to take that next step, so if we are going to encourage more people to enter agriculture, however, at whatever scale, we need to reach them where they are. And for us that is a multi-faceted social media trade association meetings and direct mailings.

Mr. LAMALFA. Okay. I am over time here, so thank you.

And, Mr. Robinson, I will come to you with that question in the next round, too. So you can ruminate on that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentlewoman from Maine, for 5 minutes.

Ms. PINGREE. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this hearing. And to all of you, thanks so much for your testimony and telling us a little more about some of the challenges that the farmers you are associated with face.

I want to have a chance in my next question to talk a little bit about staffing levels in outreach because I think that is critically important at USDA right now, but since I know it will come up a lot, I want to also discuss climate change. And I spent a lot of time working on how farmers can participate in some of the positive aspects of mitigating climate change, but also many of the challenges that people are facing with erratic weather.

I, too, am a small farmer. I am from the State of Maine, so welcome to our fellow New Englander. And we are challenged in a variety of ways. Luckily we are a fairly high rainfall state, but we have been having excess rainfall in the spring and then droughts in the summer and that presents a challenge, particularly if the irrigation systems aren't working or we don't have the capacity to irrigate.

But, I am just interested in hearing from all of you if there are ways that you know that agriculture has been affected by weather, other issues around climate change in your area. And, maybe, Ms. LaFleur, you could start out because you talked a little bit about the real challenges last year with the yield in cranberry growing. And I appreciate you are a steadfast cranberry grower in Massachusetts because we don't want you guys to have to go away.

Ms. LAFLEUR. Thank you. The weather and climate change played a pretty significant impact on the crop of cranberries nationwide. Of course things are cyclical. Some growers had a great crop. Other growers had dramatic reductions. We are seeing, in particular, growing regions had a lot of issues with winter kill, and for that particular growing region they are not used to dealing with those extreme temperatures, so their management practices and how they would typically manage their bogs in the winter, if they held *status quo,* well, last winter was not *status quo* for them.

Looking at different ways and how we can mitigate those issues, again, I mentioned before, we use water in times of drought. We have had years where there is not enough water to harvest for certain growers. We release our water to growers downstream from us that depend on our water to harvest their bogs. And so it is a coordinated effort. But the impacts of climate change is something that is not lost on producers. How to mitigate those impacts I suppose is still the big question.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes. Anyone else have experiences?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, ma'am, thank you very much. So, right. Using that EQIP, the first EQIP that I talked about in 2011 to re-dig that well. When my grandparents put that well in, they dug it by hand and used a windmill. It was a seasonal spring that would run about 3 months out of the year, and they dug it and it was only about 30′ down. When I had to re-dig that well, I had to take it down to 270′ to hit water, so it is a lot different. I don't know if it is the water usage, especially in New Mexico where it is a dry climate, that as population grows we are using more and more

water so it is driving it more and more into the aquifers. But, yes, it is impacting agriculture big time.

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, ma'am. Thank you for your question.

Particularly with blueberries in your state, we have had an opportunity to speak with some of the growers and they have informed us that as it warms earlier in the season it brings in a different type of more vicious pest, and if that particular grower has an existing conservation plan that already has a certain number of practices in it or cost to go back to NRCS and make changes to that plan can sometimes be problematic, obviously costly. But in this particular farm bill, there is a specific section in title II which allows or gives the State Conservationists more flexibility to make changes to existing plans so that the grower can have some flexibility of adapting to those climate change scenarios that you mentioned. It is just a matter of, once again, outreach and making sure that the farmer knows about the State Conservationist's ability to make waivers and be flexible with an existing plan.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes. Great, thank you.

Mr. White, I will catch you on the next round because I am out of time. Thank you. If you have thoughts I will be happy to hear.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you. I now recognize the gentleman from Georgia, for 5 minutes.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and I want to thank the panel for the week before Christmas, and hopefully we get out of here this week, but thank you for taking your time to be here and for what you do for this country.

Particularly, Lieutenant Colonel Sanchez, first I would like to thank you for your service. I am grateful that after serving your country abroad and continuing to serve at home, you are now able to enjoy the very land that you swore to protect. It is encouraging to see veterans like yourself farming and ranching, and our military is unparalleled in developing leaders, and our military leaders are mission-oriented and capable of running organizations in an efficient and very thorough manner. Obviously, this is important in our ag industry. We need a new generation of leaders such as yourself that will join if we are to remain competitive in the global market.

