

TESTIMONY OF DEAN STOSKOPF
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY
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WASHINGTON D.C.

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Roberts and Members of the Committee: Thank you for allowing me to present a central Kansas view of the Conservation Programs and their role in the 2012 Farm Bill.

My name is Dean Stoskopf. My wife and I own and operate a diversified dryland family farm near Hoisington, Kansas. We raise wheat, grain sorghum, alfalfa and forages. We also have a 125-head Red Angus cow-calf herd.

Conservation has been a significant priority on our farm. My parents were married during the Dust Bowl in 1938. They planted shelterbelts and windbreaks and watered the trees using horses and wagons. In the 1950's, they received the Kansas Bankers County Conservation Award for their soil and water conservation efforts. My wife's parents received the same award for their conservation work in north central Kansas. To bring conservation full circle, my wife and I were recognized for our own conservation efforts with the same Bankers Conservation award in 1996.

As farmers, our goal is to leave our land in better condition than we found it. For me personally, it is to leave the land better for the 5th generation of our family to farm. To me, this defines sustainability -- the ability to farm the same land for multiple generations with each generation contributing to the success of future generations.

Today's hearing is titled, "Strengthening Conservation through the 2012 Farm Bill." Considering ever-increasing budgetary pressures, this will be a challenging goal. As I begin my testimony, I think it is important to share a quick word on the success of our current conservation programs and the conservation efforts of America's farmers. The Great Plains saw the worst drought of my lifetime in 2011. The twelve months from October 2010 to September 2011 represented the driest year on record. By the end of the summer, all but five of Kansas' 105 counties were under a drought declaration and although Kansas farmer's sustained 1.7 billion dollars in economic losses, we didn't see the devastation of our natural resources that occurred in dust bowl days of the 1930's – despite hotter, and drier weather.

After talking with many of my fellow producers, I would like to share the following guidelines that I believe will allow our conservation programs to continue the legacy of success they have built.

1. Keep programs simple.
2. Keep programs local.
3. Keep the staff of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service as friends and advisors to farmers, not enforcement agents for the federal government.

Keep conservation simple: Currently, there are too many programs with similar objectives. In the 1970s and 1980s, we used the Great Plains Conservation Program. That program used an approach that provided numerous options to improve the soil and water quality of our farm. This flexible approach worked well. We could use the options that made sense for us to implement on our own farm.

A major component of simplifying programs is the consolidation of programs. Already there are proposals before you to combine existing programs into three core programs; working lands, land retirement and land easement programs. Reducing complexity should reduce the overhead associated with administering dozens of different programs and allow program dollars to reach their intended purpose. This will help NRCS Chief David White in his goal of putting boots on the ground.

Within those groups, I see several areas for potential improvement of conservation programs. In working lands, I believe EQIP has largely become the workhorse in my mind. Working lands programs should be designed to enhance land, while improving soil, water and wildlife habitat quality. EQIP offers producers a wide range of options and practices and results in many successful partnerships. One program I am concerned doesn't offer the same level of benefits for our investment is the Conservation Stewardship Program. Although it is intended to be a comprehensive approach to conservation with payments made for implementing specific practices, I see compliance issues that lead to mistrust and dollars being spent without the same level of benefit of other programs.

The Conservation Reserve Program remains our premier land retirement program. In Kansas we have 2.53 million acres enrolled. Major drought years like 2011 serve as excellent reminders of the value of CRP. It provides vegetative cover in droughts, holds fragile soil in place and also provides a much needed cushion in the form of emergency haying and grazing to provide additional forage resources for strained cattle herds. In Kansas last year, nearly 60,000 acres were hayed and more than 200,000 acres were grazed under the emergency provisions of the CRP. The drought remained devastating, but this program provided some much needed relief. I do see several potential areas for improvement with regard to CRP's ability to mitigate the effects of a major drought.

- 1) Allow hay harvested from CRP land under an emergency declaration to be sold. Land enrolled in CRP can be leased to another producer for grazing purposes, but under current regulations, hay taken under the emergency haying provisions can't be sold. This regulation often prevents one producer who may not have cattle from being able to provide hay to another who does.

- 2) Expand emergency haying and grazing operations beyond the disaster declared counties. When a county has been released to start emergency haying and grazing operations, they are already experiencing an extreme drought. Although the limited forage produced by the drought-stricken land is no doubt beneficial, allowing neighboring counties that aren't as drought-stricken to perform emergency haying and grazing operations could greatly increase the amount of forage available. This

policy would truly be established for one producer, with the blessings of rain to be able to help another that is impacted by drought.

3) Examine procedures for releasing counties for emergency haying and grazing. The current provisions for releasing a county work well when the severe weather is limited to a small area, but it is too cumbersome a process for a drought as large as the one in 2011. There is a need to release counties more quickly and in a fashion that clearly lets producers know and plan for their release. I suggest providing additional latitude to the State FSA committee to release larger areas.

4) Allow the State FSA committee to determine which CRP practices are eligible for managed and emergency grazing. Local and state entities are in the best position to make decisions regarding practices on CRP acres. For example, in Kansas Conservation Reserve Program land enrolled under the CP-25 "Rare and Declining Habitat" provision is planted to native grass. Native grassland in Kansas was grazed historically and grazing provides significant benefits to the land enrolled in CP-25 contracts, just as it does in other grass-based CRP contracts where grazing is allowed. Land enrolled in this particular program varies from one region of the nation to another. In only a few states are CP-25 contracts grasslands, meaning this isn't a widespread need, but it is an example of an area that greater local control could yield great benefits. CP-25 contracts comprise 29% of CRP land in Kansas.

The Conservation Reserve Program Continuous sign up has also yielded tremendous environmental benefits and is an example of prudent use of available dollars. It simply makes more sense to expand the enrollment of highly sensitive areas of land, typically in smaller tracts such as buffers, filters or strips that improve the soil, water and wildlife habitat quality.

Keep conservation local: Every region of the country has different conservation needs and require locally tailored solutions. The challenges farmers face in the Corn Belt are different than the challenges farmers face in the South, and practices that work well in the Pacific Northwest may not apply to the arid Great Plains. Farmers working with their local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service staff are best able to develop solutions that will work for their area.

The theme of keeping programs local should especially be applied to working lands programs. They should be administered as locally as possible, and no higher than the state level. Local landowners, tenants, and advisors have a much better understanding of the needs in their area, as well as the solutions that will work.

National initiatives, especially those that require a state to dedicate a certain portion of their budget to a particular initiative should be avoided. Management from Washington, D.C. rarely works. I disagree with any approach to apply conservation initiatives at the national level. Our state staffs, along with the state committees work day to day with the challenges we face. I believe they do an excellent job of setting priorities and making programs work in the field.

Advice and support vs. enforcement: The USDA Natural Conservation Resource Service staff and the staff of the local Conservation District have always been technical consultants and advisors, working cooperatively with local farmers to find solutions and advance conservation. As farmers, we trust those advisors to help us improve the soil and water quality on our farms, which has always been the goal of conservation programs. If the Natural Resources Conservation Service becomes an enforcement agency, that trust will be lost, along with the cooperation.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your committee today for taking my views and opinions into consideration as you deliberate on the Conservation title of the 2012 Farm Bill.

Cooperation between agricultural producers and the government has created a legacy of positive conservation efforts in this vast country. Together, we can continue this legacy for future generations.