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## Farmer-Driven Conservation Outcomes Act of 2020

USDA invests billions of dollars each year in conservation programs that support farmers and landowners in their efforts to mitigate climate change, protect water quality and enhance our shared resources. However, there is no comprehensive system in place at USDA to measure, evaluate and report on the outcomes associated with conservation programs and practices. This information is essential for farmers to be able to tell the story of how they are contributing to climate change mitigation, improving water quality and preserving other natural resources. Information on the outcomes resulting from these programs is also necessary to evaluate and enhance the conservation tools available to farmers and ranchers across the country. *The Farmer-Driven Conservation Outcomes Act* would provide USDA with the authority to measure, evaluate and report on conservation program outcomes. This would not only provide the information farmers need to demonstrate how they are part of the solution when it comes on climate change mitigation and water quality improvement, but it would also ensure accountability to taxpayers by demonstrating the effectiveness of and return on investment from USDA conservation programs.

Specifically, this legislation would:

- **Authorize the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) and expand USDA's ability to assess natural resource concerns through enhanced measurement, evaluation, and reporting on conservation program outcomes:**

While USDA is currently able to measure conservation effects on national, regional and landscape scales through the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), CEAP is not able to assess the effects of USDA conservation programs or initiatives. Further, CEAP is not authorized in statute and thus is limited in the framework it can provide for expanding measurement, evaluation and reporting on USDA conservation programs. Authorizing CEAP provides a framework on which USDA can further build a system focused on conservation program outcomes.

- **Quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices in order to better build upon and improve program and practice performance:**

Farmers are the original stewards of the land and are a critical part of the solution when it comes to major challenges like climate change mitigation and water quality improvement. Farm bill conservation programs can and must support farmers in these efforts, but in order to ensure that programs and practices are as effective as possible, USDA needs the resources and process to measure, evaluate, and report on conservation outcomes. This will allow the Agency to continually improve on the existing conservation programs and activities to ensure the highest conservation gain possible through available funding and offerings.

- **Direct USDA to use up to 1 percent of funding available for new enrollments of farm bill conservation programs to support the measurement and evaluation process:**

In order to ensure that USDA has the resources it needs to establish this measurement and evaluation process, this legislation directs USDA to use up to 1 percent of funding available for annual new enrollments of farm bill conservation programs to support the measurement and evaluation process. This funding would support the staff capacity and efforts necessary to establish and implement a measurement and evaluation system, while working with key partners on these efforts. This funding would ultimately benefit the farmers who stand to gain from the demonstrated outcomes of conservation programs as well as further improvements that the evaluation would allow USDA to make.

- **Require USDA to report on program progress to Congress and to the public, provided that individual data is aggregated to protect personally identifiable information:**

In order to demonstrate the outcomes associated with conservation programs, this legislation directs USDA to report to Congress and the public on the measurement and evaluation process, all while ensuring the protection of farmers' personal information. This information would provide the outcomes specific data to quantify how farmers are contributing to key conservation goals through program participation. Further, it would provide critical evidence for defending conservation programs and demonstrating their contribution to key objectives, including climate change mitigation and water quality protection.

- **Establish a National Technical Committee and authorize USDA to implement cooperative agreements to support implementation:**

In order to ensure that USDA has the support it needs to implement a measurement, evaluation and reporting system, this bill establishes a National Technical Committee and authorizes cooperative agreements with qualifying federal, state and local agencies, universities and colleges, NGOs and farmer representation. The National Technical

Committee would be comprised of individuals with relevant technical and scientific expertise to assist in the monitoring and evaluation process. Additionally, through cooperative agreements with key partners, USDA could leverage additional expertise and capacity to implement program assessment and evaluation.