September 7, 2023

The Honorable Glenn “GT” Thompson The Honorable David Scott

Chairman Ranking Member

House Committee on Agriculture House Committee on Agriculture

1301 Longworth House Office Building 1010 Longworth House Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20510 Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member Scott,

Thank you for your hard work and dedication as leaders of the House Agriculture Committee. As our committee drafts the 2023 Farm Bill, I write to you to share my priorities for New Mexico’s Second District. The upcoming Farm Bill must work to serve the producers that keep the United States fed, and New Mexico’s farmers and ranchers play a crucial role in doing so.

Recently, you had the opportunity to hear directly from my Agriculture Advisory Group, comprised of New Mexico’s farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers. During this meeting, producers discussed the importance of agricultural issues unique to the Southwest, including everything from food safety net programs, expanding EQIP, to ensuring our producers can access disaster relief funds and young farmer programs. These perspectives are invaluable not just to me and this committee, but to the agricultural economy as a whole.

New Mexico’s agricultural industry is a vital contributor to our nation’s food supply as well as the state’s economy, producing chiles, onions, pecans, beef and dairy products, cotton, hay, and corn for Americans and accounting for over 12 percent of the state’s GDP while supporting over 50,000 jobs. As we work together to craft this Farm Bill, please keep the following priorities for New Mexico’s Second District in mind, as strong support for New Mexican agriculture means strong support for America’s producers.

**Supporting Our Ranchers**

We must use the Farm Bill to ease burdens on ranchers and help them focus on their mission. For example, the reintroduced Mexican wolf belongs on the land in the Southwest, but cattle ranchers have valid concerns over wolf depredation on their herds. To promote the coexistence of our ranchers and Mexican wolves, producers should be compensated at 100 percent the value of their cattle as well as an additional adjustment accounting for the decrease in herd size they face as outlined in my bill, H.R. 2695 the Wolf and Livestock Fairness (WOLF) Act. We have an opportunity in this Farm Bill to help our ranchers protect their herds and cut through some of the red tape that prevents them from improving the efficiency of their operations.

**Voluntary Conservation Programs**

Conserving our wildlife and natural resources is vital to ensuring future generations can utilize and take advantage of the opportunities our land provides. Voluntary conservation programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) are some of our best tools to help advance these goals by allowing producers to take advantage of conservation practices that fit their operations best. These programs are oversubscribed due to their effectiveness and need further support in the Farm Bill for more New Mexican producers to access them and work with federal agencies to complete their projects in a timely manner. Specifically, I ask that the Farm Bill include:

* No cuts to voluntary conservation programs like EQIP, CRP, or RCPP.
* Improved response times and coordination between NRCS and project partners.

**Protecting Nutrition Programs**

We must protect nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) from any cuts and expand it wherever possible. Nearly 1 in 4 households in Southern New Mexico receive assistance from SNAP, and half of those have children under 18 years old – any cuts to the program would put these constituents at risk. The Farm Bill provides an opportunity to protect and grow SNAP, as it is not just a safety net but our most useful tool to help lift people out of poverty. I request the Farm Bill include:

* No cuts to critical nutrition programs like SNAP, TEFAP, or WIC that are lifelines to New Mexicans.
* H.R. 3519 the Hot Foods Act which would allow hot and prepared foods to be purchased with SNAP benefits.
* H.R. 1147 the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act which permits schools to offer whole milk in addition to fat-free and low-fat milk.

**Forestry and Wildfires**

New Mexico is still recovering from the largest wildfire in the state’s history, and New Mexicans are skeptical of the Forest Service after it caused that fire. To restore trust in the Forest Service, we must support the agency so they may hire additional staff to provide forestry technical assistance, conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects, and implement action plans that will prevent future fires across the Southwest. We can support our Tribes and local governments by extending eligibility for the Good Neighbor Authority program, allowing them to use revenue from timber sales to conduct critical forest restoration projects. The Farm Bill should include:

* H.R. 1450 the Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act which ensures tribes and counties can fully participate in Good Neighbor Authority, vital for preventing wildfires.
* Flexible funding for State Forest Action Plan implementation.

**Rural Development and Infrastructure**

Students in rural areas often spend long periods on school buses, and studies have shown that pollution levels are twelve times higher in the cabin of the bus than outdoors. The EPA program that funds purchases of clean school buses, however, provides limited funding for charging infrastructure, and the rural and unserved schools in Southern New Mexico need more support to build the infrastructure needed to power these buses and take full advantage of the program. The Farm Bill should include the text of H.R. 4455 Community Facilities Program for Rural Clean School Bus Infrastructure Act.

Additionally, USDA must move to streamline its high-speed internet programs to connect our most isolated communities and ensure the funding for such programs is being targeted to the rural areas that need support most, as reflected in H.R. 3216 Rural Internet Improvement Act.

**Informing Producers through USDA Climate Hubs**

USDA’s Climate Hubs provide science-based information and technologies that enable farmers, ranchers, and forest managers to make climate-informed decisions that help build resilience to climate change on working lands. A steady funding source for these hubs would protect them for future generations and assist American agriculture in leading the fight against climate change.

The Farm Bill has a storied tradition of bipartisan cooperation among Members of the Agriculture Committee. I am excited to work on both sides of the aisle to make these critical improvements to assist our producers in New Mexico and across the country. I look forward to working with you to advance this legislation in a bipartisan manner for the future of our farms.

Sincerely,

Gabe Vasquez

Member of Congress