

**Statement for the Record of Lesli Allison
Executive Director, Western Landowners Alliance**

**Submitted to the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry**

**Regarding
“A 2022 Review of Farm Bill Conservation Programs”
February 2, 2022**

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the Subcommittee, the Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement on Farm Bill Conservation Programs. The Western Landowners Alliance is a landowner-founded, landowner-led non-partisan organization that advances policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species. Our members represent millions of acres of leased and deeded land across the West.

Background

Every year we lose more farms and ranches to development. Those that remain are under increased pressure to provide not just food and fiber but a range of other public benefits such as wildlife habitat which can increase the cost of production. Farm bill programs represent an important public-private partnership that enables producers to provide these public benefits while remaining economically viable.

WLA appreciates the efforts of members of the Subcommittee in developing and passing the 2018 Farm Bill. Certain changes made to programs improved the availability of programs for farmers and ranchers throughout the West. For example, improvements to the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program (GCRP), including expanded ranking criteria and adjusted payment rates, resulted in record-breaking signups, a win-win for producers and native grasslands.

At the same time, this and other farm bill programs could be further refined and better implemented to support both agriculture and natural resource conservation in the region. Following GCRP signup 203, we surveyed our membership on their interest in the program and their experience enrolling. Based on the feedback we received, along with other first-hand experience with other USDA conservation programs, we offer the following general comments on farm bill conservation programs.

WLA Comments:

Agency Capacity

Landowners reported that internal communication challenges and capacity issues within the USDA hinder program delivery. Any discussion on successes and challenges of conservation programs must include a focus on increasing capacity of the agencies charged with implementing them. Providing the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) with sufficient staffing and resources is

key to effective implementation of conservation programs. Without adequate staffing, these agencies are unable to provide sufficient technical assistance, expertise and process enrollment applications. Beyond staff capacity, the issue of staff turnover and relocation was also cited as a considerable barrier to more effective implementation of farm bill programs in rural communities.

Program Complexity and Delivery

Complexity of the enrollment and agreement processing also limits the efficacy of staff and serves as a barrier to entry for interested landowners. The amount of paperwork required to carry out programs should not be so cumbersome that staff do not have time to learn conservation programs or assist landowners in the field. Landowners reported being overwhelmed by the number of steps required to enroll, additional uncommunicated requirements after enrolling, and felt a lack of transparency around the process. Some of this likely stems from USDA capacity issues again, but it is clear that moving forward, program delivery and improved outreach to landowners is an essential component of improving farm bill conservation programs.

Resource Coordination

Increased funding for federal conservation programs will only do so much without a dedicated focus on simplifying the process for producers and exploring how to better leverage the capacity of trusted, local leaders to conduct community outreach and assist producers in navigating the suite of conservation programs offered. To improve program delivery, and increase outcomes for producers and the resource, USDA should explore placing jointly-funded, dedicated “resource coordinator” staff positions within community-based organizations. Coordinators would be trained experts, providing capacity for outreach as well as an informative, time-saving point of contact for landowners. They would be knowledgeable on a wide range of USDA programs, but also familiar and able to work across state and federal departments and jurisdictions to help align interagency expertise, priorities and funding. This approach would provide for greater coordination, efficiency, cost-savings and more effective utilization of federal funding while also increasing local capacity for collaborative conservation.

Rewarding Biodiversity Stewardship

The cost of at-risk species conservation and listed species recovery efforts is often disproportionately placed on farmers and ranchers. Species displaced by land development, resource extraction or other activities often find safe harbor on private lands. Recent improvements to GCRP are a powerful step in the right direction toward the Farm Bill better recognizing this, particularly with refinement in the areas above. The Working Lands for Wildlife program also effectively advances proactive, collaborative conservation on private land and warrants additional funding as threats to biodiversity mount.

Conclusion

WLA appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement. The 2018 Farm Bill took significant strides forward in advancing WLA priorities addressed above. We look forward to working with you to continue to improve conservation program accessibility and practicality for western working lands. This work is

imperative if we are to combat threats such as climate change, habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss while ensuring economic viability of producers and rural communities.