

Testimony of Cori Wittman Stitt
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Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman 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 climate change opportunities for the agricultural sector.

As a fourth-generation farmer, raising a seven-month-old, fifth-generation farmer, we continually operate with the future in mind. Climate change is one of the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the future of our industry. We in agriculture like to boast that we are the best stewards of the land, but that also means we have the most to lose should we ignore the erratic weather conditions and growing consumer concern about the impacts of climate change. These current realities make it imperative that we find solutions that ensure climate-smart, sustainable food production.

Our goal as a family farm is to provide food and fiber to America and the world in a sustainable fashion. We are a diversified crop, cattle and timber operation covering approximately 18,000 acres just outside of Lewiston, Idaho. Our crop rotation includes wheat, barley, peas, lentils, chickpeas, canola, mustard and flax. If it grows, we've probably tried it. We also run about 350 head of cattle on about 9,000 acres of managed pasture and timber ground. We do this with a lean team of three partners — my cousin Todd Wittman, brother-in-law Tom Conklin and myself — as well as three full-time employees, including my husband, another cousin and a “like-family” employee.

Our farm has the potential to be a significant contributor to the climate solution. Proven conservation practices like no-till farming, diverse crop rotations that decrease reliance on chemicals and fertilizer, and cover cropping have long held 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 farm a combination of owned and leased farm ground. Our landlords, including the Nez Perce Tribe, share our interest in farming practices that ensure environmental and economic sustainability over multiple generations. We work closely with the Nez Perce County Soil and Water Conservation District on projects that protect streams, reduce erosion from farm access roads and protect from gully erosion, and we work closely with Environmental Defense Fund on strategies to scale agricultural climate solutions.

Farming is not an easy profession, and profitability can be an elusive goal. Regardless, we balance daily decision-making with the long-term implications of the farming strategies we pursue today. That is why my Dad and his partners made the decision

over 30 years ago to convert to no-till. It was a decision based on topography and soil quality; the steep terrain of northern Idaho is incredibly prone to erosion. No-till has paid dividends in reduced wind and water erosion and increased organic matter. Today, our soils are more resilient to weather extremes, less prone to disease and offer increased profit potential.

As natural resource stewards, we are on the frontline of impacts from a changing climate. We are seeing hotter hots, colder colds, wetter wets and drier dry spells. It is tougher to get crops in the ground in the spring, and harder to finish harvest before snow flies. Weather extremes have challenged our cattle operations with reduced pasture forage and increased invasive weeds. Our timber stands are more vulnerable to damage from invasive pests, drought impacts and severe wind damage. No one can remember when we've had such high winds so frequently — or how many times we've had to re-roof our barn.

These conditions have driven us to sharpen our pencils regarding how we manage our resources from both an economic and environmental standpoint. We are constantly examining how to build on our no-till experience to further improve soil health and resilience. In recent years we have experimented with cover crops and intercropping strategies. These experiments come with uncertainty as to the impact on soil moisture and yield impacts on future crops, and much of the benefit may not be realized for years to come. But our motto is “the price of progress is willingness to appear foolish.”

Despite our multi-generational commitment to sound conservation practices, it has only been in recent years that technology and scientific advancements have allowed us to more accurately measure the environmental benefits of our prior efforts. We can estimate the greenhouse gas emissions reductions from decreased passes over the field, and better fertilizer management. We can also measure soil organic matter increases from the adoption of more sustainable practices using soil quality testing tools.

Maintaining our forests is one of the most important environmental practices we do. Forests reliably create habitat for birds, pollinators and wildlife, reduce erosion and increase soil carbon, as well as sequestering carbon in the trees themselves. Although estimating carbon stored in forests is easier than for other agricultural practices, the smaller size of our timber stands can make it hard to qualify for, and participate in, voluntary markets that seek out carbon contributions in the megatons. Policies and incentives that allow smaller timber landowners to aggregate contributions will broaden participation in markets and generate new income streams for forestland owners.

The potential for farmers, ranchers and forestland owners to contribute to the climate change solution is well-documented. We have seen it on our operation and see

opportunities for it to happen on a far larger scale. But right now, farmers face two big hurdles to adopting climate friendly practices: capital to finance the implementation of practices and risk protection measures to offset climate impacts on yield and productivity.

