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**December 23, 2024**

Ms. Sara del Fierro  
Climate Mitigation Lead, NRCS Climate Office  
Office of the Chief, NRCS  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, South Building  
Room 4613  
Washington, D.C. 20250

**RE: Request for Public Input About Implementation of the Conservation Practices To Support Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation; Docket ID # NRCS-2024-0015**

Dear Ms. Fierro:

On behalf of the Agricultural Retailers Association (ARA), I am submitting comments on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) request for public input on the implementation of conservation practices to support climate change mitigation and adaptation.

**Statement of Interest**

ARA is the recognized unified national voice and trusted resource for agricultural retailers and distributors. ARA unites its members and their interests to advocate and educate on their behalf, provide services to improve their businesses, and preserve their freedom to operate and innovate, ensuring a safe and plentiful food supply for all.

**Comments**

Ag retailers work directly with agricultural producers to help develop their crop plans and are increasingly becoming a conduit of information for USDA conservation programs. Additionally, we provide information on advancements with biostimulants, enhanced efficiency fertilizers, variable rate technologies, cover crops, no-till, strip-till, and many other conservation-based practices. USDA, farmers, and ag retailers know what programs are popular. Ag retail's role can be enhanced if additional funding for popular conservation programs is available, and we can encourage and help farmers apply for these programs.

Increased conservation funding produces more demand for program implementation. Certified Crop

Advisers (CCAs) are an integral part of consulting with agricultural producers on their crop plans and become trusted advisors. USDA can include CCAs in the implementation and delivery of conservation technical assistance programs, as well as Technical Service Providers (TSPs) and USDA employees, to provide producers the maximum flexibility in applying for conservation programs. Designing programs that allow agriculture producers to stack program opportunities will be a step in the direction of maximum program participation so economic outcomes are positive at the field level. Allowing several pathways for implementation and conservation delivery will best support an equitable program, allowing producers to work with entities that they rely on as trusted advisors.

Agricultural producers are interested in their ag retailer providing the planning assistance, information, equipment, and knowledge that will match conservation practices with the emerging carbon markets/practices promoted by the USDA. As the private sector carbon markets develop, USDA can play a productive role by modernizing their programs to increase flexibility and meet the increasingly diverse needs at the field level.

ARA is appreciative of the work being done by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish the Greenhouse Gas Technical Assistance Provider and Third-Party Verifier Program (the Program), authorized under the provisions of the Growing Climate Solutions Act (GCSA). While the business community, including agricultural retailers, will drive how this market works, we appreciate USDA's outreach and inclusion in the process. While most growers are aware of carbon programs, we do see a lag in adoption and a need for more education on the protocols and processes, particularly regarding offsets vs. supply chain insets. Education is imperative to adoption. We implore USDA to conduct a series of listening sessions with retailers and other private sector businesses involved in current markets to learn more during the process of establishing the Program. We are willing and available to help conduct these sessions and welcome the opportunity for more engagement.

ARA recommends USDA-NRCS add Conservation Stewardship Program E595D, "Increase the Size Requirement of Refuges Planted to Slow Pest Resistance to Bt Crops." This conservation enhancement activity that promotes the planting of refuge seed is designed to slow the development of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) resistant pests by planting a certain percentage of fields with non-Bt crops called refuge crops. As stated by NRCS, "A refuge is intended to provide a source of a large number of Bt-susceptible insects to counter any resistant insects." As highlighted by USDA-NRCS and EPA, there has been a challenge in the Southeast regarding refuge seed planting compliance. A low percentage of growers are purchasing and planting refuge seed. Growers are focused on maximizing yields of their crops and profits to remain operational as they face significant economic challenges.

ARA believes USDA-NRCS adding this refuge incentive program under their efforts to implement

climate change mitigation measures and adaptation will help increase enrollment in this program. ARA also recommends lowering the required refuge threshold from 30% to 25% or lower to help increase enrollment. We understand the need to have a threshold requirement higher than EPA label requirements of 20% refuge seed when planting Bt seed. We are working with EPA to address the refuge seed issue to see if their refuge requirements can be slightly lowered based on new data being collected by the industry, including the option of placing refuge seed in the bag with the Bt seed.

EPA has highlighted the following benefits of preserving the durability of Bt crops:

- Decreased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, reduced worker exposure to conventional pesticides, potential for reduced groundwater and soil pollution, and limited non-target effects.
- Decreased fuel use in application vehicles has resulted in an estimated 243 million kilograms less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions between 1996-2020 in North America (Brookes 2022).
- Data from 1996-2016 estimates a 67.7-million-kilogram reduction in pesticide use from planting Bt corn and a 22.5 million-kilogram reduction from planting Bt cotton in the US (Brookes and Barfoot 2018).

It is critical for the federal government to make decisions based on sound science, peer-reviewed data, and by following a risk-based approach. Farmers need to have access to critical crop input supplies (pesticides, fertilizers, seed) and precision agricultural technologies. The Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) has been amended by Congress on several occasions to strengthen the regulatory standard for safety, including specific protections for infants and children. FIFRA provides for the federal regulation of pesticide distribution, sale, and use and establishes stringent safety standards and oversight. Farmers use pesticides to fight invasive insects, weeds, and plant diseases that attack fruit, vegetable, grain, and fiber crops. All applicators are required to follow the EPA-approved FIFRA label to ensure each pesticide is used as intended without unreasonable adverse or unintended effects on human health or the environment. In addition to federal oversight, each state may develop its own pesticide regulations, reviewing and approving pesticide products already reviewed and approved by EPA for use in the state.

Pesticides are an essential tool for farmers to grow more food using less land and water as it helps protect from pests, weeds, and diseases. Without the use of pesticides, America's agricultural production would likely be reduced by more than half. This necessary tool for modern agricultural production enables farmers to produce safe, quality, and affordable foods for the nation's consumers. Pesticides also help promote sustainable agricultural practices as no-till farming would be impossible without herbicides for weed control. Pesticides are also critical to help protect public health from the threat of insects, rodents, and microbes that cause and spread diseases.

U.S. agriculture remains the leader in innovation for plant breeding innovation due to clear,

predictable, and science-and risk-based regulations. Plant breeders continue to strive to provide solutions to new and emerging challenges facing farmers, consumers, and the environment. Ag biotechnology such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and gene editing can help increase global food security. New innovations in plant breeding provide benefits such as reducing CO2 emissions, dramatically increasing crop productivity, providing more food to remote communities, and decreasing food waste.

For healthy and productive growth of nutritious food, plants also require essential nutrients in the soil. Fertilizers serve as a supplement to the natural supply of soil nutrients, build up soil fertility to help satisfy the demands of crop production, and compensate for the nutrients taken by harvested crops. Higher crop yields are well documented with better crop and soil management. Adopting nutrient stewardship contributes to the preservation of natural ecosystems by growing more on less land.

We feel greater program flexibility that offers menus of choices to qualify for program compliance will help more producers participate in enhanced conservation practices. Some of the choices may include new and emerging technologies that are boosted by farm-level research of the innovative methods to jump-start understanding and adoption.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard D. Gupton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard D. Gupton  
Senior Vice President, Public Policy & Counsel