The first question is kind of broad, but if you could identify say four things that are obstacles that prevent most of our veterans like yourself who are interested in farming that keep you from going into agriculture after retiring. What would those four things be?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Well, thank you. I can think of two that pop into my head right away. I think the big two is the information piece. I know, in my case, I grew up on the ranch, but back then I was a farmhand, that is the way my dad treated me.

Mr. ALLEN. Yes.

Mr. SANCHEZ. Taking ownership of the ranch and becoming the operator and turning that into a business in focus was something I didn't really know about. I knew how to work cattle and knew how to brand. I knew how to mend fences. And just really getting that information to the veterans as they come out, either in a TAP,

in the transition assistance, or any of that stuff, agriculture isn't a big focus on getting out, even though we come from rural towns.

In Sierra County where I came from, we had to close the National Guard Armory in Sierra County because there is just not enough opportunity, when I moved back, Wal-Mart came in, and it is not a thing on Wal-Mart, but there was a front page article that said Wal-Mart couldn't even find enough employees to open up a Wal-Mart. They had to bring people from outside the county. People are leaving those small towns, and to get them back there they are not aware of all the options as far as the EQIP and the NRCS and stuff.

Mr. ALLEN. Yes.

Mr. SANCHEZ. So getting that information is big.

And then the second big one I would say is the availability and access to land. I am lucky enough that I come from a family that had that land. It was, like I said, homesteaded, and it has been passed down. But a lot of these young kids that come off the farm and stuff like that, when they are going back, that access to get their own place and build their own farm is very difficult.

Mr. ALLEN. Well, I too was a farmhand, and of course my father was, I don't know, several generations of farmers, because frankly back before World War II our economy, 98 percent of the workforce was in the agribusiness in some way. And now it is less than two percent.

One of the things that I might add to this, and I have just a few seconds, is, obviously there has been a lot of talk about commodity prices. We had the Secretary of Agriculture here. When he first was appointed, Secretary Purdue, I asked him about commodity prices, because obviously farm income which was stable in 2012 but when I got here in 2014 it had dropped 50 percent, farm income. And so in the next round we will talk about commodity prices and that fourth item that we didn't get to in this one.

Thank you. And I yield back.

The CHAIR. Thank you very much.

I now recognize the gentleman from Arizona, for 5 minutes.

Mr. O'HALLERAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is an important issue for my constituents, and thank you for being here today.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2017 Census, Arizona's 1st Congressional District is home to nearly 19,000 Native American producers. This is not a surprise given that the Tribes of Arizona have a rich history in agriculture.

The changes made in the 2018 Farm Bill were in consultation with Tribes from across the country. They are only a single step in the right direction. More work needs to be done.

As I learned from my Navajo constituents who live on many farms, chapter houses, in Arizona, access to the Environmental Quality Initiatives Program is a significant barrier to use of USDA conservation dollars for many Tribal producers. In fact, the government built them a beautiful irrigation system and the end result was they built it wrong. Eighty percent of the water still goes downstream instead of into the reservoir that they built, and we still haven't been able to get that corrected. And this is tens of millions of dollars that has been wasted. I ask that we work together

as a Committee to revisit the eligibility requirements of the program.

Additionally, youth are the future of agriculture in our nation, and their participation in Federal programs is critical to the future success and accessibility of these programs. In fact, there is a real crisis in making sure we keep our family farms. My family lost their farm, my grandfather, in the depression, and my father had worked the farm, and afterwards family members during the summer, dairy farmers. I had the pleasure of leaving urban America and going back to the farm and helping out while they went on vacation.

Providing more resources to Natural Resources Conservation Service and other USDA programs to create more internship opportunities for Native youth with recruitment directly from Tribal communities will serve this purpose, and for the rest of our country. Natural Resources Conservation Services advertises summer intern programs nationally, but few opportunities are offered in Indian Country. I encourage USDA to consider creating more opportunities for Native youth in Indian Country.

Further, many producers in my district are veterans. Arizona is home to more than 600,000 veterans, and we have a moral obligation to ensure the brave Americans who have fought and sacrificed for us to receive all the benefits they have earned.

Lieutenant Colonel Sanchez, thank you for your service to our country. Your testimony highlights the fact that producers in the Southwest face unique challenges. This makes the assistance and resources provided by the USDA more important in ensuring more veterans can be successful in agriculture enterprises. My district borders New Mexico. When they finish their service and they can raise a family doing so.

