

Testimony of Kent Winter

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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow and members of the Committee, I would like to thank you on behalf of Kansas grain sorghum farmers for the opportunity to share our views on discussions surrounding the upcoming farm bill.

I farm near Andale in south central Kansas, producing grain sorghum, wheat, soybeans, corn and alfalfa, and I currently serve as president of the Kansas Grain Sorghum Producers Association.

Kansas is the nation's leading producer of grain sorghum. Last year we produced 55 percent of the nation's grain sorghum crop, above our normal production rate between 40 and 50 percent of the U.S. grain sorghum crop. Sorghum is used as a feedstock for ethanol, for livestock feed and is exported to other countries. There is also a growing market for sorghum as a consumer food choice and in the distilled spirits industry. Grain sorghum has great rotational benefits for many Kansas farmers because it will often grow in challenging conditions, especially where water supplies are short.

Times are tough on the farm. Prices for most commodities have collapsed the last year, and lenders and farmers are very worried about producers staying in business. This means farm programs are critical in our day-to-day business decisions in Kansas. When producers apply for a farm operating loan, the banker asks two questions: What are your crop insurance guarantee levels, and what do you anticipate in other farm program safety net support? The ability to secure annual operating loans directly depends upon the stability of farm programs. Strong farm programs provide certainty and stability that is vital for growers to be able to obtain operating capital from their banks. That operating capital is what bolsters local rural economies.

We appreciate your leadership in maintaining and strengthening farm programs. The current Price Loss Coverage program is working for sorghum. In the first year of this farm program, strong cash sales from export demand held our prices above the reference price level set for sorghum in the last farm bill.

However, as prices dropped significantly in the last year, needed support has kicked in for sorghum farmers, and it is a simple program to understand. Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) has been very confusing and somewhat frustrating for some of our membership because it is hard for growers to understand why one county gets payments and the adjacent county does not. Therefore, having a robust risk management system in place is vitally important to my farm, and that includes a PLC program that today fills the gap between the level of risk management coverage I need compared to the level of coverage I can get through crop insurance today.

Mr. Chairman, in regards to the conservation of our natural resources, sorghum is not only the nation's premier water saving grain crop, but it also offers valuable conservation characteristics such as drought and heat tolerance, high residue stubble, expansive root systems, carbon sequestering capacity, and wildlife habitat and food. Sorghum is drought tolerant and well suited for arid conditions and is especially important in areas that draw water from the Ogallala Aquifer to support agriculture. As the Ogallala has struggled to maintain adequate levels and recharge, sorghum's ability to produce grain with significantly lower water requirements is critical for the long-term existence of the Ogallala. Sorghum is a proven water-sipping crop and will be a solution, I think, many farmers will embrace.

As sorghum producers finalize our priorities for the conservation title, we want to ensure that the title works better for dryland farmers in the western plains. Whether that is water conservation practices in EQIP or resource-conserving crop rotation practices in CSP, we want the conservation title to work for all producers in all regions of the country. Sorghum producers support a variety of conservation programs and believe working lands conservation programs are vital to increasing productivity while also protecting our natural resources.

In Kansas, sorghum is used mainly for ethanol production and livestock feed. While most think of ethanol as a product made from corn, most Kansas ethanol plants use both feed grains to produce this renewable fuel. Having both grain sorghum and corn available allows ethanol plants more flexibility and better pricing opportunities. This ensures a strong and viable ethanol industry in our state, and also ensures a good value-added market for sorghum producers.

Finally, trade by way of exports remains vital for our industry. Therefore, we support increased funding for Market Access Program and Foreign Market Development programs in this farm bill as well as even better trade agreements around the world.

While I have focused on the use of grain sorghum for ethanol, I would like to mention the potential for the use of sweet sorghum and high biomass sorghum. As technology continues to advance in this area, discussions continue with major energy companies on the use of different types of sorghum as feedstocks, so maintaining energy title programs that continue to create opportunities and reduce risks for producers is important.

One last item that I would like to address is research. Unfortunately our industry is being plagued by a new insect called the sugarcane aphid, which has created significant financial and management challenges for our farmers. Research remains the answer for a long-term solution to this growing challenge, and we need help to deal with it and the damage it is causing.

In closing, I would like to underline the importance of stable and viable farm programs, especially to smaller crops like grain sorghum. Sorghum provides many benefits to conservation and crop rotations for our growers. Sorghum also plays an important role in a dependable feedgrain supply for our ethanol and livestock producers. However, as a crop that is planted to make the most of difficult growing conditions, it is also uniquely exposed to risk. Well thought-out farm programs that address risks and the potential of grain sorghum will benefit our growers as well as our local, state and national economies.