

*Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery*

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*U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry*

*December 3, 2014: "Farmers and Fresh Water: Voluntary Conservation to Protect our Land and Waters"*

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for this very important hearing. The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry will now come to order.

Among earth's natural resources, water is fundamental to human survival.

And right now, we have a water crisis in our country that operates on two fronts.

The one most people tend to talk about is a crisis in water quantity – and we certainly see this right now in California where the drought is one of the worst in its history.

And the second – the focus of today's hearing – is a crisis around water quality.

This has long been an issue for those of us who live near the Great Lakes.

And we got a stark wake-up call this summer when the Greater Toledo area – with a population nearly as large as Washington, DC – couldn't drink their water, couldn't use water to cook, couldn't wash their hands, or brush their teeth, or take a shower because the water was contaminated with toxins from a serious algae bloom in Lake Erie. And I'm glad the Mayor of Toledo is able to join us today to talk about what happened there this summer.

Coming from Michigan, I feel a strong connection to the Great Lakes. All my life I have seen how they sustained our economy – from manufacturing to agriculture to tourism.

The lakes are where we work, and where we play.

They are part of our identity and our lifestyle.

Scientists tell us those lakes were created during an Ice Age some 15,000 years ago – a thawing that coincided with the discovery of agriculture.

Today the Great Lakes provide 84 percent of North America's surface freshwater.

This vital resource has passed from generation to generation.

Just as generations of Americans have relied on the waters of the Mississippi River, the Chesapeake Bay and so many others.

And yet our generation has the most urgent responsibility to conserve those waters. If we are going to solve this, we have to take action on climate change.

And we have to look at the nutrients going into our lakes, rivers and streams.

Our farmers want to be part of the solution, and they are, which is why we made conservation a priority in the 2014 Farm Bill.

While there is no single solution, no silver bullet that will resolve this crisis, we know that working together and sharing our knowledge will help us to develop strategies capable of making a broad impact on the quality of our water.

Our panel of speakers has been assembled with that goal in mind.

Considering that 1.5 million jobs are directly connected to the Great Lakes, our workers and our economy cannot afford another disaster on a scale of the one in Western Lake Erie.

No group understands the importance of water and soil more than our nation's farmers and ranchers.

Agriculture has played a critical role since the 1935 Farm Bill, when Congress created the Soil Conservation Service in response to the Dust Bowl.

The 2014 Farm Bill represents the largest investment yet in the conservation of private working lands critical to maintaining not just clean water, but clean air, wildlife habitats, forests and other natural resources.

We expanded the role of partnerships, so that farmers can team with university researchers, the private sector, conservation organizations and all levels of governments to find creative solutions to improving water quality.

We know that farming is one of the riskiest businesses in the world – and farmers cannot gamble on the future of their access to clean water.

Neither can we as consumers.

In his 1746 version of Poor Richard's Almanac, Benjamin Franklin said: "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water."

We have two excellent panels here with us this morning and I look forward to all of your testimony as we begin this important discussion.