



UTAH FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

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"Inspire All Utah Families to Connect, Succeed, and Grow Through the Miracle of Agriculture."

January 18, 2024

Dear Chairs Sandall and Barlow:

The Utah Farm Bureau was recently informed of concerns that State Treasurer Oaks shared with your committee regarding conservation easements and the LeRay McCallister Working Farm and Ranch Program. We wish to make clear that the Utah Farm Bureau Federation is supportive of the LeRay McCallister Program and continued state appropriations to the fund.

The LeRay McAllister Program uses funds appropriated by the Legislature to purchase conservation easements on select parcels of private land, acquire small parcels in fee title under limited circumstances, and provide small restoration grants to improve conserved lands. Since 1999, the LeRay McAllister Fund has conserved nearly 100,000 acres of land in Utah.

The state of Utah is growing rapidly. According to the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, Utah's population is projected to grow from 3.2 million in 2020 to 5.4 million in 2060, a 66% increase. As our population continues to increase, pressure on agricultural land is mounting rapidly. Farmland loss is a significant threat to our state's economy and self-sufficiency, food security, and national security. Unfortunately, there are few options for preserving farmland. These options largely include conservation easements, agricultural protection areas designated by counties, and simply making farming more profitable.

The LeRay McCallister Program provides an important option for farmers and ranchers to voluntarily sell development rights to ensure their farms and ranches can remain in perpetuity. In 2022, the Legislature moved the LeRay McAllister Program under the purview of the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF). UDAF administering conservation easements in the state of Utah provides an opportunity for farmers and ranchers to work with an agency that cares deeply about their issues and supports their industry. Utah Farm Bureau supports education related to conservation easements to assist those who have an interest in this method of agricultural land preservation.

We also want to make clear that agricultural conservation easements differ from conservation easements generally. UDAF administers the program within specific constraints that the Legislature set. Importantly, funds may be used to acquire land or an easement only after the locally elected legislative body, within whose jurisdiction the subject property lies, has properly approved the acquisition plan by including the proposal on a public meeting agenda with adequate public notice. Additionally, all agreements under the Program are reviewed by the Attorney General's Office.

We urge the Legislature to continue supporting the LeRay McCallister Working Farm and Ranch Program. We hope the Legislature will continue to recognize the importance of farming and ranching in the state of Utah and provide the tools necessary for profitable agriculture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "ValJay Rigby". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

ValJay Rigby
President
Utah Farm Bureau Federation

cc: Utah State Treasurer Marlo Oaks