
October 15, 2019

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow:

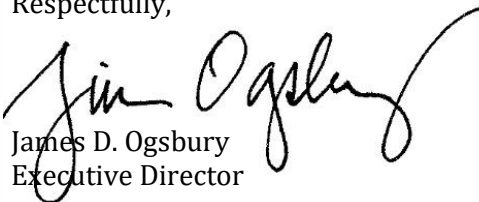
In advance of the Committee's October 17, 2019 hearing on Implementing the 2018 Farm Bill, attached please find three Western Governors' Association (WGA) items related to agriculture policy and implementation of provisions included in the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-334):

- August 31, 2018 correspondence from Western Governors to the members of the House and Senate conference committee on H.R. 2, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018;
- February 28, 2019 correspondence from WGA to the Honorable Bill Northey, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), on the implementation of 2018 Farm Bill provisions affecting the Natural Resources Conservation Service; and
- March 20, 2019 correspondence from WGA to The Honorable Jim Hubbard, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, on the implementation of 2018 Farm Bill provisions affecting the U.S. Forest Service.

I request that you include these documents in the permanent record of the hearing, as they articulate Western Governors' policy positions and recommendations on implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill, and WGA's efforts to actively and productively engage with USDA on various land management challenges in western states.

Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information. In the meantime, with warm regards and best wishes, I am

Respectfully,



James D. Ogsbury
Executive Director

Attachments

August 31, 2018

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

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

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
1305 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Roberts, Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Stabenow, and Ranking Member Peterson:

On behalf of Western Governors, we are writing to commend you and the conferees on H.R. 2, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the Farm Bill), for your efforts to reconcile the House and Senate versions of this important legislation. As you continue work to produce a final agreement, Western Governors would like to express our support for provisions addressing the special concerns of western states, which possess unique perspectives on many of the agricultural issues addressed in H.R. 2.

The Farm Bill's conservation and forestry titles are of great significance to Western Governors and to the region's agricultural producers. Western states include more than 75 percent of our national forest and rangeland ecosystems, and their responsible management represents a significant gubernatorial concern. These lands serve as critical economic drivers and provide conservation benefits, water supply, and economic and recreational opportunities. H.R. 2's forestry title authorizes the tools upon which Western Governors rely to promote responsible land management practices. These same titles promote the viability of the livestock industry, an essential component of the West's agricultural base.

Western Governors support collaborative, targeted, voluntary conservation to address locally identified natural resource concerns for farm, rangeland, and forest resources on private and public lands. The Farm Bill's conservation programs address a wide range of western issues, from threatened and endangered species and wildlife habitat, to water quality, groundwater recharge, and drought response, to soil health, air quality, and wildfire resilience.

The important role of grazing on western landscapes bears particular emphasis. Livestock grazing on federal lands is compatible with recreation and wildlife management and fulfills the multiple use and sustained yield mission of both the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Grazing management and targeted grazing are tools to achieve restoration and other land management goals, including wildlife habitat improvement, drought and wildfire mitigation and

The Honorable Pat Roberts
The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
The Honorable Collin Peterson
August 31, 2018
Page 2

resilience, water quality and watershed health, effective soil health management, and invasive species control.

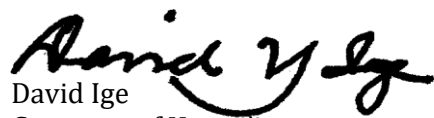
The Governors also recognize the importance of the measures' support for broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas. Many western communities lack access to broadband internet due to the high cost of infrastructure and the low number of customers in potential service areas. This has left many rural businesses at a competitive disadvantage and citizens without access to telework, telemedicine, and distance learning opportunities. Adequate authorization levels for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Rural Development programs will enable funding for the important work of increasing broadband access in rural and remote areas.

Western states have experienced sharp declines in farm income and farm prices since 2013. Western Governors support a farm safety net that recognizes past deficit reduction contributions of the agricultural sector and maintains funding for other key commodity, conservation, crop insurance, research, energy, and export promotion programs. Western Governors also support funding for the USDA Market Access and Foreign Market Development Programs to promote opportunities for western producers to increase export revenues and encourage trade agreements that maximize benefits for the West's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners.