How do you make it easier on returning service members like yourself to begin operating an agriculture enterprise? We want you to succeed. We need for you to succeed. And, in relationship to the other question that was asked, how do we get on this early? Because we have you captured for a while towards the end of your career, and to me we are wasting an opportunity to get that type of information to you, unless you are getting it already, to be able to be successful on looking into a career that you have an interest in and have had in the past. What is the best way to educate service members in transitioning out of the service and into the opportunity of your choice?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, sir. Well, thank you. The 2018 Farm Bill that created the veteran liaison is a good step in that direction, but I know when I went to the Farmer Veteran Coalition when I was looking for the liaison in the New Mexico area, they didn't have one at the time. It is getting, filling those positions and making those liaisons aware of the programs. And that way they can intersect with the veterans at the right time, whether it be in the TAP class or getting that message into the service as far as the Military Benefits Office so that they know those benefits are available prior to leaving service. Because, like you said, that is when they are looking at what their next step out of service is going to be. And that is when we need to get the information to them.

Mr. O'HALLERAN. Thank you. And I yield back, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. I now recognize the gentlewoman from Virgin Islands, for 5 minutes.

Ms. PLASKETT. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Sanchez, I want to thank you for your testimony and the discussion of your family. You were just discussing some involvement of veterans liaison. Can you share how you would use that person if they were in fact there in your district and in other places?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

As far as being a veteran in the service and just coming from where I come from, I am more, I know myself as more of a face-to-face type person. You can put information on a website and I know some are going to gravitate and do website stuff, but just being who I am, I am face-to-face interaction. So, just being able to sit down with somebody and ask them the questions.

Ms. PLASKETT. In real time, right?

Mr. SANCHEZ. In real time.

Ms. PLASKETT. Yes.

Mr. SANCHEZ. To tell them my story and say, "I grew up on a farm, I am looking at going back, what is available to help me." And having that liaison be wise in the programs and the different opportunities.

Ms. PLASKETT. Yes.

Mr. SANCHEZ. That way they can hand that information off face-to-face would be a great, great asset.

Ms. PLASKETT. Thank you for that. I know that in many areas we often have new farmers. Even our older farmers are unaware of some of the programs that are available to them. I know in my district in the Virgin Islands, we have to share someone with Puerto Rico and oftentimes they don't have the budget to travel over. We had our only certified organic farmer here in another hearing who was talking about the cost of having to bring someone over, and even that cost-share is not enough.

You highlighting how important it is to have someone and be able to answer the questions, have a relationship with someone that you believe is there supporting you, as opposed to just a website to go onto, is really critical.

I am concerned about our veterans. Even telemedicine in so many instances is just not doing them and you all the service that you deserve to having people there to walk you through. I want to thank you for sharing that insight with us.

Mr. Robinson, I wanted to talk with you about, a little bit about the farm bill heirs program, the heirs property provisions. We know that we are fortunate to have a network of about 19 historically black colleges and universities, HBCUs, which include Alcorn State University which houses USDA's Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center, which seems perfect for the discussion you were talking about.

How might USDA benefit from their input as well as the feedback from producers on the ground? And what research gaps might they be able to address?

Mr. ROBINSON. Thank you, Congresswoman, for your question. Alcorn is doing a—at the research, at the Minority Farmer Research Policy Center, they are doing a great job of getting into the

field and collecting the data on conservation, credit, and other USDA programs.

USDA is, has been a part, and I believe will continue to be a part of the data collecting process. And what we do at the Rural Coalition because we are grassroots is that we make sure that the Policy Center develops their research questions based on what is happening on the farm with the particular farm family. And so it is one thing to build a data set based on academia, but it is another thing to build a data set based on what is actually happening on the farm.

And with conservation, one example would be, especially with heirs property, which became a part of the farm bill, and we appreciate the Committee's working with us on that, is that there needs to be more outreach on heirs property and the method in which a farmer gets the information about how taking the problem of heirs property and turning it into an economic benefit, whether it is——

Ms. PLASKETT. In talking about that economic benefit, you said, your testimony said that the heirs property provision is critically important to areas like Puerto Rico and my district, the Virgin Islands. Why is that?

Mr. ROBINSON. Well, because in the Virgin Islands, what we found during the farm bill debate as we were drafting these provisions is that it had just gone through a natural disaster and as you were working with USDA to provide emergency natural resource programs, it was difficult to do that for many families simply because there was not a clear title to land. And so what we have done in this farm bill with this heirs property language is that we have allowed the USDA to allow the farmer to use alternative documentation to prove ownership of the land, whether that is through a lease or whether the farmer has paid the taxes on the land for a certain period of time. And we remember very clearly working with your office on making sure we got the language right, and so we appreciate that.

