

Testimony of Brent Bible
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
June 24, 2020

Thank you Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Senator Braun and all the Members of this Committee for the invitation to testify before you today. I am honored to share with you my perspective on the Growing Climate Solutions Act and how this legislation can benefit both the economic health of my farm and the environmental health of the landscape around me.

As a first-generation farmer I see myself as a typical, but vital part of the food supply chain. My business partner and I operate Stillwater Farms, growing corn and soybeans for seed production, ethanol, and food products on over 5,000 acres across three counties in west central Indiana. I am also a member of the Indiana Corn Growers Association and the Indiana Farm Bureau; I appreciate their support for farmers and for the work we are trying to accomplish today.

I also see our farm as a significant piece of the climate puzzle for the wellbeing of my community, state and country.

Conservation practices have a central place on our farm. We value the environmental benefits these practices provide, as well as the economic benefits they deliver for our business.

We use precision center pivot irrigation on nearly one-fifth of our acres to reduce water consumption, and we use no-till or minimum till management practices and cover crops on one-fourth of our acres to enhance soil health and productivity. Our strategy is to make management decisions for each individual farm that maximizes the economic and environmental return on investment on a field by field basis.

Farming is my passion, but it's also my business. And that business has become increasingly challenging recently. As a graduate of Purdue University with a degree in Agriculture Economics, my decision making process is driven by data, and there are multiple data points that support the challenges production agriculture has faced the last 2 years.

Farmers in the U.S. have faced trade wars that have wiped out demand for our product, extreme weather events like the heavy precipitation we saw in 2019, and supply chain disruptions like the ethanol facility and meat plant closures we're seeing this year from COVID-19. We appreciate everything that this Committee has done to help us and value your work to bring us out of these tough times.

However, it's become clear to me and many of my peers that, as farmers, we need to create additional economic opportunities and improve the resiliency of our farms and of agriculture as a whole. To better weather these external shocks, farmers like me need support to expand adoption of resilient farming practices.

That's where greenhouse gas markets, like the ones that the *Growing Climate Solutions Act* enables, have real potential to boost both economic and environmental resilience.

Many farmers already use conservation practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase landscape resilience to climate impacts we can't avoid. But adoption of many of those practices still lags behind what it could be, and farms' financial challenges are one reason why.

With the *Growing Climate Solutions Act*, these same conservation practices would also generate a valued commodity that could be sold to companies that want to offset impacts from their operations. On the farm, steady and diversified revenue streams would help smooth the ups and downs of the commodity markets and keep us in business.

In the markets for agriculture carbon offsets created to date, the cost and complexity of certifying credits has often outweighed the benefits of the credits themselves, preventing many farmers from participating in carbon markets. A 2018 paper published by the Environmental Defense Fund recommended that policy makers should focus on streamlining transaction costs as a first step to overcoming barriers to agriculture carbon markets.¹ That streamlining could happen, thanks to this bill.

The *Growing Climate Solutions Act* would simplify and standardize the certification process for generating environmental credits and help farmers realize greater returns on their investments in credit-worthy practices.

Right now, farmers interested in participating in the private market for environmental credits lack credible information on trusted sources for verification and technical assistance, both of which are crucial to enable farmers' participation.

This bill would create a pool of USDA-certified third-party verifiers and technical assistance providers to assist farmers in accessing voluntary environmental markets. USDA would also establish and maintain a list of existing standards and protocols that

¹ Proville, J., Parkhurst, R. T., Koller, S., Kroopf, S., Baker, J., & Salas, W. A. (2018, August 28). Agricultural Offset Potential in the United States: Economic and Geospatial Insights. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/zea8g>

farmers could choose from to get started. This important first step will provide legitimacy to the voluntary markets and offer comfort and transparency to participants.

Once standards and protocols are set, farmers can voluntarily contract with private sector certifiers, get their operations certified and then sell credits into existing markets.

Selling environmental benefits will create additional and diversified revenue streams for farmers like me. In addition, many of these same practices build the soil health of my farm, conferring resilience to my crop yields during poor weather years. These benefits are vitally important to me and my business, but conservation practices also positively impact my neighbors. The free-market, voluntary structure established by this Act will economically incentivize farmers rather than mandate action, and ultimately result in higher rates of adoption.

Agricultural landscapes are critical for helping entire communities address climate impacts. Conservation practices can slow, filter and strategically direct water runoff during heavy rains. This can reduce flood risk for downstream communities, protect water quality and recharge groundwater. Precision technology can facilitate less fertilizer and chemical use, and result in direct economic savings in addition to environmental benefits.

Maintaining or restoring wetlands and adding more perennial plants to my farmland will help store carbon and help prevent the worst effects of climate change. It can also enhance rural landscapes with other benefits for wildlife conservation, recreation and hunting.

Finally, it's important to note that access to broadband is essential to tackling climate change. Widespread use of precision technology and real-time data on crops and nutrients depends on universal broadband in rural and agricultural areas. Farmers want to engage and be part of the solution, but they need the tools and internet infrastructure to be successful. Our local Rural Electric Cooperative, for which I serve as on the Board of Directors, is currently investing over \$100 million to provide this broadband service to our membership, but we need continued policy and financial support to make this type of service widely available.

Farmers are on the frontlines of climate impacts we're already seeing today. Climate impacts like heavier, more variable rainfall and shorter planting windows have a direct, adverse impact on farm operations. Farmers see these changes and want to make our farms as resilient as possible so they survive for generations to come.

Agriculture has a tremendous opportunity to lead by example with impactful, common sense climate solutions. Farmers are vital partners in stabilizing the climate and increasing resilience to climate impacts we can't avoid.

This bill makes it easier for farmers to benefit from being part of the climate solution by ensuring climate-smart agriculture practices are economically viable and opening the door for farmers to engage in voluntary greenhouse gas marketplaces.

I submit that we will soon realize that a positive return on investment and environmentally beneficial are not mutually exclusive outcomes, but rather are complementary results. In fact, the *Growing Climate Solutions Act* is strongly supported by both agriculture and environmental organizations because the bill allows farmers to help reduce their own impact on the climate while providing income during tough times like we face now.

I would like to see this Committee fully support the Growing Climate Solutions Act and pass this bill into law. It doesn't matter if you pass it by itself or part of a larger package of bills. But farmers need your help so they can do their part to mitigate climate change and make our world a better place.

Thank you