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Protecting Water for Western Irrigated Agriculture

April 16, 2021

The Honorable Michael Bennet
United States Senate
261 Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Support for Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act

Dear Senator Bennet:

On behalf of the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance), thank you for your continued work to help restore Western forests, watersheds, and rangeland. In that spirit, we welcome the opportunity to formally support your *Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act*.

The Alliance is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and allied industries in 16 Western states. We are committed to the fundamental proposition that Western irrigated agriculture must be preserved and protected for a host of economic, sociological, environmental, and national security reasons – many of which are often overlooked in the context of other national policy decisions. The American food consumer nationwide has access to fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, and beef throughout the year largely because of Western irrigated agriculture and the projects that provide water to these farmers and ranchers.

Forests and watersheds are the natural infrastructure that sustain our economy in the West. While climate change continues to drive catastrophic wildfires and prolonged drought, Congress has failed to invest in our western lands, undermining our economy and way of life. As a result, local governments are often left to foot the bill for conservation, restoration, and wildfire mitigation. Upgrading our natural infrastructure is an opportunity to build climate resilience and create or sustain millions of good-paying jobs.

Your bill would establish an Outdoor Restoration Fund to increase support for local collaborative efforts to restore forests and watersheds, reduce wildfire risk, clean up public lands, enhance wildlife habitat, remove invasive species, and expand outdoor access. It would empower local leaders by making \$20 billion directly available to state and local governments, tribes, special districts, and non-profits to support restoration, resilience, and mitigation projects across public, private, and tribal lands. The bill would invest another \$40 billion in targeted projects to restore wildlife

The bill establishes an advisory council of local, industry, conservation, and national experts to advise on funding priorities, coordinate with existing regional efforts, and provide oversight. We share your belief that empowering local leaders provides opportunities to bring diverse voices to the table is the path for progress in the West. Towards that end, we look forward to working with you to ensure that the final Restoration Fund Advisory Council proposed in Section 4 of the bill is crafted to properly ensure that there is stronger representation from local resource-dependent industries like agriculture. The Family Farm Alliance has long held that the best natural resource solutions are unique and come from the local, watershed and state level.

We believe this bill provides an important opportunity to address critical restoration challenges in Western watersheds. Improvements in watershed health also result in positive water quantity impacts. The bill appears to be focused on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which owns federal land throughout the United States. In the West, the Department of the Interior also has a significant federal presence. We appreciate that the bill directs USDA to carry out certain restoration and resilience projects on federal land in coordination with the Secretary of the Interior. This legislation should reflect that the Interior Department and its agencies play a role in the Western United States that is equally important as the USDA. The Bureau of Land Management manages vast swaths of federal land in the West, and the Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Geological Survey all have significant influence on Western resource issues. These agencies should have a leadership role in this proposed program, along with USDA agencies like the Forest Service.

We appreciate your strong leadership on these issues - forest health, watershed improvement, invasive species control, and Western wildlife - which are so important to farmers and ranchers throughout the American West. The future of the rural West will be defined by the inter-relationship between local communities, farmers, ranchers, foresters and constructive conservation groups working together to balance production and conservation. Your bill tangibly moves us forward towards implementing this vision.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patrick F. O'Toole". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Patrick O'Toole
President