Ms. PLASKETT. Thank you so much for that information and thank you for your indulgence, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Absolutely. With the first round of questions completed, and without objection, we will begin a second round of questions. Members will be recognized for 5 minutes in order of seniority, and I will first recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. LaMalfa, from California.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you. I am going to defer to Mr. Allen here since he has an appointment. I will come back later.

Thank you, ma'am.

Mr. ALLEN. Thank you, Ranking Member.

And to move on from the commodity pricing, and of course we hope to get to achieve the USMCA trade deal, which I am assuming in the livestock business that is going to be a plus for you, and so you might just comment on what you see right now and what you see in the future. And of course we have trade issues that we have that are in negotiations we have to finalize.

Just how important are these trade agreements in increasing our ability to sell our goods at a fair price, not only here but around the world?

Yes. Just go ahead, sir. We will just move down the line real quickly.

Mr. WHITE. Thank you very much. On the local farm level, trying to understand the national politics is challenging, but in what I read and what I understand it is supremely important to get these trade barriers knocked down to where we can get back into Japan, get into China and deal with our competitors around the world. I mean, U.S. beef is recognized around the world as the best there is.

Mr. ALLEN. Right.

Mr. WHITE. We need to be able to sell it, and that will trickle back.

Mr. ALLEN. You need to sell it, but it also matters how much you sell it for, right?

Mr. WHITE. Correct. And it all comes back to the smaller farm can benefit, as much or more than anybody from that.

Mr. ALLEN. Right.

Mr. WHITE. Because, I mean, they are the ones that get hit the most when the prices drop. The bigger farm, you can weather, whether it is climate change, it is easier to weather if you are a bigger farm, or all the bumps are easier to weather the bigger you are.

Mr. ALLEN. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. The smaller farms and the beginning farms, they all get hurt the most by the bumps.

Mr. ALLEN. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. Whatever they are. The get hurt the most.

Mr. ALLEN. Any other quick comments?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question. Especially being from New Mexico and so close to Mexico, I have seen the dropout out there in the beef prices, because there has been somewhat of a flood of foreign beef coming across just like a lot of the other agriculture products. Trying to find that niche market is harder.

Mr. ALLEN. Right.

Mr. SANCHEZ. But if we have some fair practices we can trade and work on the outside.

Mr. ALLEN. And I wanted to get that fourth part, which is labor. We have a huge labor shortage which you have mentioned here in this country right now, and this Congress is doing nothing about it. I mean zero. And that is sad because we could grow this economy a lot faster if we could come together in a bipartisan way and fix this labor issue, and it can be fixed.

Also, and we talk about the climate change issue and I look at you guys in the livestock business, I guess you know your cows are a bit of a problem, according to some who have knowledge about this. But I just got to tell you we are producing more than we have ever produced in this country by far, 120, 125 percent. In fact, the whole world is producing more than—I mean, we could feed the world if we could get rid of corrupt leadership.

But I do have to tell this story. Somebody asked me when was the first time I had ever heard of climate change, and I said, "Well, it was in Sunday School when I was a young person." I said that flood in Noah's time was a big deal. It had never rained before.

Now, can you imagine that? Can you imagine? Because God watered the Earth through the dew on the Earth and then all of a sudden we had a storm and we had rain. Now, I guess that was the beginning of climate change and then I guess we got to figure out who is in charge of the weather and how we can help him figure this thing out. But I thought I would share that with you.

And I yield back.

The CHAIR. The chair now recognizes the gentlewoman from Maine, for 5 minutes.

Ms. PINGREE. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for having a chance to ask you all another question. And thank you again for your indulgence in being here.

Mr. White, I did want to ask you about climate change impacts on your farm, but I am also interested in the fact that you are sharing your expertise in rotational grazing to help other farmers, because that just seems increasingly important as people understand the value of permanent pasture and raising cattle on rotational grazing. Thank you for doing that. It seems like an interesting opportunity and I see also you are trying to expand your ability to raise grass-fed beef, which again comes at an increasing price and premium prices. People are more concerned about how things are raised, as Ms. LaFleur was talking about. Do you want to talk about either of those things and how it is going in your area?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, ma'am, thank you. The climate change issue, understanding that on my scale, it is hard. The biggest deal we are dealing with is the extremes.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. The extreme cold, the extreme wet. I mean, I can say that 2019 was probably the worst year I have had farming. You build up. You do the savings account like I say. You try and do things right and you weather the storm, but this has been our worst year starting last year this time when it started raining and it wouldn't stop, then it got hot.

