

May 10, 2024,

Testimony of Keeff Felty, President, National Association of Wheat Growers
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration
and Related Agencies
House Appropriations Committee
Concerning NAWG's FY 2025 Agriculture Appropriations funding priorities
POC: Jake Westlin, Vice President of Policy and Communications

The National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony about our priorities for the fiscal year (FY) 2025 Agriculture Appropriations bill. Before outlining our FY 2025 requests, we wanted to say "thank you" for continuing to fully fund the U.S. Wheat and Barley Scab Initiative (USWBSI) in FY 2024 and for providing \$500,000 in funding for the new Wheat Resiliency Initiative (WRI).

As our leaders in Congress consider an FY 2025 Agriculture Appropriations bill, one of NAWG's main priorities will be to ensure that no provisions are included that would cut Farm Bill programs, particularly mandatory programs like crop insurance, farm programs, conservation programs, or trade promotion programs. As the Appropriations Committee works to lay out goals for Fiscal Year 2025, we respectfully urge you to protect crop insurance from harmful cuts. Even in good years, farmers need access to a strong and secure federal crop insurance program, a program that farmers have described time and again as a critical linchpin of the farm safety net. The 2018 Farm Bill passed through Congress with strong bipartisan, bicameral support and sent a clear message that these critical programs should not be harmed.

NAWG also strongly urges Congress to provide at least \$255 million for the Agricultural Trade Promotion and Facilitation Program with at least \$200 million for the Market Access Program (MAP) and \$34.5 million for the Foreign Market Development (FMD) program in FY 2025. We are asking that your subcommittee use discretionary funds to provide \$7 million – less than 3 percent of the program investment – for USDA administrative and operational costs to help reverse the diminished real dollar value of MAP and FMD from being funded at the same level for over 15 years. While the trend for agriculture trade has been uncertain for the last several years, the MAP and FMD programs are more critical than ever before to ensure that U.S. producers continue to access the global market.

Wheat is a vital crop and source of economic activity. In the United States, wheat ranks third in planted acreage, production, and gross farm receipts, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). According to the USDA, in the 2023/2024 crop year, total U.S. farmers produced a total of 1.8 billion bushels of wheat from a harvested area on 37.3 million acres, which is up from 1.6 billion bushels and 35.5 million acres from the previous crop year. In any given year, wheat farmers must deal with a number of disease and pest challenges that can only be addressed through public and private research efforts. Federal funding for agriculture research has remained stagnant, threatening the future viability and competitiveness of U.S. food systems by being out invested by competitors such as China.

NAWG joins the National Wheat Improvement Committees (NWIC) and National Barley Improvement Committees in urging the Committee to maintain full funding for the UWSBSI. Fusarium Head Blight (Scab) is a plant disease attacking all wheat-producing regions of the U.S. that impacts not just growers but also millers and bakers because of its impact on the quality of wheat. The 2018 Farm Bill increased authorization for the USWBSI from \$9.5 million to \$15 million to enhance food safety and supply by reducing the impact of Fusarium Head Blight (Scab) on wheat and barley. While the President's budget zeroed out funding for the USWBSI, we appreciate Congress's role in the appropriations process and for fully funding the initiative for the past several years. Continued full funding is vital in supporting the agricultural economy and food system.

Also, NAWG supports the NWIC's request to fully fund the Wheat Resiliency Initiative (WRI) at \$1.6 million to address new and emerging challenges to wheat production. We are appreciative of the Senate and House FY 2024 Agriculture Appropriations bills for including report language and \$1,000,000 for the WRI to help stand-up the program. Ultimately, Congress included \$500,000 for the WRI, which we are thankful for and are currently working with USDA-ARS to implement. We anticipate about half of the funding is expected to be utilized for extramural wheat stem sawfly pre-breeding and breeding programs and hessian fly field testing in impacted areas. The remaining half will be allocated to USDA-ARS to work on wheat stem sawfly resistance and Hessian fly nursery stem coordination and fieldwork.

