

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Perspectives From the Field, Part 4: Conservation

13 May 2025

Overview: The hearing focused on the role of conservation in U.S. agriculture and how the upcoming Farm Bill can support voluntary, locally led conservation practices that benefit both producers and the environment.

Witnesses:

- [Gary Blair](#) (National Association of Conservation Districts): Emphasized the need for technical assistance and local partnerships.
- [Brad Doyle](#) (Arkansas farmer): Shared a personal example of using EQIP to build a reservoir and reduce aquifer strain.
- [Lynn Tjeerdma](#) (Pheasants Forever): Advocated for CRP and public-private partnerships to deliver conservation.
- [Chad Ellis](#) (Texas Agricultural Land Trust): Warned about rapid land loss in Texas and the importance of easements.
- [Megan Dwyer](#) (Illinois Corn Growers): Highlighted Illinois' underfunding and the need for flexible, scalable conservation programs.

Key points:

- Voluntary, Locally Led Conservation
 - Broad bipartisan support for maintaining conservation programs as voluntary and incentive-based, not mandatory.
 - Emphasis on local flexibility—what works for a rice farmer in Arkansas may not work for a corn grower in Illinois or a rancher in Texas.
- Technical Assistance and Staffing
 - Strong concern over the loss of 2,400 [Natural Resource Conservation Services](#) (NRCS) employees, which could reduce farmers' access to conservation support.
 - Witnesses and senators stressed the importance of trusted local relationships and boots-on-the-ground expertise.
- Oversubscription and Funding Gaps
 - Programs like the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) and [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) (CSP) are oversubscribed, with demand far exceeding available funding.
 - Many witnesses and senators advocated for incorporating unspent Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds into the Farm Bill baseline to expand access.
- Innovation and Flexibility
 - Calls for modernizing USDA conservation standards to keep pace with new technologies and on-farm innovation.

- Support for bills like the [Agriculture Innovation Act](#) and [Streamlining Conservation Practice Standards Act](#) to improve data use and reduce red tape.
- Working Lands and Easements
 - Support for programs that allow land to remain in production while improving soil, water, and habitat.
 - Conservation easements were highlighted as tools for protecting land from development while maintaining agricultural use.
- Generational Transition and Land Loss
 - Concerns about the aging farming population and the need to support new and beginning farmers.
 - Alarming statistics on farmland loss (e.g., 11,000 acres/day) and the need for long-term conservation planning.