Getting the information out as things change and helping farmers, especially the smaller ones, figure those things out. That is key, getting the information out. And doing it, as Mr. Sanchez says, having a person to talk to, and getting coordination between the different agencies is a big help.

The rotational grazing in the direct marketing side of what I am doing, it is a real desire of mine to sell my beef to people I know.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. We had gotten in with a butcher shop and we were selling one animal a week. And grass finishing one animal a week is a pretty big deal where I was selling five a year to friends of the elementary school crowd where the kids went, and that was nice, but then when we got to one a week, I mean, that was a big deal. But then that butcher shop didn't make it, so now we are starting over. And it is a big investment and it is something I want to do. The local food movement is big, but I just don't want to sell local beef. I want to sell good local beef and do it right, so it is a learning process and there is not a whole lot of people out there doing it, the rotational grazing, the management of sustainable farm.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. All of those key words are—that is what we do every day.

Ms. PINGREE. Right.

Mr. WHITE. And trying to put it all together is the hard part. It is picking your head up from working hard and stopping and looking around and trying to figure it out and then go back to work and then there is a lot to try and figure out.

Ms. PINGREE. This wasn't actually on my list of questions, but since you are talking about it. I am the cosponsor of a bill called the PRIME Act (Processing Revival and Intrastate Meat Exemption Act) with Representative Massie, one of my Republican colleagues from Kentucky, and that is really to increase the availability of local slaughterhouses, and that lack of infrastructure seems to be a problem in most places, and it is not on the list but it is certainly a concern. And is that something you have had to deal with trying to raise local products and sell it locally?

Mr. WHITE. Very much so. You know, we have been selling freezer beef for 15 years.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. And, it is an hour and a half drive to the nearest butcher shop. We have a new one that is about an hour away that is much bigger and holds a lot of promise, but it is being able to sell the product and it is educating the consumer about the product, and everybody wants 400 fillets and two packs of ground beef.

Ms. PINGREE. Right.

Mr. WHITE. It is like the cow is not built that way, there is a lot to work through, but more USDA licensing. Some of the western counties in Virginia, they have a mobile processing thing out there.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes.

Mr. WHITE. There are several states around the country where I have seen articles on that, and that is an excellent idea. And you know, people want to know where their food is coming from and it is a good thing.

Ms. PINGREE. Right. Mr. Sanchez, you were nodding your head. Have you experienced that, too?

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, ma'am. As you help the beginning farmer, in the end it helps a lot on this side, but there is a big bathtub in that processing, in those slaughterhouse and the facilities to get that local quality product to the table. There is a big bathtub right there and that is a huge deficit right now.

Ms. PINGREE. Yes, it does seem like with increasing opportunities, particularly with people's interest in locally raised and processed animals and vegetables, everything else, we have lost a lot of our infrastructure that would have been there in places like Maine and other states. Fifty years ago this wouldn't have been so complicated, or a hundred years ago. Interestingly we had a lot more facilities to process food and process animals, and finding a way to get that infrastructure back seems critically important.

Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIR. The chair now recognizes the Ranking Member, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you again.

Back to Mr. Robinson here. Again, I wanted to, the subject being the access to these programs for different types of farmers and

ranchers, I just wanted to let you elaborate a little bit on what have the gaps been in the outreach? What does the outreach really look like? Where are you—how do you find people? How do you connect them towards what they don't know about or don't seem to know about, or connect them in a way that maybe eligibility had been an issue and that gap is bridged? Please speak about that a little bit.

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, thank you, sir, for your question. The five percent set-asides, whether it is a minority producer or whether it is new and beginning or veteran producer, that does exist, but that money runs out at some point. But even in the presence of the five percent set-aside with both categories, a producer who would be eligible under those categories may not meet the ranking criteria as you have heard the panel talk about today. When I mentioned the ranking category, if that producer's conservation concern, whether it be water or soil, does not meet the conservation practice that is accepted by the state or accepted by the local conservation technical committee, well, then that new and beginning producer or minority producer may not be able to participate in the program for, not just eligibility purposes, but for ranking purposes.

