

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Hearing: *The Agricultural Act of 2014 implementation after one year*
Testimony of Michael DeRuiter, Michigan fruit grower
February 24, 2015
9:30 a.m.

Thank you, Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow for the kind introduction, and I thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today.

I'm Michael DeRuiter, a specialty crop farmer from Hart, Michigan. I'm pleased to be here today to support the committee's work on the Farm Bill, which has had a big impact on my farm and the farms in our region of the state.

On our farm we raise approximately 1,000 acres of tart cherries, apples and peaches. We also have a processing facility, where we process cherries in July and August. I'm a third generation farmer and my wife Amanda and I are raising what we hope will be the fourth generation to farm our land.

I farm with my brother and father on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan—what may be the largest, most diverse specialty crop region in the state. We grow mostly tree fruit; however the neighbors around me grow a lot of vegetables including asparagus, squash, onions, carrots and pumpkins to name a few.

I'd like to briefly share with you how the Agricultural Act of 2014 has been impactful not only to my farm, but to Michigan as a whole. While there are many critical programs in the bill that help our industry, I'd like to focus on a few specific areas: conservation, research, nutrition, and crop insurance.

Conservation: Farming in western Michigan, with so much water all around us, conservation is an important consideration. For our farm to be economically viable for the next generation, we must think about sustainability, soil health and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programs on a daily basis. Our family believes strongly that we need to leave our farm in better shape than when we started. To that end, our farm is verified in the Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program, or MAEAP. MAEAP verification requires having a third-party auditor inspect our farm to verify that we are following good agricultural practices, and that we participate in conservation programs that help improve soil health and protect the environment. Today our orchards are all no-till systems to protect our soils from run-off and nutrient movement.

MAEAP is an important, voluntary program in Michigan that continues to grow, but it wouldn't work without NRCS programs that assist farms with technical and financial

assistance to build and pay for chemical containment systems, storage facilities, fueling pads and other similar projects. NRCS today has a unique partnership with state agencies and conservation districts that helps farmers implement lasting conservation practices.

Research is also vital to our farm and Michigan agriculture as a whole. New technology and programs to reduce pesticide use and enhance IPM are critical. Funding available through the Specialty Crop Research Initiative has helped us move all specialty crop research forward. I want to highlight one project: RosBREED I, a \$14 million program under the last Farm Bill that provided the research framework for the apple, peach, cherry, blueberry and strawberry industries to map the genome in Rosaceae. This project brought together breeders from all over the world to develop and identify the genetic markers for fruit quality, and led to the RosBREED II proposal, funded last year for another \$10 million. RosBREED II will focus on cherry leaf spot and Armillaria, two key disease threats in the cherry industry. Cherry leaf spot control costs our farm thousands of dollars every year. Armillaria lives in the soil and over time we will not be able to replant our cherry orchards unless we can develop resistant varieties. The Specialty Crop Research Initiative has been critical, promoting collaboration across state lines and around the world to address key researchable problems. There is no other funding source to address these issues today.

Nutrition: Michigan is one of the eight pilot states for a new school-food pilot program exploring local sourcing. This is a very big deal for specialty crop growers. Finding new ways to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to our nation's schools is a very good idea. The pilot program will redefine how schools work with local farms, vendors and shippers to decrease food transportation costs. It will also allow the government to streamline the buying process and get more locally grown fruits and vegetables into our schools. Our state is pleased to be part of the pilot, providing buying flexibility while supporting local farmers and processors. I can't leave this topic without also talking about the bonus procurements from USDA and how it helps farmers remove surplus product from the market and get it into the hands of needy families. Specialty crop industries across the nation have benefited tremendously from the program.

Crop Insurance/Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP): Crop insurance for specialty crops is of vital importance. For several years in our area you could buy crop insurance for apples and peaches but not cherries. In 2014, for the first time ever, a tart cherry policy became available to all growers. While NAP is an important option for farmers, we also needed a broader risk management tool like crop insurance, which covers for multiple perils, beyond disasters. We purchased crop insurance last year and, while we had a nice crop, growers in southwestern Michigan

suffered a wind storm on June 2nd that ruined most of their crop. Those growers are working with their crop insurance adjusters to recuperate the damage from that storm. This is a good news story for cherry growers, and as a young farmer it is vital that there is support for programs like this. Specialty crops are high-value crops with high input costs. We need programs to help mitigate the risk so that young farmers don't go broke because of one adverse weather event.

NAP is also very important, and the new buy-up policy is a great tool for smaller farms and other non-insured crops. The policy implemented in the new Farm Bill provides better coverage for farmers and is a step in the right direction for those farms that don't have crop insurance today.

The new Farm Bill is an important tool for my farm and the many, diverse farms across western Michigan. Thank you again for the opportunity to join you here today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.