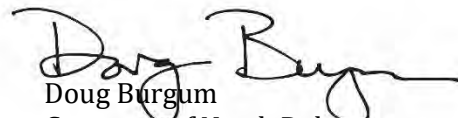
With respect to specific provisions in H.R. 2, attached please find a side-by-side summary of House and Senate provisions and relevant policy of the Western Governors. We hope you find this material helpful as you move toward a final agreement and ensure that western agricultural interests are appropriately addressed in the legislation.

We appreciate the difficulty of coming to final agreement on a legislative package with the complexity, size and scope of the Farm Bill. Moreover, Western Governors are grateful for your efforts to reauthorize and improve the agricultural, conservation and forestry programs that facilitate healthy ecosystems and a strong agricultural base. Thank you again for your leadership on this matter.

Sincerely,



David Ige
Governor of Hawai'i
Chair, WGA



Doug Burgum
Governor of North Dakota
Vice Chair, WGA

Attachment

cc: House and Senate conferees on H.R. 2, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018



2018 Farm Bill Side-by-Side

House Version: H.R. 2, the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018

Senate Version: H.R. 2, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018

The following side-by-side provides a summary of legislative language in H.R. 2, primarily in the Conservation and Forestry titles, and indicates where bill provisions relevant to existing Western Governors' Association (WGA) policy.

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
Conservation		
<p>Sec. 2201. Reauthorizes the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through FY23 and increases the number of acres enrolled in the CRP to 29 million (up from 24 million) by the end of 2023. Requires that the distribution of enrolled acres across states in proportion to historic state enrollment be maintained by the Secretary.</p>	<p>Sec. 2101. Reauthorizes CRP through FY23 and increases the maximum acreage enrolled to 25 million acres. Prioritizes land designated as a "State Acres For wildlife Enhancement area" (SAFE area) that are continuously enrolled for certain wildlife habitat conservation practices. Authorizes a state or tribe, in consultation with a Farm Service Agency (FSA) State Technical Committee to submit a request to designate a SAFE area.</p>	<p>Western Governors support the reauthorization of CRP. The reauthorization is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2E, which states: "fully fund conservation title programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), that provide technical and financial assistance for forest and rangeland management in partnership with private landowners. Take steps to provide greater flexibility in the deployment of these programs to achieve restoration objectives."</p>
<p>Sec. 2405. Establishes a pilot project for feral swine eradication and control and allocates \$100 million in mandatory funds through FY23. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service must coordinate through State technical committees, and the pilot</p>		<p>Western Governors note that the House provision is consistent with WGA Policy Resolution 2016-05, Combating Invasive Species, which expresses that Western Governors "support coordinated prevention efforts and early detection and rapid response with multistate management and eradication actions to limit or eliminate new</p>

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
<p>program is required to be carried out in areas of States in which feral swine have been identified as a threat to agriculture, native ecosystems, or the health of humans or animals.</p>		<p>introductions and existing species expansion. Programs for the control and/or eradication of invasive species must result in more on-the-ground prevention, management and eradication.”</p> <p>Feral pigs are an invasive species in 14 western states, ranked #6 on the WGA list of top 25 terrestrial invasives, and the #1 mammal on the list.</p>
	<p>Sec. 2108. Provides an exception to the standards of CRP ineligibility if USDA consults with a state technical committee and determines that enrollment in CRP “is in the best interests of that program.”</p>	<p>Western Governors observe that the Senate provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>
<p>Sec. 2501. Increases funding for the Agriculture and Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to \$500 million annually through FY23. Authorizes increased funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), beginning with \$2 billion in FY19 and increasing to \$3 billion in FY23.</p>	<p>Sec. 2301.-Sec. 2309. Amends the purposes of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and extends the program through FY23. Directs the Secretary to review the process for determining annual State funding allocations and the process used to review State budget proposals. Authorizes the Secretary to streamline and coordinate procedures between EQIP and CSP and provides direction to enhance soil health. Allows for coordinated management of the program and authorizes the CSP to facilitate enrollment of a program upon satisfying the stewardship threshold for at least two priority resource concerns under that program. Authorizes the establishment of a micro-EQIP pilot program in 10 states to provide financial and technical</p>	<p>Western Governors support the reauthorization of EQIP and ACEP. The reauthorization of these programs is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2E, which states: “fully fund conservation title programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), that provide technical and financial assistance for forest and rangeland management in partnership with private landowners. Take steps to provide greater flexibility in the</p>

