

Testimony of Kyle Rorah  
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before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, it is an honor to testify before you today. I thank you both for the opportunity to express the importance of the Farm Bill to the conservation community here in Michigan and across the country. Ducks Unlimited (DU) has been a proud member of that community for 80 years and our commitment to conserving, restoring, and managing wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl has led to the conservation of 13.9 million acres across the continent. 80,000 acres have been conserved right here in Michigan. This work not only supports the environment - benefiting more than 900 wildlife species, improving water quality, and conserving soils that are vital to farming – it also supports both jobs and the economy. In fact, in Michigan hunting and fishing support over 74,000 jobs and contribute over \$6 billion to the state's economy.<sup>1</sup>

Conservation delivery at this scale does not happen without strong partnerships with other conservation organizations like Pheasants Forever and National Wild Turkey Federation, state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agency partners like the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and most importantly private landowners.

North America's nearly 50 million waterfowl rely on the food, shelter, and nesting habitat on private lands across this country. The Farm Bill's conservation programs represent the single largest investment in private land conservation that this nation makes on an annual basis. More than 60 percent of the U.S. and 70 percent of Michigan's land base is privately-owned. The conservation title is a critical tool for landowners in Michigan, Kansas, and across the country to enhance profitable farming operations, while benefiting healthy soil, clean water, and abundant wildlife.

DU appreciates Senator Stabenow's leadership in securing a robust conservation title in the 2014 Farm Bill. Our top goal heading into the 2018 Farm Bill is preserving many of the gains made in conservation – from the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program to working lands programs to conservation compliance. There is a lot at stake.

An innovative new program created during the last Farm Bill and one that is proving to be an extremely valuable tool here in Michigan, and across the country, is the Regional Conservation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/fhw11-mi.pdf>

Partnership Program (RCPP). RCPP leverages federal funds with private partner investments to promote the sustainable use of soil, water, and wildlife in critical conservation areas, like the Great Lakes. Here in Michigan, eight RCPP projects totaling more than \$55 million are addressing issues like algae blooms in Lake Erie, water quality improvements in Saginaw Bay, restoration of the Grand River, and enhancing the Huron River watershed. DU is currently involved in two different RCPP projects here in the state and 9 different RCPP projects nationwide. An example of the type of partnerships facilitated by RCPP is that between USA Rice and Ducks Unlimited. Through this partnership we have worked with many producers and other partners to harness this tremendously powerful and innovative program. The implementation of our 2015 RCPP rice projects across the country and the success of two RCPP proposals in 2016 demonstrate the importance of the program to rice growers. DU wants to maintain this important partnership program in the 2018 Farm Bill, while making some changes that will improve program delivery, further spur innovation, and ensure partners have the resources and tools they need to be successful.

Another Farm Bill program that DU has found mission critical is the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). ACEP provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Many of Michigan's breeding waterfowl migrate up and down the Mississippi River every year, and so they rely heavily on habitat work done in the states to our south. Currently there are over 151,000 acres in Missouri alone that are enrolled in Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) that is part of ACEP. Most of these acres are located within DU wetland emphasis areas across the state and nicely compliment all the wetland work we have been doing across Missouri. Currently the enrollment demand for this program nationwide far outpaces what current baseline funding levels will allow. Due to its documented success and high landowner demand, we support efforts to restore baseline funding back to at least \$500 million per year, as well as changes to improve management and landowner flexibility on ACEP sites.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), is yet another important component of the Farm Bill and gives landowners the opportunity to conserve lands and habitat that are critical to economically important game species like pheasants and ducks. Hunters spend \$4.8 billion a year in Michigan to pursue many of the species that rely on the type of habitat conserved by the CRP. , Lands enrolled in CRP help absorb farm field run-off before it hits the ditch or stream, help recharge groundwater resources, and help keeps the soil on the landscape. For these reasons DU is advocating for an increase to the current national CRP cap of 24 million acres, an increased allocation to CRP grasslands, and finally a robust voluntary incentive based working lands program, one that works hand-in-hand with private landowners.

As previously mentioned, hunting and fishing are extremely important to Michigan's economy. Nearly 2 million Michiganders hit the woods and waters every year to hunt and fish, and these individuals spend big money that supports our State's communities. My hometown of Algonac, MI is one such community whose economy is largely recreation based. During the fall, the parking lots of all the small family-owned diners along the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair are packed at 5 A.M. with waterfowl hunters and the gas stations are full of people fueling up there

fishing boats in the summer. This scene plays out every season in communities across the state. As noted earlier, these activities support over 72,000 jobs statewide. Protecting and enhancing these outdoor pastimes is therefore both culturally and economically important to the state. A Farm Bill program called the Volunteer Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) aims to protect and enhance private lands for recreation by providing financial incentives to landowners who allow the public to hunt their land. Michigan has received \$1,973,000 in grants through this program, helping grow the number of acres enrolled from 7,000 in 2011 to 22,000 in 2016. It is estimated that over \$2.4 million will be spent by Hunter Access Program (HAP) hunters using the expanded program, and these dollars will help support rural local economies. It is important to continue this program so that current and future generations of sportsmen and women have places to hunt and enjoy the outdoors.

A key factor in the success of the programs mentioned thus far is properly aligning conservation incentives for farmers with federal farm program supports. One such incentive that is paramount to this is conservation compliance. A strong and reliable safety net for our nation's farmers and ranchers, as well as our soil and wetlands, is a critical component of the Farm Bill and the future of agricultural sustainability. For more than 30 years, conservation compliance has been a central part of federal farm programs and this has been renewed by both Congress and bipartisan Administrations over the past five farm bills. In exchange for federal farm program supports, American taxpayers deserve common-sense assurances that farming and risk management practices are done in a way that minimizes impacts to our nation's highly erodible lands and wetlands. This balance is key as we move forward together in the development of the 2018 Farm Bill. A broad coalition of commodity, crop insurance and conservation leaders formed in 2014 to support and defend attacks on crop insurance and support conservation compliance during the last Farm Bill and we stand ready to assist in these efforts again today.

In closing, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify. DU stands ready to continue working with you to achieve a strong conservation title in the 2018 Farm Bill, which is essential to the economic prosperity and vitality of our nation's landowners, producers, and rural communities and serves as a backbone to conserve our nation's valuable soils, wetlands, grasslands and wildlife populations.