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Written Testimony of Ben Scholz
President, National Association of Wheat Growers
Before The House Agriculture Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee
Managing for Soil Health: Securing the Conservation and Economic Benefits of Healthy
Soils
June 25, 2019

Chairman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa and Committee members, I am Ben Scholz, a wheat farmer from Lavon, Texas and President of the National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG). NAWG represents wheat growers across the nation and works with a team of 21 state wheat grower organizations to advocate for the wheat industry. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding soil health. The National Wheat Foundation (NWF), of which NAWG is the only member, serves as the national center for wheat research information, education and outreach.

Wheat growers see conservation as the heart of farming. Farmers want to leave the land in better condition than they found it which means including management practices aimed at improving soil health into their operations. It may come as no surprise to members of the Subcommittee, but the reality of wheat production in the U.S. is that acres planted to it have been on a steady decline. To address this decline while promoting long-term sustainability, the National Wheat Foundation is investing in programs to help growers have a better understanding of the link between crop rotation, on-farm management practices, yield and quality of the wheat crop harvested. Let me remind you, wheat is a “food” crop. Unlike the other large acre, feed grain commodities in the U.S., quality of wheat is measured at the first point of delivery and reflected in the price a wheat grower receives. Wheat growers are motivated to look at all management practices that will improve the quality of wheat for millers, bakers, and ultimately, the consumers of all products made from wheat.

In late 2017, the National Wheat Foundation joined the Soil Health Partnership (SHP). The Soil Health Partnership is a farmer-led initiative that fosters transformation in agriculture through improved soil health, benefiting both farmer profitability and the environment. SHP’s mission is using science and data to support farmers in adopting practical agricultural practices that improve the economic and environmental sustainability of the farm. Administered by the National Corn Growers Association, the partnership has more than 140 working farms enrolled in 14 states. The SHP brings together broad and diverse partners to work towards common goals, with initial and continuing funding and guidance from NCGA, Bayer, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research, The General Mills Foundation, Midwest Row Crop Collaborative, National Wheat Foundation, Natural Resources

Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, the Pisces Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. NWF and SHP are working together to demonstrate the soil health benefits of management practices and crop rotations that include wheat. Data will be collected to help assess the impact of different systems on productivity, profitability and wheat quality. SHP and NWF are working with wheat farmers to set up research trials and demonstration sites to move the project forward.

NWF and NAWG see wheat production having a key role in soil health. Wheat cropping systems provide opportunities to improve soil health. Improved soil health offers a potential link to grain quality as well as grain yield that we would like to further understand and share across wheat production systems. Our ability to quantify and communicate the connection of soil health helps wheat farmers and their supply chain partners ensure a productive, long term supply of high-quality U.S. wheat. Through wheat's involvement in SHP, we hope to gain more information about the management practices needed to improve soil health, the soil health benefits on productivity, then share the information with growers and throughout the supply chain.

An important part of soil health practices and conservation tillage for wheat growers is access to appropriate crop protection tools. Glyphosate is an exceptional product for wheat growers because of its ability to effectively control a broad spectrum of plants post-emergent. Rather than using tillage to eliminate emerged weeds in their fields prior to planting, growers, instead, apply a labeled treatment of glyphosate to the weed growth. Undesirable plants that would otherwise provide competition for water and nutrients to the crop are controlled without using a tillage trip across their fields. Thus, glyphosate allows for direct seeding without disturbing the soil. This conservation tillage practice enables growers to leave the crop residue on the surface of the field. Maintaining residue on the field without disturbing the soil with tillage protects the soil from wind erosion, preserves moisture, preserves nutrients, and improves soil health. Direct seeding and conservation tillage have proven to sequester carbon in the soil, producing a carbon sink on farms. Keeping residue on the field serves as a mulch, allowing the soil to retain moisture and increase water filtration into the soil, reducing the amount of water that runs off the field. I have been practicing no-till/minimum till for more than 10 years and according to USDA, conservation tillage practices were used by wheat growers on 67% of wheat acres in 2017, up from under 40% in 2004. Reducing tillage trips across the field is a conservation practice wheat growers know has a positive impact on soil health and on their ability to produce a quality crop over wide variation of climatic conditions. Conservation practices preserve the environment and improve soil health, sustaining the long-term viability of the farming operation. This would not be possible without the use of glyphosate. This unique product is critical to the sustainability of wheat production in the United States long term.

Wheat growers across the country are also working directly with their local Natural Resource Conservation Services and Farm Service Agency offices to participate in USDA conservation programs. Working lands conservation programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Conservation

Reserve Program provide valuable assistance to wheat growers. For example, under my CSP contact, one of the practices I am doing is to take tissue tests to lean results from soil test recommendations and application of nutrients. This helps me understand the impact of the nutrient application on the crop.

Whether working directly with USDA programs, state programs, or adopting conservation practices on their own, wheat growers are committed to managing their operations in a manner for long term productivity, profitability and sustainability – economically and environmentally. We are investing in research to more clearly show the links between soil health, wheat crop quality and yield. We look forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee on these important issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Scholz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ben" being more prominent than the last name "Scholz".

Ben Scholz
President
National Association of Wheat Growers