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	<p>assistance to small-scale agricultural producers. Allows each state, in consultation with the state technical committee, to designate 10 high-priority practices to be eligible for increased payments under EQIP under certain conditions.</p>	<p>deployment of these programs to achieve restoration objectives.”</p>
<p>Sec. 2408. Amends the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act to establish a monitoring and program evaluation process to assess progress in reaching identified environmental objectives and the contribution of programs and initiatives. Allows implementation partly through cooperative or contribution agreements with federal, state, and local agencies, among other entities. The process would be administered by NRCS with assistance from an appointed national technical committee that includes representation of state agencies and land grant university natural resource research programs.</p>		<p>Western Governors note that the House provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>
<p>Sec. 2502. Specifies that technical assistance may be provided by third parties such as state or local government.</p>	<p>Sec. 2502. Specifies that technical assistance may be provided by third parties such as state or local government.</p>	<p>Western Governors support this provision. The language is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>
<p>Sec. 2704. Authorizes the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) at \$250 million annually through FY23. Adds CRP as “covered program,” and allows agreements longer than 5 years.</p>	<p>Sec. 2411. Provides \$200 million (increased from \$100 million) in mandatory funding annually for FY18-23 for the RCPP and requires the Secretary to transfer 7 percent of funds and acres available from CSP, EQIP, and ACEP each fiscal year. Increases to 40 percent the funding for State projects and adds authority for multistate</p>	<p>Western Governors support reauthorization of the RCPP. The reauthorization is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2E, which states: “fully fund conservation title programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP),</p>

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
	<p>projects. Makes various other changes to the RCPP, including adding CRP as a covered program.</p>	<p>Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), that provide technical and financial assistance for forest and rangeland management in partnership with private landowners. Take steps to provide greater flexibility in the deployment of these programs to achieve restoration objectives.”</p>
<p>Sec. 2801. Eliminates the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and would incorporate some of the program’s initiatives into EQIP.</p>	<p>Sec. 2201-2204. Reauthorizes CSP through FY23 and directs the Secretary to rank applications based on certain conservation and environmental benefits. Reauthorizes the acreage enrollment limitation through September 30, 2027 at a reduced 8.797 million acres (10 million acres currently). Authorizes the Secretary to allocate State funding for organic and transition to organic production.</p>	<p>Reauthorization of CSP is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2E, which states: “fully fund conservation title programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), that provide technical and financial assistance for forest and rangeland management in partnership with private landowners. Take steps to provide greater flexibility in the deployment of these programs to achieve restoration objectives.”</p>
	<p>Sec. 2425. Codifies the working lands for wildlife conservation partnership and expands authority of the conservation reserve program. Authorizes the Secretary to assist a requesting federal, state, or local agency seeking regulatory certainty through conservation practices in certain circumstances.</p>	<p>Western Governors support the Senate provision. This section is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2E: “take steps to provide greater flexibility in the deployment of these [conservation] programs to achieve restoration objectives.” It is also consistent with WGA Policy Resolution 2017-11, Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act, in which the Governors state that “incentives and funding for conservation are essential. Western Governors</p>

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		believe that providing economic incentives for landowners to participate in conservation efforts is likely to achieve more efficient and cost-effective results, and may lead to more rapid conservation, and even obviate the need to list a species in the first instance.... [f]unding needs to be made available for proactive and incentive-based efforts to prevent listings, and for recovery plans and de-listing activities.”
	Sec. 2426. Makes changes to the Healthy Forests Reserve Program adding a purpose of the program to conserve habitats for threatened and endangered species of those of greatest need for conservation under State wildlife action plans.	Western Governors support the Senate provision. The section is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.” It is also consistent with WGA Policy Resolution 2017-11, Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act, in which the Governors state that the “Endangered Species Act can effectively be implemented only through a full partnership between the states, federal government, local governments and private landowners.”
Rural Development		
Secs. 6102, 6105, 6113, 6201. Sec. 6102 creates a competitive grant program, authorized at \$350 million annually through FY23, for construction, improvement, or facilities acquisition projects related to broadband service in rural areas. Sec. 6105 modifies the Rural Gigabit Program, renaming it the Innovative Broadband Advancement Program and making grants and	Sec. 6206. Reauthorizes \$150 million annually through FY 2023 for grants and loans promoting access to broadband telecommunications services in rural areas. Makes eligibility changes and codifies USDA’s minimum acceptable broadband service definition (25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream).	WGA Policy Resolution 2017-09 , Western Agriculture, articulates the support of Western Governors for “continued efforts to provide financial assistance for...broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas.”

