

June 24, 2024

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition, and Forestry  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition, and Forestry  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Bennet  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Conservation,  
Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources  
261 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roger Marshall  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Conservation,  
Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources  
479A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow Ranking Member Boozman, Subcommittee Chair Bennet, Ranking Member Marshall, and members of the subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this hearing to discuss ongoing drought conditions and how we can combat this devastating impact on agriculture with innovation. The National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG) is a federation of 20 state wheat grower associations and industry partners that works to represent the needs and interests of wheat producers before Congress and federal agencies. Based in Washington, D.C., NAWG is grower-governed and works in areas as diverse as federal farm policy, transportation, trade, environmental regulation, agricultural research, and sustainability. NAWG appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony for the record expressing the concerns of wheat growers within the High Plains and Western regions. It is vital that we collectively come together to discuss innovation and methods to combat drought and maintain a strong and successful agriculture industry.

The 2024 Farm Bill reauthorization process provides an opportunity to refine existing programs to address ongoing challenges throughout the agricultural industry, and, for wheat growers, drought has remained a persistent challenge in many major wheat producing regions. Throughout the farm bill process, NAWG has underscored that protecting crop insurance is our number one priority, which is the best tool that producers have to mitigate risk – like drought – on the farm. Additionally, Congress should work to strengthen crop insurance by increasing premium support for higher levels of crop insurance coverage and improve the Supplemental Coverage Option by increasing premium support and expanding coverage. These improvements will help address concerns we have heard related to affordability and provide more timely relief than ad-hoc disaster assistance. Additionally, NAWG looks forward to working with you on conservation programs and research that can prove innovative and help mitigate drought-related impacts facing wheat growers.

The United States has recently experienced some of the driest years they have seen, and wheat growers are feeling the impacts on their cropping systems and the long-term viability of their operations. Farmers are seeing the immediate impact of the lack of moisture and the constraining effects of prolonged and sporadic periods of moisture scarcity. When drought conditions are present, it is a significant factor impacting our crops that we cannot avoid; however, properly preparing during high

moisture conditions by protecting and building soil health and utilizing innovation through practices and technologies are the greatest tools in helping maintain our lands.

Wheat requires less moisture than most other crops. As drought becomes more prevalent with climate change, and aquifers such as the Ogallala deplete, wheat will be used more extensively to maintain a cropping component on drier soils. Investment in technologies for wheat must be considered when looking to mitigate drought in the future. Winter wheat is grown on a variety of different agriculture operations because it can help maintain moisture and improve soil health by keeping the ground covered over the winter. Wheat's ability to thrive off minimal water requirements makes this an excellent crop for producers to grow while sustaining scarce nutrients and moisture. The winter wheat acts as a cover to capture any winter snow and stabilizes the soil against the hot, dry winds of the High Plains. Investing in research on new and innovative wheat germplasm is something we must consider when looking into the future.

A majority of wheat growers are using conservation tillage practices to maintain soil health and moisture content. However, the lack of tilling requires the use of herbicides to control weeds. Conservation tillage and no-till practices require the use of herbicides to treat weed pressure, but the lack of moisture makes the herbicides less effective, and many weeds have also become herbicide resistant. Simply put, producers need crop protection tools to stay in no-till systems and keep the ground covered, and the continued attacks on the use and availability of crop protection tools and the development of new tools are a concern for growers and the future of their operations. Congress and the Department of Agriculture must consider these very real situations and evaluate how programs can support growers in maintaining their no-till operations during periods of drought.

As referenced earlier, crop insurance is one of the most effective tools to protect growers during years of intense drought. However, with ever-changing conditions and drought periods worsening, there must be further improvements within the safety net. The Multi-Peril Crop Insurance (MPCI) program is one of the most invested plans in the crop insurance space. MPCI protects growers and their crops from a variety of natural disasters, and from seeding to harvesting. This type of insurance option is extremely important among agriculture producers. According to the USDA, drought and high temperatures are the leading cause of loss among crop producers in the United States.

Wheat growers are faced with planting their winter wheat in drought conditions in the fall, hoping for rain on the field before winter. Wheat growers are not typically utilizing prevented plant coverage through crop insurance, but rather planting during the drought. NAWG supports additional flexibility in prevented planting provisions which favor history of participation instead of current year planting requirements for eligibility of the Enterprise Unit structure.

NAWG is supportive of legislation (S. 2104) put forward by Chairman Bennet and Ranking Member Marshall that would allow farmers to insure wheat enterprise units by fallow and continuous, while still offering a combined option for those who it would benefit. Making the change to be able to separate the two cropping styles would be a great benefit to wheat farmers by allowing them to protect their crops and operations effectively, giving them more confidence in their business decisions. NAWG would like to thank both Chairman Bennet and Ranking Member Marshall for their efforts in introducing this piece of legislation and hope to see it included as part of a long-term farm bill later this year. With drought conditions becoming even more serious, it is vital that we give wheat growers a choice to choose between coverage options based on their practices.

Alongside crop insurance, innovation in research advancement is critical. Agribusiness investment in wheat breeding and wheat improvement in the United States is minimal compared to other

commodities. While private investment in wheat research has increased in recent years, federal investments must be made to provide solutions for problems affecting domestic wheat productivity. Wheat growers and the wheat industry depend on the USDA-Agricultural Research Services' public research efforts, checkoff programs, and land grant universities to provide these solutions. These investments have resulted in wheat varieties with an end-use quality that meets or exceeds the demands of our customers, both domestic and international. However, with drought conditions shifting along with evolving pest and disease challenges, continued investment in research is essential to help meet the long-term needs of wheat growers. Drought-resistant wheat varieties and other crops are innovative measures that will provide beneficial factors for growers and the environment. Drought-resistant crops show higher percentages of water conservation, improvements in soil health, require less maintenance, and provide higher crop yields. While wheat may be a crop that thrives in dryland, there must be further research and allocation towards testing hardier varieties of wheat to ensure efficient use of nutrients while providing higher yield numbers for growers. This advancement in research must be prioritized among all sections of the agriculture industry through funding advancements and access to new technologies.

Our nation is seeing drought periods not only worsen but extend for longer durations. The National Integrated Drought Information System suggests that with long-term droughts escalating, the damage caused to crops, ecosystems, and wildlife is becoming more catastrophic. The prolonged drought periods are resulting in decreased yields or crop failure, which is causing constraints on producers, ultimately leading to some abandoning multigeneration farming operations. Ensuring that we properly invest in programs that support our nation's food producers is something we must prioritize in this Farm Bill. Food security is national security, and it is important that this Farm Bill recognizes the continuous pressure that growers are facing in our nation. Properly allocating and increasing resources in crop insurance and research programs is a necessity in this Farm Bill reauthorization process.

NAWG appreciated the opportunity to provide written testimony for today's subcommittee hearing. Innovation to combat drought is going to be a significant feat, but it is feasible when working collectively to strengthen crop insurance, support voluntary conservation programs, maintain access to crop protection tools, and invest in research. Further collaboration and investment will be necessary for the region's long-term future.

We look forward to continuing to work with you on passing a bipartisan farm bill this year that supports wheat growers and our nation.

Thank You,



Keef Felty  
President