

**‘Conservation in the Farm Bill: Making Conservation Programs Work for Farmers and Ranchers’
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry, And Natural Resources
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Thank you to the Honorable Michael Bennet and Roger Marshall for holding this important hearing. Thank you for inviting me to share my story and bring the young farmer perspective to this conversation.

My name is Joseluis M. Ortiz y Muniz and I am an Indigenous, land-based, native New Mexican from the Genizaro land grants of La Merced de Santo Tomás El Apostol del Rio de Las Trampas and La Merced de San Antonio del Embudo. I am a father, mayordomo, professor, member of the National Young Farmers Coalition, and community liaison. I currently live in Northern New Mexico with my partner, where we grow garlic, medicinal herbs, and other vegetables, and care for a variety of animals on my ancestral lands.

I come from a family of farmers: my maternal grandparents farmed more than 25 acres of vegetables from the 1960s to the 1980s, and my paternal grandfather farmed nearly 80 acres of pasture grass from the 1970s to the early 2000s. When they passed on, maintaining an agricultural lifestyle for my parents became impossible and they were forced to find jobs away from our traditional village. As is the case for many of the people who are traditionally from Northern New Mexico, young people often leave in search of a more promising future in the city. I too left, hoping to find a calling in corporate America and quickly learned that it was not for me. Unfortunately, I was impacted by the opioid crisis facing our country today, and had it not been for a peer-to-peer farmer training program championed by organic farmer Don Bustos, I likely would have found myself in jail, homeless, or even dead. This training program, along with programs at a local nonprofit called Los Jardines Institute, that focused on environmental justice, and historical literacy, compelled me to quit using opiates and return home to reconnect to my ancestral land-based traditions.

Returning home was not easy. I no longer had access to the land my family leased for decades, despite 90% of land in the area being fallow, and I didn't have a home to live in. Despite many homes being boarded up and empty, I didn't have the infrastructure or tools that many farming families have, and most importantly I didn't have a thriving agricultural community and economy that would support a successful return home to the land.

Before returning home, I stewarded land-based projects for a decade in Albuquerque that serve under-resourced and disadvantaged communities. For many years I worked with formerly incarcerated individuals to create pathways to healing and to success through land-based and traditional ways of living with modalities rooted in the understanding that culture heals, or “*La Cultura Cura.*” When I first

returned back home to Northern New Mexico, I began working with another farmer to revitalize the land-based learning center at Northern New Mexico College called Sostenga. Together, we revitalized the dilapidated land, putting 2.5 acres into production for student demonstrations, and teaching the community how to grow food. We have also been building a training center to teach agriculture as a viable career pathway.

At Northern New Mexico College, I serve as the Farm Director and Research Professor, where I have developed a farm for students and the community to learn. To date, we have grown over 20,000 pounds of food, which we distributed to the community, including students and neighbors. Many of the students in our school are food insecure, so I also created a hunger task force, La Dispensa del Barrio, to provide produce from the farm to students in need.

I also serve as the Mayordomo for my *acequia*, serving over 120 land and water owners. *Acequias* are ancient irrigation canals that were dug by my ancestors hundreds, and some even thousands of years ago. They are a type of democratic community self-governance system that, at its core, values principles such as “you reap what you sow,” or “everyone has a voice.” These principles help guide our community’s ability to thrive in an environment that under natural circumstances would be impossible. My job is to manage the distribution of our sacred water resource and the maintenance of our almost four miles of *acequia* infrastructure. A Mayordomo's job has changed a lot in recent years due to the unpredictable effects of climate change. What once was a thriving viable water source, our river, the Embudo River, has transformed into a creek. In times of great drought, our community has to rely on non-traditional methods of sourcing water, which can mean leaving land fallow, planting more drought-tolerant and less irrigated grasses for animal feed, and we are sometimes forced to share the available water with other irrigators, causing community stress and trauma. We are literally planning for a near future where surface irrigation might become a footnote in history along with our *acequia* culture and traditional lifeways.

