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Testimony Before the
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Field Hearing in Wichita, Kansas
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Thank you Chairwoman Stabenow, Senator Roberts and distinguished members of the Committee. Welcome to Kansas, my name is Karl Esping, I am from Lindsborg, Kansas in McPherson County, about an hour north of here. My wife Wanda and I are the fifth generation to operate our farm. I am so pleased you have chosen Kansas as one venue to listen to the impact of Farm Bill programs and funding on Midwestern producers. Although I am Chairman of the Kansas Sunflower Commission and a member on the National Sunflower Association Board, I am here today representing myself and to represent the interests of other sunflower producers and also similar interests of other minor oil seed crops like canola. It is a great honor for me to represent the thousands of farmers who produce these commodities.

First I will give you some quick facts about sunflowers in Kansas and nationwide. Annually, Kansas plants between 100,000 and 150,000 acres of oil seed and confection sunflowers. In 2011 USDA estimated 1.8 million acres of sunflowers were planted nationwide. Oil seed production makes up 1.4 million of those acres with non-oil about 400,000 acres. Almost all of those acres are planted in eight mid-western States.

Farm Bill programs, and particularly the risk management programs, are a vital food security mechanism that keeps American food safe and affordable. Kansas producers are part of an industry that actually has a positive trade balance and is a growing part of the American economy. I am sure you are aware Farm Bill dollars are infused back into rural America through purchases of farm goods and services, agriculture inputs and everyday household needs. They are a part of the financial equation that keeps rural America whole. More importantly, these programs keep American agriculture successful and give producers a much needed safety net.

As we look at the future of the Farm Bill it appears cuts in funding are eminent. Particularly since recent times have brought relatively good market prices, but remember the only constant in agriculture markets is volatility. We understand this need to reduce expenditures and hope all programs under the Farm Bill will take fair and appropriate decreases. However, I hope the appropriators in Washington will allow your committee the opportunity to determine how funds will be distributed amongst the Titles and programs within the Farm Bill. The expertise and agriculture backgrounds of the Committee members will be extremely important as the limited resources are distributed.

As you look at priorities in this new Farm Bill please consider that producers still need a safety net for crop failure and disaster. Crop insurance has been and still is the best tool for these situations. Full funding for the crop insurance program is the highest priority for sunflower growers and I suspect that it is the case for all commodities. Both production and revenue protection insurance products are important options for producers. The flexibility these options offer is important as producers weigh input costs, planting decisions and premiums. I encourage the Committee to continue the flexibility currently found in federal crop insurance.

Certain conservation programs in the Farm Bill have been an important part of sunflowers maintaining acres and in some States even gaining acres. Sunflowers are generally part of a robust no-till rotation, a practice that has gained wider acceptance and implementation through EQIP funding. Initiatives like this are why conservation programs are vital to the overall success in agriculture. There may need to be some streamlining of programs to increase efficiencies, but there is still a need for conservation practices and cost-share programs for those practices.

Direct payments and market loan programs are also an important piece of the Farm Bill for minor oil seed producers. Direct payments provide the financial security needed for producers to remain in business when markets are low and/or crops fail or have decreased yields. Market loan programs serve an equally important role in sustaining producers; these loans allow debt repayment while still being sensitive to market trends. Having the assurance that a future crop can be used as collateral and that crop can be sold when markets are optimized provides stability in income and the marketplace. Just as with all other programs, we see and understand the need for fair reductions but these programs are still important to provide some funding.

In the world of sunflower production, research is a vital component of improved market place and production. Although not directly tied to Farm Bill funding, it is important for members of Congress from agriculture States and appropriators to understand how research helps agriculture producers keep up with the increasing demand for food. The USDA Agriculture Research Service is a key component of conducting genetic research, pest and disease control research and alternative use research.

In partnership with the National Sunflower Association Kansas growers and the Kansas Sunflower Commission along with growers in other states help provide vital funding for USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS). The goal of this research is to significantly increase yield and production through improved genetics and increased pest resistance. Partnerships link ARS with Kansas State University and other universities in sunflower production states. Over a 3-year period, \$2.6 million has been invested by this partnership while USDA has invested approximately \$6 million. We feel this \$6 million is a very wise investment of federal dollars. We recognize that ARS research funding is not part of the farm bill, but as producers we strongly believe that aggressive research at the federal ARS level along with Universities and grower groups is critical to our future and the future competitiveness of American agriculture.

I understand there will be many more public interests lobbying your committee for other programs and overall debt reduction actions. So I will take this opportunity to remind you that American agriculture is the original industry that got this country started. We still produce the safest and most abundant food worldwide. In Midwest States like Kansas, agriculture is still a major contributor to state and local economies. We need your support and leadership in Congress to continue our tradition and our way of life. With the utmost respect to you and the difficult decisions you have ahead, I would ask you remember those of us out in the country that put food on your tables as you make these decisions. Thank you.