

October 4, 2017

Western Landowners Alliance
PO Box 6278
Santa Fe, NM 87502

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow:

As the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (the Committee) considers the nomination of William Northey of Iowa for Under Secretary of Farm Production and Conservation at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) – representing approximately 14 million acres of Western rangelands and forest – urges attention to the increasing pressure on land, water, and wildlife in western states. If confirmed, Mr. Northey will be a core partner for the landowners, farmers, ranchers, and communities who rely heavily on these natural resources to support their families and quality of life.

There are rangelands and forests in urgent need of restoration across the American West. Past and outdated management practices, public policies, economic circumstances, and now a “new normal” of persistent drought conditions have led to working landscapes increasingly less able to support livelihoods, rural economies, and wildlife. The condition of these landscapes poses a direct and significant threat to western water supplies, communities, public health, and the national economy. These challenges are exacerbated by tremendous population growth in the Western U.S. and high public expectations for wildlife management and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Even so, WLA and its partners acknowledge significant progress and see great potential for partnership. The 2014 Farm Bill, in particular, was a step forward for conservation. It recognized the importance of privately held forested land to promoting healthy watersheds by creating new pathways at USDA for forest conservation. And the work of this Committee to increase flexibility within USDA conservation programming has been particularly helpful as farmers, ranchers, and communities work to address natural resource challenges that regularly span fences

and jurisdictions without discrimination. WLA is eager to maintain and build on these successes in the 2018 Farm Bill.

Looking ahead, it should surprise no one on the Committee that everyday Americans increasingly look to private landowners and agricultural producers to sustain wildlife populations alongside their primary income generating activities. In New Mexico alone, the most recent State Wildlife Action Plan identifies 235 “species of great conservation need,” many of which utilize or reside on private rangelands and hold significant economic value in the state. We should not only better recognize the landowners and producers who manage wildlife for the public benefit, but also be clear-eyed about the costs to the farms and ranches carrying out such activities (forage depleted, time away from generating income). The highly effective Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFWL) initiative, led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, is one example of the ways in which government and private stakeholders can effectively come together to address important habitat restoration concerns. As Congress and the administration continue down the path toward Farm Bill reauthorization, WLA encourages the Committee and Mr. Northey to examine and build on these successes and seize further opportunities to integrate wildlife management into USDA conservation programs.

Finally, taking a step back, we encourage strong funding for the Farm Bill conservation title and devoting additional resources to the agencies that work directly with people on the land to achieve environmental and productivity gains. Adequate staffing and technical support will help ensure effective delivery of Farm Bill programs and greatly increase the likelihood of good outcomes. While recognizing that Congress is facing a difficult budget environment and that conservation is but one of many important issues up for debate during this reauthorization period, we note that such resources made available through the Farm Bill have proven time and again to be forward-thinking investments that provide positive returns for taxpayers. Working lands are the backbone of this nation and these programs, which deliver positive outcomes over and above regulatory approaches, serve a valuable public role through direct engagement with landowners and producers, helping keep those families working and protecting the interests of American taxpayers.

WLA is grateful for your ongoing efforts on behalf of the West and rural America and values greatly the opportunity to share our views with the Committee and Mr. Northey, the nominee. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lesli Allison', written in a cursive style.

Lesli Allison
Executive Director
Western Landowners Alliance