While these limited dollars will help, the key challenges for wheat stem sawfly, Hessian fly, bacterial leaf streak, and the rust diseases will remain. Changing weather patterns combined with the migration of pest and disease problems to regions previously unfamiliar with these yield robbers are resulting in substantial economic losses at the farm gate. For example, losses caused by wheat stem sawfly are now estimated to exceed \$350 million annually for spring and winter wheat growers in Montana, Colorado, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Kansas. The Wheat Resiliency Initiative, over time, will require \$6.5 million in new funding – equally split between intramural and extramural funding – to meet its stated objectives and goals. Fully funded, the initiative will support multi-disciplinary research and involve scientists in eighteen states. However, providing an initial \$1.6 million will help this initiative begin researching wheat stem sawfly and Hessian fly resistance.

Together, these various pests and pathogens affect every growing region and market class of wheat grown across the U.S. Wheat is grown, milled, and delivered as a dietary staple in every state. If funded, through this initiative, the community of U.S. wheat researchers will build a new genetic base in all wheat market classes for resiliency to these challenges posed by wheat rusts, stem sawfly, hessian fly, and bacterial leaf streak. The strength of local agricultural economies of every state will be supported through building resiliency in the face of these challenges to wheat production.

In addition to securing new resources for the WRI, NAWG encourages the subcommittee to provide an additional \$750,000 for stripe rust screening nurseries. Currently, the wheat stripe rust initiative receives nearly \$200,000 annually to support public wheat research into stripe rust at facilities in Manhattan, KS; Raliegh, NC; Aberdeen, ID; and Pullman, WA. These additional

resources would be used to support additional stripe rust screening nurseries in all wheat-producing regions.

NAWG urges the Committee to continue to fully fund the Small Grains Genomic Initiative (SGGI) at \$3.44 million. While the President's budget cut funding for the SGGI, the program provides critical resources to four research areas: Next Generation Genotyping, Next Generation Phenomics, ARS Uniform Small Grains Nurseries, and Doubled Haploid Research and Production. It is important to retain full funding for the SGGI in FY 2025.

Lastly, NAWG supports retaining language that provides \$1 million to support research focused on utilizing crop genetics research at public-private consortiums. NAWG applauds the funding of the National Predictive Modeling Tool Initiative (NPMTI) in FY 2022 at \$5 million, and we urge the committee to maintain or increase funding for the NPMTI as additional resources permit. NAWG continues to support maintaining at least the current level of funding for the NIFA Hatch Act, Smith-Lever Formula Grants, and the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative.

Wheat research at the federal level is driven by funding to the ARS division of USDA, land grant universities via Hatch Act and Smith-Lever Act funds, and Agriculture and Food Research Initiative competitive grants. State governments support wheat research through funding of public universities and agriculture experiment stations. Wheat growers in many states directly support wheat research through checkoffs or assessments on their crop each year. This collaborative partnership has made the United States one of the premier countries for wheat research, with all segments sharing in its cost. The investment has resulted in wheat varieties with the end-use quality that meets or exceeds the demands of our customers, both domestic and international.

Agribusiness investment in wheat breeding and wheat improvement in the United States is minimal compared to other commodities. Private investment in wheat research has increased in recent years, but increased federal investments must be made to provide solutions for problems affecting wheat productivity in the U.S. Wheat growers and the wheat industry depend on the USDA-ARS' public research efforts and land grant universities to provide these solutions.

In addition to our interest in research funding, NAWG does have concerns with the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) announced in an Agricultural Statistics Board (ASB) Notice dated April 9, 2024, that it was cancelling the County Estimates for Crops and Livestock report. These reports and datasets are incredibly valuable and not only used for market projection, but also to estimate economic impact and losses associated with natural disasters. While we recognize that NASS has seen a year-over-year appropriations reduction, we would like to work with you to ensure NASS has adequate resources and has the ability to continue publication of the County Estimates for Crops and Livestock reports.

The National Association of Wheat Growers works with our 20 wheat state associations and industry partners to benefit wheat farmers. These requests will directly help find new markets to export our wheat, provide critical investments in research, and facilitate innovative

wheat research to improve quality and protect against disease and pest challenges. We greatly appreciate your consideration of these requests.