

Testimony of

Jeff Rutledge

**Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources**

**Conservation in the Farm Bill: Making Conservation Programs Work for
Farmers and Ranchers**

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Good morning, Chairman Bennet, Ranking Member Marshall, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and the opportunity to testify on my perspectives of voluntary Farm Bill conservation programs.

My name is Jeff Rutledge, and I am a fifth-generation rice, corn, and soybean farmer from Newport, Arkansas. I am actively involved in two organizations that are leaders in the conservation arena, USA Rice and Ducks Unlimited.

As the global advocate for all segments of the U.S. rice industry, USA Rice's mission is to ensure the health and vitality of a unified U.S. rice industry by advocating on behalf of farmers, millers, merchants, and allied businesses. Rice farmers harvest roughly 20 billion pounds of rice grown on 2.8 million acres of sustainably managed farmland annually. The rice not consumed domestically – roughly 50 percent of the crop in most years – is exported to more than 120 countries around the globe. Nearly 80 percent of the rice consumed in the U.S. is grown on family farms in Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas.

Every day, the U.S. rice industry strives to meet the demands of growing populations while increasing resource efficiencies at every level of the supply chain. The rice community is invested in using sustainable production and processing practices because it is personal to us. Our stewardship is deliberate, ensuring a healthy, safe food supply, while improving the environment, and contributing to the local economy.

I am proud to serve on the USA Rice Federation Board of Directors, USA Rice Farmers Board of Directors and Conservation Committee, as vice chairman of the USA Rice Council, and also as member of the USA Rice-Ducks Unlimited Rice Stewardship Partnership Committee. I am also active with the Arkansas Rice Federation, Arkansas Rice Council, Arkansas Ag Council, Arkansas Waterways Commission, Arkansas Rice Research and Promotion Board, and the AgHeritage Farm Credit Association. I have also served in various capacities with Farm Bureau at the county, state, and national levels, and previously served on the U.S. Grains Council and as a member of my local school board.

As a farmer, I'm proud to live and sustainably manage land at the nexus of production agriculture and conservation. In addition to rice and the other crops I produce, we are proud to provide critical habitat to hundreds of species of wildlife, particularly migratory waterfowl, namely ducks. As a member of Ducks Unlimited, I am extremely proud of the work this organization does.

Ducks Unlimited (DU) was established in 1937 amid the Dust Bowl drought and the Great Depression. Founded by people who understood the value of wetland resources and bolstered by the passage of the first federal duck stamp in 1934, DU has become the premier organization for wetlands and waterfowl conservation with a mission to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl, other wildlife, and people. To date, DU has conserved more than 15-million acres across the continent focusing heavily on the priority landscapes for waterfowl populations, while conserving habitat in all 50 states, every Canadian province and Mexico. DU has more than 1 million members and supporters across the U.S., with a strong concentration of members and chapters in the U.S. rice growing states.

Rice fields throughout the rice-growing regions not only provide \$3.5 billion in migratory waterfowl habitat, but also contribute to substantial biodiversity, ranging from crawfish and yellow rails along the Gulf Coast to a successful NRCS supported pilot program in California that uses flooded rice fields as salmon nurseries.

Farm Bill conservation programs are important to the U.S. rice industry and its voluntary, incentive-based, locally-led model is critical to widespread adoption of conservation practices by rice farmers. Conservation programs should have the dual goal of not only incentivizing environmentally beneficial practices but also helping producers transition to conservation systems that promote productivity and economic viability as compatible goals while supporting the rural economy.

Working Lands Programs

Throughout rural America, working lands programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) serve as economic drivers. It takes more than just one farmer to complete the work needed to implement an EQIP or CSP contract. Consider the outside technicians, engineers, and local soil and water conservation districts needed to help oversee the conservation planning, as well as the scientists, the land movers, and other equipment necessary to implement these conservation practices.