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<p>loans available for projects demonstrating innovative broadband technologies or methods of deployment, decreasing costs and providing faster broadband service. The program would give priority to public-private partnerships.</p> <p>Sec. 6113 would extend authorized appropriations of \$150 million annually for loans regarding access to broadband telecommunications services in rural areas.</p> <p>Sec. 6201 instructs the Secretary to prioritize rural projects that implement strategic community investment plans and reserve program funds for these projects. It would also allow the USDA to provide assistance to rural communities to develop community investment plans and provide \$5 million annually for this technical assistance.</p>		
Forestry		
<p>Sec. 8101. Reauthorizes \$10 million per year through FY2023 for statewide assessment and strategies for forest resources.</p>		<p>Western Governors note that the House provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>
<p>Sec. 8104. Reauthorizes at \$10 million annually the landscape-scale restoration program, which helps states realize public benefits from state and private forest land.</p>	<p>Sec. 8101. Establishes the State and Private Forest Landscape-Scale Restoration Program, a competitive grant program to encourage collaborative, science-based, landscape-scale restoration of priority forest landscapes, and authorizes the program at \$20 million per year through FY2023.</p>	<p>Western Governors note that this authorization is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 4A: “codify and fund the USFS State and Private Landscape Scale Restoration Competitive Grant program to prioritize work consistent with state forestry goals and action plans.” Given the importance of integrating state</p>

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
		input into federal decision-making processes and facilitating collaboration with states to address wildfire risk in areas of mixed ownership and at large scale, Western Governors support the Senate-proposed authorization level.
<p>Sec. 8321. Expands the current categorical exclusion (CE) for insect and disease infestations to include all five fire regimes (current law allows only Class I, II and III landscapes to qualify for the CE).</p>		Western Governors support the House provisions in Section 8321, which address fire regimes eligible for the current CE for insect and disease infestations. The House provision is consistent with the second element of National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 2A: “eliminate project constraints from section 603 for condition class or fire regimes outside of the WUI.”
<p>Sec. 8335 Analysis of only Action and No Action Alternatives for projects developed pursuant to Section 602 of the Health Forests Restoration Act, supported by a collaborative process, proposed by a RAC, occurring on lands suitable for timber production, or covered by a community wildfire protection plan.</p>		Western Governors’ National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation L3D states: “Allow federal agencies to analyze only the action and no action alternatives when a project is collaboratively developed, unless a third alternative is proposed during the scoping and meets the purpose and need of the project.”
	<p>Sec. 8405. Requires the Chief of the Forest Service to establish a Watershed Condition Framework for National Forest System land to evaluate the condition of watersheds to identify priority watersheds for protection and develop an action plan for watershed protection and restoration for each priority watershed. Requires coordination with State, Tribal, and local governments, as well as interested non-Federal partners in the relevant watersheds.</p>	Western Governors note that the Senate provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation A2E: “champion and encourage the efforts of state and local governments, municipalities, water utilities and corporate partners to collaborate on, and co-invest in, forest and rangeland restoration – including the support of collaborative groups – across ownership boundaries in key water supply source watersheds.”
<p>Sec. 8511. Authorizes the award of grants from the competitive forestry, natural resources, and</p>		Western Governors note that the House provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative

