Written Testimony

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A 2022 Review of Conservation Programs
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Thank you to Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the House Agriculture Committee for the opportunity to provide written testimony during today's hearing.

Founded in 1883, ASTA is one of the oldest trade organizations in the U.S. Its membership consists of nearly 700 companies involved in seed production and distribution, plant breeding, and related industries in North America. ASTA is the leading voice of action in all matters concerning the research, development, marketing and movement of seed, associated products and services throughout the world. The association promotes the development of better seed to produce better crops for a better quality of life.

Today's food and agriculture system faces unprecedented challenges, from climate change to a growing population, and rapidly evolving pests and diseases. The seed industry is founded on innovation, and innovation is a part of everything we do – from plant breeding and seed treatments, to soil health and habitat restoration. Better seed means better life, for everyone.

Conservation Starts with Quality, Professionally-Produced Environment, Conservation, and Cover Crop Seed

The seed industry plays a unique and critical role in supporting conservation programs. Whether it be farmers enrolling acres in the Conservation Reserve Program, signing up for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to promote wildlife habitat or other environmental benefits, or strengthening efforts on working lands by implementing management activities through the Conservation Stewardship Program, farmers and landowners need quality, professionally produced seed.

Environmental and conservation seed, for example, helps to restore lands devastated by wildfires, natural disasters, and invasive weeds. It serves as the foundation of healthy landscapes, contributing to stable ecosystems and economies, all while providing critical erosion-control and biodiversity. The significant use of cover crops in production agriculture is another one of the most promising practices to address the stewardship of our soils and nutrient reduction in our environment. As the use of environment, conservation, and cover crop seed has expanded considerably in recent years, ASTA member companies have remained committed to working with farmers and other customers to achieve success through the use of the right seed at the right place at the right time. Quality cover crop seed helps farmers not only achieve their conservation goals, but also their business goals, by contributing to soil health and carbon sequestration, while conserving resources and boosting productivity. With this in mind, ASTA has developed a new resource for locating professionally-produced environmental, conservation, and cover crop seed that allows farmers, land owners, and others to easily locate and contact professional seed suppliers.

As Congress looks at Farm Bill conservation programs to support environmental and economic benefits within sustainable farmland practices, we encourage you to prioritize the need for high quality, professionally produced seed. ASTA member companies have been supplying farmers with conservation seed for decades, and have a wealth of knowledge, experience, and expertise when it comes to quality conservation seed that is both appropriate and cost-effective.

Challenges in Meeting Increasing Seed Demand

U.S. seed companies strive to provide variety choice and performance for America's growers, gardeners and landscape managers to ensure the best seed is available for the market. The vast array of choices meets the needs of the wide range of environments, soil types and management practices. Just like other agriculture producers, seed producers shoulder the same pressures of increased costs along the value chain – from inputs, to labor, to transportation, to cost of land. Furthermore, seed companies are often making seed planting and production decisions two growing seasons in advance of seed sales. This creates additional constraints for seed companies to respond to last minute changes in demand. Despite these challenges, the U.S. seed industry is committed to meeting growing and changing market demands.

Long-term Success Requires Clear & Predictable Policies, Collaboration

As the need for conservation seed continues to rise, the seed industry needs clear expectations and government policies that provide certainty and transparency. Seed companies make significant investments in research, collaboration and data over long periods of time in order to understand and meet the unique and changing needs of their customers. Because of the inherent risk involved in this process, it's vital that government policies around seed and conservation programs are clear and workable, for the seed industry and for farmers.

Benefits of Cover Crops

Cover crops are known to provide benefits to a farmer's operation by reducing soil compaction, increasing water infiltration, and improving soil health by improving the biological, chemical and physical soil properties. Cover crops can also suppress soil diseases and pests, and reduce or provide nitrogen in fields, depending on the species. Cover crops can provide forage for livestock and help store nutrients from manure. The natural resource and the environment benefits are also significant with the use of cover crops that can reduce soil loss from erosion, reduce water runoff through increased infiltration, reduce nutrient runoff and leaching, sequester carbon and provide wildlife and pollinator habitat.

Although continued research and quantification of benefits is always needed, a report from Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) showed that cover crops have the potential to sequester approximately 60 million metric tons of C02 equivalent per year when planted across 20 million acres. SARE also qualifies the benefits of the use of cover crops to include:

- Reducing sediment losses from erosion by 20.8 tons per acre on conventional-till fields, 6.5 tons per acre on reduced-till fields and 1.2 tons per acre on no-till fields;
- Reducing nitrogen losses by an average of 48% and as much as 89%;
- The ability to reduce average total phosphorus loads to waterways by 15% to 92%, but additional research is still needed.

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Seed Industry Farm Bill Conservation Title Policy Recommendations

As this Committee evaluates changes to the next Farm Bill, it will be critical to the seed industry that policies include necessary flexibilities that allow producers access to the right seed at the right time. Transparency is increasingly important as the use of cover crops continues to rise. Farmers would benefit from a clear and transparent methodology to add species and varieties to the state recommended cover crop lists. This improved certainty will encourage private sector investment in variety development. Additionally, ASTA will continue to advocate for conservation programs that emphasize cover crop education and provide cost share and incentives for planting cover crops when appropriate, and support the evaluation of cover crops. These proposals include:

- New Approaches to Expand Cover Crop Adoption
    - NRCS Conservation programs are oversubscribed, with many growers' applications not being funded. With over 50% of applications going unfunded, new approaches should be considered to provide streamlined enrollment and financial assistance to growers seeking to plant cover crops. This could include financial incentives for growers through a tiered structure by designating payment by number of cover crop species planted.
- Improve Conservation Program Delivery
    - Clarification is needed in NRCS program decision making related to cover crop seed selection. Local field staff, crop advisors and others need flexibility to make real time decisions to modify cover crop seed selection in a manner that allows growers to meet the goals of the conservation program contract and recognize the dynamics of local seed availability. That critical decision-making period results from the convergence of harvest dates and access to the field, weather, USDA processing of program applications and fiscal year deadlines, all leading to cover crop seed selection during a few weeks in late summer and early fall. When seed demand is high, growers should have more choices in seed selection due to limited local availability and price management.
- Increase Plant Diversity and Climate Benefits
    - In the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Programs, more practices should be offered for agricultural producers to increase legumes, forbs, and pollinators in grazing systems to achieve greater GHG sequestration as well as biodiversity. Additionally, including grassland restoration and improvement as a part of the cost-share and technical assistance available to producers in the Conservation Reserve Program would also aid in increasing GHG sequestration and biodiversity.
    - Within the Conservation Reserve Program, USDA should utilize mid-contract management authority to improve carbon mitigation and sequestration in all CRP program offerings, by improving plant diversity. Additionally, CRP should offer cost-share assistance for improving plant diversity.

ASTA's Long-Term Vision for the Future of Cover Crops

Conservation practices, including the use of quality, professionally produced cover crop seed, are an important tool not only for soil health and retention, but also to address sustainability efforts of growers and livestock producers. Cover crops play a vital role to farmers' economic livelihood and productivity. Future, long-term success will require growers, seed companies, and local, state, and federal governments to work in close coordination with one another, to develop policies that provide

certainty and transparency. ASTA stands ready to serve as a resource and looks forward to working with Congress throughout the policy development process.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. ASTA continues to work through policy recommendations and we will remain in contact with the Members of the House Agriculture Committee as we refine these recommendations.