

Statement of Ben LaCross
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
April 9, 2011

Thank you Madam Chairman and Senator Roberts for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. I want to thank you Senator Stabenow for your leadership on the last Farm Bill. Today, we have a specialty crop title in the Farm Bill, which is a result of your hard work and determination the past few years. Specialty crop farmers have benefited from your vision and leadership.

I am a young farmer from Cedar, Michigan- a small town just north of Traverse City. I farm with my parents, Glenn and Judy LaCross, and we grow tart and sweet cherries, plums, and apples. I am the Chairman of the American Farm Bureau Federation's Young Farmers and Ranchers Committee.

Young farmers and ranchers are more optimistic about agriculture now than ever before. Strong agricultural markets, increasing demand for niche products, and a general public that is showing an increasing awareness of agriculture make today an exciting time to be a farmer or rancher. Young farmers and ranchers face many of the same challenges that have plagued our industry for years including access to credit, limited ability to transfer ownership from one generation to the next, and marketing limitations.

We have a great tradition of family farmers in our country. We measure the longevity of our operations not in years, but in generations. Young farmers and ranchers need your committee to show strong leadership to ensure that the challenges of farming and the risks we undertake as farmers don't eclipse the rewards that family farmers reap every day by working the land. Young farmers need a stable Farm Bill that consists of research, useable support mechanisms, rural development, conservation, and market access.

Research and conservation are pillars of farm policy, areas of investment where the payday is not measured in return on investment, but on the sustainability of farmers and ranchers nationwide. Safety nets are crucial for farmers to be confident that the future of their farms won't be devastated by market or weather fluctuations. Most farm families are able to sustain the ebbs and flows of farm income by supporting themselves through off farm income. Rural development is a jobs initiative, compounded with the benefits it gives farm families and the rural communities that are vital to our nation.

Michigan is second only to California in crop diversity. Our proximity to lakes, our sandy soils, and our abundance of fresh water allow Michigan growers to produce some of the finest specialty crops in the world. Fresh and processed fruits and vegetables are vital to Americans' diets, and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables has shown to lower the instances of obesity. This is an area of the Farm Bill we should be celebrating America's farmers grow nutritious food and the Nutrition Title gives consumers access to these foods. What harmony!

As a specialty crop grower whose fruit goes mainly into the processing market, it is very important for my crop to be recognized as a healthy snack alternative. I was dismayed that dried cherries, a ready to eat form of our perishable crop, were excluded from the snack program. Value added agriculture is a significant driver of our state's and nation's economy, and canned, frozen, juiced, and dried fruits can be easily added to healthy menus.

While fresh fruits and vegetables have their place on the nation's collective plate, so do processed fruits and vegetables. I urge the Committee to restore processed fruits and vegetables, specifically dried cherries, back into the snack program.

As a farmer, I understand firsthand the need to spend money wisely. I also understand how to make the difficult decisions to cut expenses when my income comes up short. Chairwoman Stabenow, Senator Roberts, you are in the unenviable position of having to write a farm bill during challenging economic times. I appreciate Chairwoman Stabenow characterizing the Farm Bill as a jobs bill. Agriculture is economic development. It is also crucially important to the wellbeing of our nation.

This Farm Bill must maintain the vital areas of research, useable support mechanisms, rural development, conservation, and market access. Young farmers and ranchers are optimistic about their role in American Agriculture. I urge your committee to give them the stability they need from their government to continue to produce the safest, most abundant, most affordable supply of food, fuel, and fiber the world has ever known.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you and would be happy to take any questions.