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<p>environmental grant program to support forest restoration in addition to research. Competitive grants for forest restoration would be awarded based on specified criteria, including risk posed to the forests of that state by non-native pests, the proportion of the State’s forest composed of species vulnerable to non-native pests, and the pests’ rate of spread.</p>		<p>recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>
<p>Sec. 8106 Reauthorizes the Community Wood Energy Program at an increased level of \$20 million.</p>	<p>Sec. 9112 Reauthorizes the Community Wood Energy Program at current \$5 million funding level.</p>	<p>This reauthorization is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislative recommendation 4C: “pass legislation to promote forest and rangeland product markets and technologies, and expand funding for the Community Wood Energy Program.” Western Governors support the increased authorization level of the House provision.</p> <p>Western Governors also note that Sec. 8643 of the Senate bill, Wood Innovation Grant Program, is consistent with legislative recommendation 4C.</p>
Horticulture		
<p>Sec. 9004. Extends authorized appropriations of \$85 million annually for Specialty Crop Block Grants and directs USDA to enter into cooperative agreements with state departments of agriculture to evaluate performance.</p>	<p>Sec. 10107. Reauthorizes through FY23 the Specialty Crop Block Grants Program. Updates the State plan to set performance measures and provide best practices; requires the Secretary to provide guidance regarding best practices and priorities, based on stakeholder input, prior to the submission of State plans; adds an evaluation to audit requirements based on performance measures; increases the administrative cap for funds for the Secretary (up to 4 percent) and funds for States (up to 9 percent); and designates the Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service as administrator of multistate projects and</p>	<p>Western Governors note that this reauthorization is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: “leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities.”</p>

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
	provides mandatory funding (\$5 million each year) for these projects.	
Miscellaneous Provisions		
<p>Sec. 11202. Requires the designation of a State beginning farmer and rancher coordinator from among existing employees. The coordinator would coordinate technical assistance at the State level, work with outreach coordinators in other State offices, and facilitate partnerships and outreach with State, regional, state, and local organizations and stakeholders.</p>	<p>Sec. 12306. Establishes a National Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinator and requires the Secretary to designate an employee in each state as the State Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinator. The coordinator would be responsible for the creation of a State plan to coordinate outreach and technical assistance in county and area offices. The National Coordinator is required to designate a State coordinator.</p>	<p>Western Governors note that the designation of such a coordinator is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative legislation recommendation 4D, which states: “pass legislation, such as the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act, to make it easier for young people and veterans to complete quality, cost-effective maintenance and improvement projects on public and tribal lands and waters across the country. These programs could address the backlogged maintenance needs of land and water management agencies; enhance outdoor recreation opportunities; improve the accessibility of public lands; and respond to wildfires and other natural disasters.”</p> <p>This is also consistent with WGA Policy Resolution 2017-09, Western Agriculture, which states: “Western Governors encourage the expansion of programs that can meet the unique educational, training, technical and financial needs of new, beginning and veteran farmers and ranchers and other USDA programming that can help returning veterans develop and expand business opportunities in rural communities.”</p>
	<p>Sec. 12410. Requires 60-day notification of relevant committees before closing a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or relocating personnel employed within NRCS or the Rural Development mission area.</p>	<p>Western Governors have expressed the need to be consulted on any federal reorganization activity that may have federalism implications, and generally support the Senate position.</p>
	<p>Sec. 12520.</p>	<p>The Senate provision is consistent with WGA Policy Resolution 2017-09, Western Agriculture, in</p>

House Version	Senate Version	WGA Policy / Discussion
	Requires a report describing the funding necessary to address the needs of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, activities carried out under the Smith-Level Act, and research and extension programs at 1890 Institutions or institutions designated under the "First Morrill Act", to provide services for the growth and development of economies or rural communities based on changing demographics.	which Western Governors "support the continued efforts to provide financial assistance for...broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas."
	Sec. 12516. Establishes a Task Force for Reviewing the Connectivity and Technology Needs of Precision Agriculture, which includes representatives from State and local governments.	Western Governors note that the Senate provision is consistent with National Forest and Rangeland Management initiative administrative recommendation 4C, which states: "leverage the use of state, tribal, and local expertise and science in federal environmental review, consultation and permitting requirements. Collaborate with environmental regulators to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities."
	Sec. 12517. Authorizes USDA to improve soil moisture monitoring, including by increasing monitoring stations. Allows the Secretary to coordinate with other Federal agencies and State and local governments, among others, when carrying out certain provisions in the bill.	Western Governors generally support the Senate provision. WGA Policy Resolution 2018-08 , Water Resource Management in the West, affirms that the Governors "support state and federal efforts to maintain adequate collection of drought and water data, enhance data networks where appropriate, and facilitate better use of existing information."

