



March 5, 2012

Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member Pat Roberts
Senate Committee on Agriculture
328 Senate Russell Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: 2012 Farm Bill Priorities

Honorable Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts:

The undersigned signatories of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition would like to take this opportunity to highlight our priorities for the 2012 Farm Bill.

The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition is an unprecedented group of California ranchers, environmental organizations, researchers and government agencies. Together, these partners are working to preserve private working landscapes, support the long-term viability of the ranching industry, and protect and enhance California rangeland for both legally protected and still-common species. This unique coalition encompasses the expertise of ranchers, rangeland managers, ecologists and grassland wildlife experts who are looking to the Farm Bill as an essential means to meeting our mutual goals.

Overall Goal: Signatories of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition urge that the 2012 Farm Bill retain funding for programs that are both beneficial to ranchers and essential to improving the country's natural resources. Further, we seek to enhance programs to better meet the needs of participating landowners, while improving their ability to achieve natural resource conservation goals.

Stewardship Programs:

- **Provide robust funding for voluntary conservation projects that enhance both management of natural resources and the economic viability of producers.**

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP).

- Provides critical funding for air, water and habitat improvements and leverages federal dollars with private funding and actions. Proactive, voluntary resource conservation can reduce regulatory pressure.
- **Allow match funding to come in the form of in-kind donations on the part of the landowner and other partners.**

- Encourages landowners and other partners to contribute time and equipment necessary to complete projects.
- **Support prioritization of funding based on economic efficiency, effectiveness in addressing resource concerns and environmental performance.**
 - With limited funding it is imperative to target funds to address the most pressing resource concerns, leverage other voluntary conservation program funds and implement proven practices.
- **Enhanced availability of technical assistance through Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and by contracting with third-parties to deliver service.**
 - CTA is the baseline funding program that is the foundation that allows all other NRCS programs to work. CTA provides voluntary, non-regulatory technical assistance to help willing landowners conserve, maintain and improve the long-term sustainability of working landscapes.
 - By encouraging contracting with appropriate third parties to deliver technical assistance on a project-by-project basis staff capacity can be leveraged for short term needs and specialty projects requiring certain skill sets.

Easement Programs:

- **Provide robust funding for voluntary conservation easements.**
 - The demand for current easement programs outstrips resources allocated to the programs.
 - There is a strong interest in voluntary easements. The California Rangeland Trust alone has a list of 120 families interested in selling easements to perpetually preserve over 500,000 acres.
- **Ensure that a significant share of conservation easement funds are available for working ranchlands.**
 - Funding allocation decisions must take into consideration the public values of rangelands such as contributing to healthy watersheds and providing valuable habitat for native species.
 - Rangeland easements should receive an appropriate share of overall easement funds, based on public benefits provided.
- **Support “Rangeland” type easements that keep lands as ranches.**
 - Ranchers should be allowed to voluntarily sell easements that maintain the public benefits that grasslands and rangeland provide by preventing conversion to more intensive agriculture.
 - Easement valuation should reflect the value of any voluntary agricultural intensification rights sold by the landowner.
- **Maintain the right to graze as an essential element of easements, where that is compatible with maintaining key public benefits.**
 - Peer-reviewed science illustrates the benefits of managed grazing for a myriad wildlife and plant species, along with ecosystems such as vernal pools.

- Allow 3rd parties to hold, enforce and negotiate easements.

Retain current language under the Grasslands Reserve Program and Farm and Ranchland Protection Program

- Reduces burden on the federal government for long term management and the cost of easement monitoring by passing these responsibilities on to the qualified third party entity.
- Increases landowner trust, leading to increased participation in the program, including in areas important to achieving national conservation goals.

- Ensure that any interest that the United States receives in an encumbered property is a secondary “right of enforcement” and not an ownership interest.

Grasslands Reserve Program

- Maintain current clarification language that the contingent right of enforcement in an easement purchased, owned, and written by a non-Federal entity is not a federal acquisition of real property.

- Matching funds for easements should be allowed to come in the form of the value of a charitable donation or qualified conservation contribution.

- This provision would allow a private land owner to donate a portion of the easement value as a viable source of match value, therefore leveraging federal funding.

- Explicitly allow mitigation funds to be used as part of the non-federal share for NRCS conservation easement programs.

- Will leverage program funds, holding great potential for the voluntary preservation of millions of acres of grasslands in California where an abundance of funding is available for endangered species mitigation.
- Mitigation funds would be coupled with easement funds as part of the overall financing package for individual conservation easements.

We greatly appreciate your leadership in developing a Farm Bill that meets that vast needs of all 50 states and takes into consideration the landowner and natural resources priorities. If you have any questions please contact Tracy Schohr, Director, (916) 716-2643 or tracy@carangeland.org.

Sincerely,

Signatories to the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition



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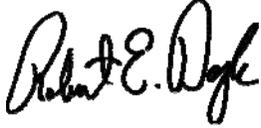
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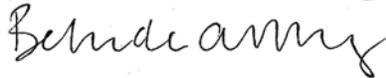
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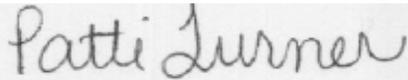
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