

Chairman Jones, Vice-Chair Klopfenstein, Ranking Member Brent and distinguished members of the House Agricultural Committee, my name is Dr. John Patterson and currently I serve as the State Executive Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency.

As you know, agriculture is Ohio's largest industry. According to the Ohio Department of Agriculture, over \$124 billion dollars are contributed annually to Ohio's economy by this industry. Clearly it is imperative to ensure that not only do we sustain such production, but we seek to enhance it. One such initiative to do just that is to create a Healthy Soils Task Force, which HB 568 would do. The USDA, and by extension, the Ohio Farm Service Agency fully supports such an initiative.

The USDA website promoting healthy soil practices states that "healthy soil is the foundation of productive, sustainable agriculture. Managing for soil health allows producers to work with the land—not against it—to reduce erosion, maximize water infiltration, improve nutrient cycling, save money on inputs, and ultimately improve the resiliency of their working land."

The timing of this hearing could not be more providential as World Soil Day was celebrated last Thursday, December 5. World Soil Day, which is an annual commemoration, is a global recognition of the importance of maintaining healthy soil. According to the USDA, 95% of our food comes from soils and up to 58% more food could be produced through sustainable soil management. That is why the work we do at the Farm Service Agency in partnership with farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, and Tribal partners is so important. The investments we are making in soil health practices and climate-smart mitigation activities such as no-till, cover cropping, and diverse rotations, not only advance sustainability but increase agricultural production. Since 2012, the USDA and its partners have helped producers install soil health practices on more than 40 million acres of working agricultural lands throughout the United States.

Specially, the USDA has developed four major principles to improve soil health. First, we should attempt to minimize disturbance to the soil. This can be accomplished by limiting tillage, optimizing chemical inputs, and rotating livestock. Second, soil should be covered whenever possible. To maximize soil cover year round we can plant cover crops, use organic mulch, and leave plant residue. Third, we should maximize biodiversity to break disease cycles, stimulate plant growth, and provide habitat for pollinators and organisms in the soil. To do this, it is important to plant diverse cover crops, use diverse crop rotations, and integrate livestock. Finally, we must attempt to maximize the presence of living roots. Living roots reduce soil erosion and provide food for organisms like earthworms and microbes that cycle the nutrients that plants need. Once more, cover crops and practicing diverse crop rotations will help to maximize living roots. Clearly, my agency and the USDA have been purposeful in our quest to promote soil health.

Therefore, I must reiterate my agency's support for HB 568 which will create the Healthy Soils Task Force and thereby enhance food production critical for an ever-increasing population. Once more, working closely with our good friends at the Ohio Department of Agriculture, we can do just that. I thank you for the opportunity to address you and I will take any questions you might have.