Nationwide – and in Arkansas specifically – the demand for EQIP and CSP has outpaced funding by approximately 3:1. Over the past five years in Arkansas, the average demand for EQIP funds has been \$155 million while the State’s average funding allocation has only been \$49 million. This has resulted in unmet demand of \$106 million each year for the State’s producers. Likewise, the State’s unmet demand for CSP funds has averaged at \$99 million over the past five years due to the state having a funding allocation of only \$25 million but a demand of \$124 million.

As you write the 2023 Farm Bill, Congress should strengthen working lands programs, like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

EQIP is a vital tool because it is a straightforward program with an extensive list of practices that works for all regions and all production systems. EQIP’s broad suite of structural and management practices can help better manage water resources, help with irrigation efficiency, reduce soil erosion, improve soil health, and enhance water quality.

CSP helps to target specific resources using several complementary practices and has been a great tool for rice farmers to pay for expensive long-term management practices and increase conservation work across the entire farm. Congress should ensure the Conservation Stewardship Program continues to acknowledge early adopters while also incentivizing incremental conservation goals through programs. Many rice farmers are struggling to find options within the program that reflect the advancements in technology and workable systems to improve soil health. We encourage Congress to work within the Farm Bill to ensure that the program is

offering options that reflect the state of technology and facilitate continued improvement in conservation for rice producers.

However, Congress should be careful not to prioritize one natural resource concern over others. Voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs are popular because farmers have a suite of choices and can adopt conservation practices that most benefit their operation and their region. For example, the rice industry, working with USDA, has made significant investments in conserving the flyways. An essential piece of that strategy is winter flooding, which should be recognized for the many benefits it provides. Winter flooding is an EQIP and CSP wildlife practice that provides moist-soil wetlands in rice fields and attracts a significant number of ducks in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and the Central Valley/Coastal California.

Furthermore, Congress should not prioritize one solution over others. Because rice is a unique cropping system and a 100 percent irrigated crop, conservation programs should not provide one-size-fits-all solutions. For instance, focusing solely on a practice like cover cropping that most rice farmers cannot utilize would be inequitable for rice farmers. Similarly, a farmer in the Dakotas would not utilize post-harvest flooding as a practice option. That's why solutions should be locally led and support local priorities.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

I must also mention the importance of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). As you may know, the rice industry's symbiotic relationship with waterfowl led to a historic partnership with Ducks Unlimited, called the Rice Stewardship Partnership (RSP) founded in 2013 and is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. While we both have separate missions and methods, we have managed to collaborate and develop goals for our Partnership, including work on RCPP.

The Rice Stewardship Partnership's RCPP projects have pulled together nearly one hundred diverse partners to help implement their goals, communicate successes, and ultimately share the cost of investment in working lands conservation programs. The Rice Stewardship Partnership has had phenomenal success in delivering on the ground conservation to rice farmers. Since the creation of RCPP in the 2014 Farm Bill, the RSP has beneficially impacted over 800,000 acres of rice and rice rotation ground and provided over \$108 million in additional conservation funding.

For the 2023 Farm Bill, USA Rice and Ducks Unlimited would note the complexity plaguing RCPP since the 2018 Farm Bill is affecting the long-term viability of a crucial partnership program to rice farmers. Congress should work to address barriers for partners including the overly detailed and complicated application process, multiple layered agreements, the length of time it takes to finalize an agreement, and how technical assistance is accounted for. Simplifying RCPP will help deliver more timely assistance to producers. While administrative barriers can present unnecessary obstacles and costs for partners, we ask Congress to provide thoughtful and minimal solutions that allow the program to successfully function as it has for nearly a decade.

Conclusion

Rice farmers are passionate conservationists. They invest their own financial resources to bring these Farm Bill conservation programs to their farm. USA Rice has formed partnerships with conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited and the private sector to expand the conservation opportunities and produce rice that benefits the soil, water, and wildlife resources as well as our local communities. However, none of these historic producer investments in conservation can happen if the farm is not profitable. I urge Congress to ensure all producers have the safety-net to continue to be sustainable both economically as well as environmentally.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my perspectives on the Farm Bill conservation programs.