February 28, 2019

The Honorable Bill Northey
Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Northey:

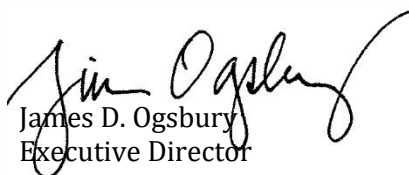
On behalf of Western Governors, I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill, which includes many provisions to support working lands across the West. Many of these Farm Bill programs will be implemented or supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). As outlined in our previous correspondence (attached), the NRCS is a critical federal partner of western states, as the conservation programs it manages provide needed leverage for private landowners to engage in beneficial agricultural production and conservation activities.

The NRCS plays a key role in implementing a variety of Farm Bill programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program. These programs help landowners maintain their working lands and achieve a wide range of related objectives, from water quality protection, to habitat conservation and improvement, to wildfire mitigation.

The Farm Bill acknowledges the importance of conducting landscape-scale restoration on both state and private land in cross-boundary projects, which is often a challenge in the West due to “checkerboard” ownership patterns of federal, state, and private lands. The NRCS addresses this challenge by synchronizing federal land management actions with similar efforts on private land. NRCS’s engagement with private landowners helps ensure that conservation actions have demonstrably positive effects across the landscape and that western producers can continue to operate productive agricultural lands.

Western Governors appreciate the high value of NRCS programs throughout the West and urge your favorable consideration of these comments.

Respectfully,



James D. Ogsbury
Executive Director

Attachment

June 5, 2018

The Honorable Bill Northey
Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Northey:

Western Governors appreciate the dialogue and the growing relationship we have enjoyed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) under Secretary Perdue's leadership. Thank you for taking the time to discuss issues of mutual concern on a recent conference call with the Staff Advisory Council of the Western Governors' Association (WGA). We are optimistic that your engagement with western states will lead to greater state-federal collaboration and redound to the benefit of our shared constituents.

We applaud your efforts to streamline the operations of Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) agencies. This should result in greater efficiency for programs of the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Risk Management Agency. We hope your initiative will result in greater programmatic value and better service to agricultural producers and private landowners. Please consider the following as you proceed to implement operational changes.

Intergovernmental Collaboration: Through WGA's National Forest and Rangeland Management Initiative, we have experienced the benefits of working together to address the land management challenges in western states. The Governors' leadership brought together state foresters, NRCS, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Department of the Interior (DOI) to examine land management practices and reforms. These land managers were joined by a wide range of non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and agricultural and other business interests. The initiative produced 48 discrete [recommendations](#), which our state foresters and land managers, along with our federal partners, are presently implementing. Both USFS and NRCS have been invaluable contributors to the initiative, and Western Governors hope both agencies will continue to be an integral part of this productive effort.

Conservation Flexibility and Multiple Use: NRCS has been adept at using its various conservation programs to address a wide range of land management needs, from forest restoration to water quality enhancement, and from habitat conservation for imperiled species to reducing the threat of invasive species. These conservation tools help western agricultural lands retain their working status, providing economic benefits for rural communities and ensuring that land management needs are properly addressed. Western states expect that NRCS will continue to contribute to western working lands in effective and practical ways.

The Honorable Bill Northey

June 5, 2018

Page 2

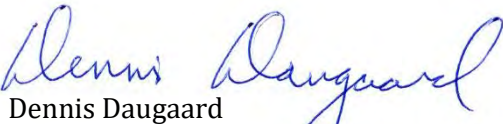
NRCS Leveraging Capability: NRCS conservation programs are among the few existing mechanisms for states and federal agencies to engage private landowners on cross-boundary land management priorities. They empower private landowners to work with states and the federal government on large-scale management issues across areas with different land ownerships. The ability to leverage the resources and involvement of private landowners and provide informed technical assistance to those landowners significantly enhances the value of the agency to western states.

Agency Cooperation: Under the previous management structure, NRCS and USFS both reported to the same Under Secretary, making it relatively simple for the agencies to identify opportunities for cross-boundary cooperation. The Joint Chiefs Initiative between NRCS and USFS reinforced this collaboration between the agencies. We encourage you to consider continuing this effort or instituting a similar mechanism to ensure cooperation between the agencies. In fact, it may be useful to expand this effort beyond USDA to include relevant DOI agencies, including the Bureau of Land Management, which has extensive land management responsibilities in western states and is a critical partner in cross-boundary activities.