When we do get rain, it can come in the form of flooding. In 2022, Northern New Mexico responded to three 200-year floods that occurred as a consequence of an intense monsoon season. And during the summer of 2022, New Mexico faced the largest wildfire in our state history, the Calf Canyon and Hermit's Peak fire. Because thousands of acres of forest and surrounding lands were burned, destroying numerous farms and ranches, the resulting runoff and flooding have wreaked havoc. The forests are no longer able to retain water as well, and when the rain comes, it runs downstream quickly.

Because of this, many of our community *acequias* have been destroyed and reconfigured. Almost a year later, we are still rebuilding our *acequia* infrastructure so that producers can irrigate. We believe that conservation programs that focus on soil health, infrastructure, and the development of the next generation of farmers are the only way to authentically prepare for an uncertain future. These programs can ease the burden and stress of watershed mismanagement, failing infrastructure, and a generation of new farmers that do not fully understand the difficulties that lay ahead for farmers and land-based peoples. This is why we must commit to providing an all-hands-on-deck approach inclusive of all communities, all sectors, and all technologies while placing conservation, preservation, and outreach services at the center of our work.

As a community leader, I work closely with farmers and aspiring farmers by providing farm training and technical assistance, helping people apply for and implement Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. I am not paid to do this work and instead, I take it on because there are gaps in the delivery of NRCS programs. If I was not helping producers apply, no one would and these producers would be left behind. Part of my work is helping identify what NRCS programs would be a good fit for folks to apply for, especially the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). I have seen firsthand the benefits that NRCS conservation programs can have for farmers, however, there are many barriers to accessing these programs, especially for disadvantaged communities. I work with a lot of traditional land-based communities, and one of the biggest barriers they face is not knowing that these programs are for them or how to access these resources.

I've done a lot of outreach and identified people who would be excellent candidates for certain USDA programs, and when I send them the application, I'm often met with confusion or refusal. It's difficult to understand the complexities that go into submitting an application: driving to your local NRCS office to receive an application or accessing them online, deciphering the questions in English (and sometimes Spanish), and making sense of the technical language and jargon. NRCS currently has a very hands-off approach, where, in my experience, there is no one to sit down and walk you through the application and help you fill it out. Therefore, NRCS needs to focus on securing more staff in local offices that can dedicate their time to helping farmers access the programs that are available. And if NRCS cannot build its capacity, they need to look to partners, technical service providers, or peer-to-peer opportunities for assistance in program delivery.

Through the National Young Farmers Coalition's network, young farmers and ranchers have identified two key barriers to accessing EQIP funding. The first issue is farm size. Research has shown that large farms are more likely to receive payments than small farms, even though small-acreage farms have an important role to play in protecting natural resources, improving water quality, and improving wildlife habitat. The second major barrier the Young Farmers network has identified is difficult application processes. As mentioned above, these applications are complicated and NRCS staff often do not have the time and resources to help new farmers navigate these processes. Conservation plans and applications usually require the same amount of time to complete for both small farms and large farms, but small farms do not have the same capacity or resources, and NRCS usually prioritizes projects based on acreage. I recommend that NRCS create a scaled-down version of EQIP, one that can help small farms and young farmers access EQIP funding much more easily. Investing in conservation and traditional ecological knowledge/research can help protect our natural resources and ensure the long-term success and resilience of our farms. By creating a small farm EQIP program, USDA could meet the needs of small farms through dedicated funding and a simplified application process.

Another way that USDA and NRCS could improve programs and ensure that more people, like those that I work with, can actually use these programs is by having culturally competent technical assistance paired with adequate outreach that harness peer-to-peer farmer networks and community-based organizations. This could look like hiring and compensating people from the surrounding community who understand *acequias* and local community needs who can step in to provide the same support that I am currently providing to my community. These people can help identify farmers to apply for programs, help people

fill out applications, and serve as a true agency resource for farmers. The role of a farmer should be to grow food, not fill out paperwork. According to a 2022 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition, nearly three-quarters of young farmers do not know that there are USDA programs to assist them. And according to a recent survey from the American Farmland Trust New England, they found that more than half of farmer respondents were getting their technical assistance and other education directly from farmers they know (compared with 20% from NRCS). Equitable and culturally appropriate outreach to young and Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color, in addition to simple and streamlined application processes, would help more farmers benefit from the programs that are there to help them.

Thank you for listening to my story and for working to support so many other farmers like me.