Opening Statement of Chairman Sheldon Whitehouse
Senate Committee on the Budget
"Cultivating Stewardship: Examining the Changing Agricultural Landscape"
June 7, 2023

Ranking Member Grassley, members of the committee, witnesses, and guests, welcome to our thirteenth committee hearing. Today, we return to our series on the economic toll of a changing climate, this time with a bipartisan hearing with witnesses both sides agreed to. We will hear from farmers on the front line about climate risks to the agriculture sector, the associated economic and budgetary costs, and the important steps that we can take to help mitigate them.

As we've highlighted in this series, the ongoing climate crisis poses enormous threats to peoples' well-being on this planet, and to our industries, our livelihoods, and our entire economy.

Our nation's agricultural landscape is changing. Unpredictable weather has always been a challenge to raising crops and livestock, but farmers are seeing more frequent and extreme weather variability than ever before. Events that used to be considered anomalies now occur with increasing regularity.

For decades, California faced record-breaking droughts; this year, California crops face record floods. Last year, Kansas suffered a triple-digit heat wave that killed thousands of cattle; this year, Kansas is struggling with a drought forcing farmers to abandon their wheat fields. In 2018, Hurricane Michael swept through Florida and Georgia damaging cotton, pecan, and poultry farms; last year, Florida citrus farms hit historic production lows after twin hurricanes, Ian and Nicole. Atypical events are the new norm, leading to lower crop yields, lower livestock productivity, worse pests and disease, and reduced soil fertility.

Consumers are seeing the impacts of climate change on their grocery bills; and will continue to bear the brunt of lower crop yields and increased production costs.

As climate change affects food production in our country, it's also affecting food production around the world. The United States imports a third of our fresh vegetables, more than half our fresh fruit, and 94 percent of the seafood we consume. Global weather variability disrupting supply chains and global agricultural productivity will have far-reaching effects on food prices and supply. U.S. government programs that protect growers and stabilize the agricultural economy move the costs of damaging weather events to the federal government.

The largest is the Federal Crop Insurance Program. In 2022, the federal government spent over $15 billion on that program, which included over $11.6 billion in premium subsidies. Indemnities — what the government paid out to those affected — in the last year were around $18 billion dollars. As climate change makes farming and raising livestock more unpredictable, it is a cost that will continue to grow.

Spending on other disaster assistance programs is also likely to grow as extreme weather events become more prevalent. In just three years of the Emergency Relief Program, the federal government has already disbursed more than $7.4 billion to help agricultural producers. This is on top of the Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program, which provided payments to farmers for losses caused by hurricanes, wildfires, and other natural disasters.

Ranking Member Grassley and I agree that the agriculture sector can play a role in the climate solution. As we'll hear today, climate-smart agriculture can drive down greenhouse gas emissions, such as methane. It can improve soil health and sequester carbon, and it can help make farms stronger in the face of a changing climate. Farmers know that climate-smart practices — such as cover crops, no-till, and diversification — increase food production and make agriculture more resilient.

Farmers like those here today are on the front lines of building resilience and adapting to a changing agricultural landscape. Major agricultural corporations like Cargill warn that midwestern production of some commodities, like wheat and corn, could drop by as much as 69% by the end of the century absent significant emissions mitigation or adaptation.
Our collective future depends on getting it right on climate.