Testimony of John Piotti
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Chairman Hastings and Honorable Members of the House Rules Committee.

I am John Piotti, the President and CEO of American Farmland Trust, a nonprofit organization founded 40 years ago to help protect farmland, advance sound farming practices, and help keep farmers on the land.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I applaud the committee for exploring this issue of resiliency. It is critically important to our farmers and to our rural communities. Your purpose aligns closely with AFT's mission and activities.

Since our founding in 1980, AFT has helped permanently protect 6.5 million acres of farmland with agricultural conservation easements, making sure that that land will forever be available to both grow food and to provide critical environmental services, including those that increase resiliency. At the same time, we have helped advance farming practices that enhance resiliency on millions of additional acres, and we have promoted policies and provided services that have helped over a half million farmers and ranchers stay in business.

AFT has for decades undertaken a combination of critical research, policy work, and focused programming in multiple states. But my purpose today is not to list AFT's past accomplishments or current priorities; but rather, to outline some of the issues that we, through our experience, see as essential to the resiliency of farmers and rural America.

I am going to highlight four different areas, providing basic information on each. I will gladly provide more detailed information, as desired, either during the Q&A period or after the hearing.

Better farming practices boost resiliency

AFT has spent much of its history helping farmers improve soil health through practices that include reduced tillage (no till or low till) and active use of crop rotations and cover crops. Building soil health has numerous benefits, including these:

- Healthier soils soak up water more quickly and can store more of it. This keeps water on fields and reduces runoff into streams and rivers, reducing the severity of flooding. (You can see this with your own eyes if you drive around the countryside during a big spring rainstorm—bare fields will have water pooling and running off them, while pastures and cover cropped fields will have far less runoff.)
- Maintaining fields with cover crops and perennials, or even with crop residue, keeps soils in place during heavy rainfall or flooding. Farms managed with these practices will be able to bounce back after an extreme event and start farming again more rapidly.
- Keeping soil on farm fields will also reduce recovery costs downstream, because there will be less sediment to clean up.

There are many examples of how this past spring's heavy rainfall prevented farmers from planting or forced them to plant late. Yet AFT's heard from farmers who used practices like no-till and use cover crops that they were often able to farm when their neighbors often not. One of the most frequently heard comments was that regardless of how much rainfall there was, farmers who had cover crops saw little soil erosion.

Agricultural conservation easements can mitigate flooding

Farmland provides a natural means of tempering storm water and floodwaters. In fact, it is often the development on farmland that funnels storm water in ways that exacerbate negative impacts. Hurricane Harvey, which hit Texas in 2017, is an example of this. So much farmland around Houston had been developed that the city no longer retained a natural resiliency. Sadly, this in happening in Houston again right now.

Another example of where development has led to faster storm water flow and increased flooding is in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. The devastation that occurred as a result of Hurricane Irene is well known to chairman McGovern. Many farms were underwater, and sadly, a lot of topsoil was washed to the sea. The irony is that farms were hurt by the fact that there is less farmland in the area now than there once was. Development occurring on farmland puts the remaining farmland at higher risk.

This does not have to be what happens. In response to the devastation of Hurricane Harvey the executive director of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust, one of many agricultural land trusts that AFT helped create, testified before the Texas Legislature on the use of agricultural conservation easements as a strategy to mitigate potential flooding.

Although agricultural conservation easements have been applied on millions of acres nationally, they are not commonly used to mitigate flood risks. A few states are using federal Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds to buy "Floodplain Conservation Easements." The first application that we are aware of was in the late 1990s in Illinois following flooding along the Mississippi River. Another example was in 2001 in Nebraska. Yet these are rare cases. FEMA needs to raise awareness of how conservation easements can be used to target agricultural lands that would be a natural buffer to flooding.

Farms can play a critical role in flood attenuation and groundwater recharge

In California, farmers are creatively working to both minimize the negative impacts of floods and help save floodwaters for future use. Here are two examples from the San Joaquin Valley:

- In the King's River Basin, farmers are currently pumping an unsustainable volume of water during dry years that is drawing down the aquifer as much as 900 feet in some areas. The rapid withdrawal of water is causing the land to subside by over a foot per year. In high water years, the region risk floods from rivers that crest their bank. Farmers in this area are piloting a new approach in which excess water during high precipitation years will be diverted directly onto the fields, flooding them. The water then will slowly sink into the ground and recharge the aquifer.

- One local farm is undertaking a NRCS-funded project that will use a series of canals, pumps, and turnouts to capture and divert flood water from the King's River. This project will protect five thousand acres of farmland from flooding and create habitat for waterfowl. It will increase recharge and flood mitigation capacities while protecting groundwater quality.

We need more innovative projects of this sort.

Farms and Farmers also enhance resiliency in other ways

So far today, I have been talking about how farms can help buffer floods and storms through on-the-ground practices. But I want to mention two other ways that farms enhance resiliency.

First, let me stress how the economic and environmental health of many rural communities is directly tied to the vibrancy of farming. And as we all know, the overall health of rural communities is critical to their resiliency and capacity for adaptation. Thus, it is critical that farming remain vital if rural communities are to remain healthy. We know that many farm communities are struggling, for a variety of issues that are beyond the scope of this hearing. Any strategy designed to enhance rural resiliency must have at its core efforts to strengthen farming.

Second, let me mention the role that farmers often play in rural communities in a crisis. Farmers more often than not are key contributors to a community, perhaps as volunteer firemen or first responders. Beyond that, farmers often possess exactly what's needed in a time of crisis, be that heavy equipment and the know how to use it, stored foodstuffs, and barns and warehouses that can be used to shelter people or supplies.

Simply put, farms and farmers are essential to rural resiliency.