Written Statement for the Record

Carl R. Mattson
President, George Mattson Farms Inc.
Chester, Montana

Strengthening Conservation through the 2012 Farm Bill

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Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman

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Carl Mattson

Senate Ag Committee Testimony

Thank you Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Roberts, Montana Senator Baucus and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today about something that is very important to me.

My name is Carl Mattson and I have farmed with my family near Chester, Montana my entire life. Today, our family members own and manage a successful, no-till, dry land wheat farm located near the Canadian border. Our success as a family farm can be attributed to our corresponding successes in the adoption of conservation practices.

The wind blows in Montana; always has. During the mid 1960's while in grade school I recall my school bus being sent home early due to blowing dust. Time to time as we bounced along the dirt road the driver would stop and wait for the dust to clear so he could see well enough to safely continue. Dust would sift through the loose-fitting slide-up windows eventually settling on the seats thick enough for us draw the # and play tic-tac-toe. Our son is 33, lives where I grew up and has never experienced dust events like that.

The implementation of conservation practices has a history of working.

While the most sensitive acres should remain and likely will remain in the Conservation Reserve Program, with economics prevailing, many acres in Montana, suitable for farming, will not be re-enrolled in CRP. These acres will be used to produce food. But we have to protect our original conservation investment. So, it's critical that farmers have the incentives and assistance that working land programs provide to farm these acres in an environmentally satisfactory way.

When we made the transition to no-till farming in the early 1990's we didn't realize we were sequestering carbon at the same time, no one did. Our experience has been that each conservation practice we adopt opens doors to additional possibilities. Adopting conservation practices; doing the right thing for the environment has helped our farm prosper.

The rewards of the no-till system have been both immediate and accumulative in nature. For instance, the adoption of no-till provided an immediate 33% per acre reduction in diesel fuel used over the previous year. This represents a reduction in cost that we have continued to realize for the past 19 years.

The addition of auto steer to our field machinery reduced and nearly eliminated overlaps. Prior to GPS guided auto steer, field operation experience taught us to calculate at least a 4 % overlap cost. With every GPS guided field activity employed, we now realize that 4% as a

reduction in costs plus we are able participate in the associated environmental benefits. The savings are especially rewarding with the high cost major operations such as planting, fertilizing, spraying, and harvesting.

The accumulative benefits are directly attributable to long term soil health. Over the years we have increased our soil organic matter and that in turn has increased our water holding capacity. More water directly translates to more wheat. In the absence of tillage earthworms now populate our fields. Their tunnels further aid the percolation of water deeper into the soil profile. The layer of residual plant material allowed to lie on the soil surface reduces evaporation. Water and soil erosion are all but eliminated thus preserving the valuable nutrients residing in the precious top soil. All wildlife has flourished but especially the birds choose to populate the standing stubble. These are but a few of the benefits.

We find ourselves standing at an important crossroads for US ag policy, especially for conservation programs. What we do here matters to U.S. farmers.

By 2050 our world will face the daunting prospect of having to increase food production by as much as 70 to 80 percent. While some of those gains will clearly be captured by developing farmers using technology and advancing their own farming practices, the reality is that much of the need will and must be met here, by U.S. farmers. We must not underestimate the importance of meeting this need. Food security is not just about feeding people it's about creating political stability, averting famine, mass migrations and preventing despair and disease worldwide.

For those of us meeting that need on American farms and ranches, we must ensure our ability to balance the competing demands of high productivity with the equally important need to maintain overall sustainability within our agricultural system. We must find ways to generate more with less without degrading soil and water quality or creating further losses to limited wildlife habitat. Just maintaining our current levels of conservation practices, frankly, may not be enough to meet the unprecedented requirements of feeding 9 billion people.

I suggest that investing now to enhance and protect our natural resource base is crop insurance for a nation; a prudent risk mitigation strategy initiated by this generation to feed the next.

EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program provide the incentive platform needed to assist farmers with the implementation of necessary conservation practices on working lands.

A frequently used word in farm business discussions today is sustainability. I can say that each and every conservation step we've taken on the Mattson farming operation has moved our farm towards being more sustainable. Like others we define sustainability to mean an operation that is economically viable, environmentally responsible and socially beneficial and

we understand that sustainability is a journey; not a destination it's an attitude motivating one to constantly strive to improve.

Sustainability is a relatively new word used to describe an evolving agricultural process that has existed in America since our nation was founded. With the help of lenders and universities we have developed the financial metrics necessary to measure the economical viability of a farm. With the help of the NRCS and others, we understand what is necessary and what it means to be environmentally responsible. Developing the metrics necessary to measure and define the social benefits of our individual farming operations will be the next step requiring farmer participation as we move forward on the sustainability journey.

Water limits wheat production on the Mattson farm. We transitioned to no-till farming to conserve more water and to protect the soil surface from the ravages of wind and water erosion. We aggressively pursued the adoption of no-till farming and precision agriculture techniques. Pioneering these practices in our state placed us in a position to be awarded the Montana's first Conservation Security Program contract. We are proud of that accomplishment.

To strengthen conservation in the next farm bill vigilance is needed to ensure that we do not create perverse incentives that lead to unintended consequences and present moral hazards.

Accompanying each new conservation practice is a required learning curve and the necessity to adapt that practice to a particular locale. "Early Adopters" are visionaries who tend to understand the potential of a practice, long before others. "Early Adopters" are the human vehicles that provide the local knowledge necessary for the fast, efficient, large scale adoption of each new conservation practice by others. Our capacity to meet the future will require significant breakthroughs in conservation practices.

We must create an atmosphere where innovators are encouraged to innovate.

Top down government regulation such as the Endangered Species Act, discourages innovation, and limits our producers' ability to keep working lands working. As a nation, we must find innovative ways to replace burdensome regulation with proactive voluntary approaches that provide win-win solutions for both agriculture and wildlife.

USDA's Sage Grouse Initiative provides a roadmap for this type of innovation that could be replicated throughout the country. Through the Sage Grouse Initiative, NRCS is orchestrating a paradigm shift in at-risk species conservation by replacing undo regulatory burdens with voluntary incentive-based approaches that mutually benefit agriculture and wildlife.

The key to the Initiative's success is a shared vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching—what's good for ranching is good for wildlife—with SGI, both agriculture and wildlife win. Ranchers and their partners have rallied around this innovative concept, and in just two short years the results are rolling in—conserving land, reducing sage grouse mortality and boosting both livestock and grouse productivity. Specific examples include:

- Conservation easements were secured on 208,000 acres to maintain large and intact working ranches in some of the highest sage-grouse abundance areas of the West. Easements reduce the threat of fragmentation, the overarching reason for a potential listing under the Endangered Species Act.

- Ranchers have implemented grazing systems on 1.3 million acres of large and intact sagebrush to increase hiding cover for nesting birds. Additional grass cover is expected to improve rangeland productivity while increasing sage-grouse populations by 8 to 10 percent.

I especially appreciate the difficult choices this body made during the budget negotiations of 2011 and the hard work you did to ensure a balanced approach to conservation's role in U.S. agriculture even in a time of competing pressures and difficult choices.

In closing, I stress that American agricultural producers like me care about conservation and are committed to enhancing the working lands and rural communities that provide our food and fiber. Innovative, flexible, and voluntary approaches are the foundation on which we reaffirm our ongoing commitment to food production and natural resource conservation in the future.

Thank you.