Technical and economic barriers often discourage and limit the adoption of climate-smart practices. For farmers who have implemented a “first round” of practices, as we have with no-till adoption, it is very difficult to build on those practices with next generation methods that are still being discovered and refined. There’s a huge need for support — both financial and technical — to help diverse sectors of the agriculture community move the needle forward.

In order to tackle this challenge, we need Congress and this Committee to support the design of voluntary, incentive-based programs and market-driven opportunities for the agriculture sector. We need policy that maximizes measurable net carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas reductions, while increasing the resilience of the land. Luckily, the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance has proposed more than 40 policy recommendations that would meet these criteria, including support for the *Growing Climate Solutions Act*. This is an area ripe for bipartisan congressional action, and we need you to take that action now.

We are now in a stage of urgency requiring climate action that is both immediate and large in scope. An incentive-based approach is the most viable path to achieving widespread adoption of effective, but costly, climate-smart practices.

Thankfully, we are not starting from scratch. Traditional farm bill programs are and can continue to be part of this solution. Our farm has participated in many of these incentive programs that would have otherwise been economically cost prohibitive. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program have provided invaluable education and financial support to transition to no-till, experiment with cover crops, re-plant trees after timber harvest and improve soil testing regimens. However, traditional farm bill programs alone will not meet the growing demand for incentives. We also need a robust private marketplace, actively monitored and refereed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to provide further incentives. Farmers need new options to participate in climate friendly strategies. We need to think big if we want to tackle this big problem.

Today, consumer demand for sustainable and climate-friendly food, fiber and fuel is outpacing USDA’s ability to keep up. Private companies are attempting to fill that void. Consumer demand is pushing the marketplace to develop standards and tools that, in many cases, are untested and may be unreliable when it comes to measuring greenhouse

gas emissions, carbon sequestration and general sustainability markers. Farmers need USDA to set the rules of the road, provide assistance to producers who want help upgrading their operations, and provide credible standards for measuring reductions and sequestration levels.

The entry of the private marketplace into the climate and sustainability conversation can be a great option if it is managed well. Once developed, new markets can help farmers finance sustainable and climate-friendly strategies on their farms. The private sector market can also provide additional revenue to farmers who are already working to achieve these goals. For example, many companies, including many food companies, are trying to pay farmers for water quality improvements, wildlife habitat and, in some cases, carbon sequestration. These companies need to know that the environmental benefits they are purchasing are accurate and durable. And farmers need technical assistance and up-front capital to make systematic changes to our operations to participate in these opportunities and remain profitable over time.

I urge this committee to consider policies that will accelerate the development of a whole suite of supportive options for producers who want to participate in market-based sustainability incentives, while also ensuring that participation is equitable, farmer-friendly and transparent.

Federal climate policies must be guided by science and work toward measurable outcomes. It's essential to know that we're making real progress tackling climate challenges. That is equally true for taxpayer-funded initiatives as it is for the private marketplace. For the private sector-funded approach to be viable, the individuals and businesses paying into that marketplace must be assured that their investments are meeting the desired outcomes of permanent net carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emission reductions.

We have a long row to hoe when it comes to gathering the best science to inform our policies and deliver the global outcomes we are talking about today. Any meaningful action must have targeted investments in research, monitoring, and farm-level technical assistance. But the urgency of the situation compels action today. In recognizing that the science and understanding of our complex environment will always improve, I urge this committee to consider policies that use the best available science today, while at the same time generating new data that will improve the science foundation over time.

In closing, I want to again thank this Committee for taking on this important issue. I also want to thank you for starting that process in this new Congress by listening to producers.

The message I bring today is not entirely new. I am often charged with the task of continuing the work that my father and his partners began in the last generation, and our commitment to engaging in the climate discussion is no different. In fact, he testified to this same Committee in 2008 when Congress was considering eight different climate change proposals. Many of the same concerns and opportunities he discussed then are still valid, but we now have a broader base of science to inform our decisions, a broad coalition of voices embracing the need for action and a renewed hope for addressing the problem. Let's capitalize on this and start finding solutions now.

Climate change is arguably the greatest threat to our industry in this generation, and one that will only get worse without action. I am here as a farmer, standing ready with intimate knowledge of the land we steward and the potential it holds to be part of this solution. I am asking for your help in doing this. Thank you.