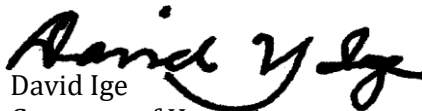
NRCS programs help western landowners achieve multiple agricultural production and conservation objectives. Working lands conservation programs, developed through locally-led partnerships, improve soil health and drought resiliency on the West's croplands, rangelands, pastures and forests. Conservation easement programs preserve working lands and help maintain agriculture's positive contributions to rural economies. NRCS technical assistance helps landowners improve the efficiency and effectiveness of land management practices. Finally, ensuring that producers conduct their work deploying responsible land use practices is critical to responsible stewardship of our natural resources.

We look forward to strengthening the relationships between our states and USDA and partnering to assist western agricultural producers in contributing to our rural economies while conserving natural resource values. To that end, Western Governors would be pleased to have you join us at the WGA annual meeting to be held in Rapid City, South Dakota, from June 24-27, 2018. We would also welcome you to any of our states to see firsthand the role that conservation programs play in western agriculture. If you are interested in such opportunities, please contact Jim Ogsbury, WGA's Executive Director, who would be more than happy to coordinate your participation.

Sincerely,



Dennis Daugaard
Governor of South Dakota
Chair, WGA



David Ige
Governor of Hawaii
Vice Chair, WGA

March 20, 2019

The Honorable Jim Hubbard
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Hubbard:

On behalf of Western Governors, I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on implementation of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 ([Pub. L. 115-334](#), a.k.a. the Farm Bill), which includes many provisions to support forest and rangeland management in the West. Several Farm Bill programs address priorities identified in the Western Governors' Association's (WGA) [National Forest and Rangeland Management Initiative](#), and in WGA Policy Resolution [2017-10, National Forest and Rangeland Management](#).

Western Governors are encouraged by the enactment of Farm Bill provisions that call for greater collaboration between the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and state and local agencies. Such provisions include reauthorization of the annual statewide assessment and strategies for forest resources through Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 and the State and Private Forest Landscape-Scale Restoration Program. Programs such as these leverage state, tribal, and local expertise while reducing legislative and regulatory barriers to restoration activities. Governors also support the Farm Bill's expansion of Good Neighbor Authority to counties and tribes, which should provide greater flexibility for local and tribal governments to participate in cross-boundary projects. Each of these provisions promotes cooperation between federal, state, local, tribal and private land managers and can be helpful in collaboratively addressing western land management needs.

Effective restoration is a vital component of forest and rangeland management. The Farm Bill contains several programs to improve forest and rangeland restoration practices. Among these are the reauthorization of hazardous fuel reduction on federal lands, and the authorization of grants from the competitive forestry, natural resources, and environmental grant program to support forest restoration in addition to research. These programs address Western Governors' call to prioritize restoration activities across all ownerships and create resilient landscapes in areas facing high wildfire risk, significant watershed health issues, and wildlife and fish habitat degradation.

Western Governors hope that the Shared Stewardship initiative of Secretary Perdue will be an effective avenue to facilitate additional communication about, and action on, cross-boundary management priorities across the West. WGA appreciates the Secretary's engagement with Western Governors at their 2018 Winter Meeting, and his execution with WGA leadership of a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on shared stewardship. I look forward to implementation of several cross-boundary projects of regional concern through the MOU, and to the completion of additional agreements between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and states to address specific priority projects and management needs.

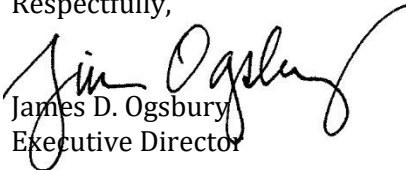
The Honorable Jim Hubbard

March 20, 2019

Page 2

I appreciate your attention to forest and rangeland management and restoration priorities in the West. Please consider Western Governors a resource as you begin implementing Farm Bill provisions and addressing these important issues. In the meantime, with warm regards and best wishes, I am

Respectfully,



James D. Ogsbury
Executive Director