And so what we like about the farm bill is that it gives the State Conservationist quite a bit of flexibility to work with the ranking criteria in order to reach those producers that are being missed. And typically our organization will hear about a producer who has not participated because of ranking once they have been denied, and so what we do is, through the land-grant system, whether it is an 1862 or whether it is an 1890 institution, we work to inform the State Technical Committees to inform the State Conservationist on using their flexibility to reach down and serve the producer that we are concerned about.

Mr. LAMALFA. Okay, thank you.

Touch briefly on educational opportunities, meaning just more directly telling people that don't know about that, and then I want to come to Mr. Sanchez for my final 1 minute, please.

Mr. ROBINSON. There are a number of conferences that take place around the country annually that we attend, so farmers have a chance to become educated. Then our field organizations have specialists in conservation who will go out and meet face to face with the individual farm family.

Mr. LAMALFA. For those that don't go to conferences, *per se,* right?

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. LAMALFA. Yes. Yes.

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, sir. Those opportunities are available, but the main point that we make here is that if the State Technical Committee or if the Local Technical Committee does not understand the natural resource concern of a minority farmer or a new and beginning farmer, which is different from a thousand-acre farm, then most likely that policy that is set by the State Technical Committee will actually miss the need of the smaller farm.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you.

Mr. Sanchez, you kind of perked my ears up on that 10 year end date. That really kind of struck me, for veterans where there is not a lot of end date on being a veteran, *et cetera.* Speak a little bit

about in general, your own experience was that you applied on a non-veteran status and you were turned down, but veteran status did put you in play there. So, just touch a little bit in the remaining time on that and how important that was and how did you find out about that.

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, sir, thank you.

The initial EQIP that I did apply for was under beginning farmer and rancher and that was in 2011. In 2014 I wasn't aware of the veteran, so I applied for a second and I received it this last year under the veteran status and it was really through the Farmer Veteran Coalition and talking with them that I learned that the farm bill had changed from the original time I applied in 2011 to recognize veterans as an underserved and minority group.

Mr. LAMALFA. How did you find out about the Farmer Veteran Coalition?

Mr. SANCHEZ. I just talked to one of my friends about it and they pointed me to the website, because as a National Guardsman——

Mr. LAMALFA. That reminds me of the scene in *A Few Good Men* where they are trying to find where in the manual how you find the Mess Hall.

Mr. SANCHEZ. Right.

Mr. LAMALFA. That is something else.

Mr. SANCHEZ. Exactly. Through the National Guard I had a lot of people out there, farmer, rancher and everything, and they were like, hey, have you heard about this, and I found it and I applied for one of the scholarships to go to the conference and that is how I heard about it was at the conference in Kansas City.

Mr. LAMALFA. Okay. I know I am a little over time.

All the way down the panel, just a one or two-word answer, are we doing better, yes or no? Irvin and everybody.

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, sir, we are doing better.

Mr. SANCHEZ. Yes, sir, I would agree. It is getting better. It is not there yet but it is getting better.

Ms. LAFLEUR. Yes, sir, getting better but always opportunity for improvement.

Mr. LAMALFA. Sure. Thank you.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. I think you need more people.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you.

Mr. WHITE. To get boots-on-the-ground. Thank you.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you. I appreciate that.

The CHAIR. Before we adjourn I would invite the Ranking Member to make any closing remarks that he may have.

Mr. LAMALFA. I already used up my extra minutes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Well, I want to thank our witnesses today, and I want to emphasize our commitment to continuing our efforts to ensure agriculture is a profession that values and enables the contributions of farmers and ranchers of all backgrounds.

I thank you for the insights that you have brought to this discussion relating to current efforts under the 2018 Farm Bill, what is working, what could be better, and thank you for the frank assessment that we are doing better but we can always continue to do better.

When we are talking about some of the efforts and the endeavors that you all are pursuing, it is fantastic to see the tie that they all bring together in terms of what rotational grazing is doing, not just for the farmers who are engaging in it, but for our efforts to address climate change and how ranchers like yourselves, Mr. White, are able to bring that knowledge in yearly investments and infrastructure back to other farmers in the area.

As we have heard today, not only is it important, but it is required that if we are going to mitigate the effects of climate change, support the next generation of our producers, and create economic opportunities across our rural communities, we need to understand the challenges that we are facing in rural America. Rural America is facing numerous challenges, but fortunately we have a diverse and growing number of farmers that are eager to do the work and we must ensure here in Congress and across the country that every farmer has the tools that they need to succeed across the country.

Thank you so much for being with us today. I appreciate your time, your frank answers.

And under the Rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 days to receive additional material and supplementary written responses from the witnesses to any question posed by a Member.

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:44 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]