Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to come before the Agriculture Committee on what I believe is one of the most important issues facing the nation's farmers -- soil erosion. I know that the Committee has done a great deal of research on this bill and the issue generally, and I am truly grateful that the bill has now been co-sponsored by 23 of my colleagues, including several Members of this Committee.

I first introduced the sodbuster bill on November 9, 1981, nearly two years ago. And the process which has led to this hearing is very illustrative of the importance of the bill to the American farmer.

I have some material on the bill which I would ask to be included in the record of this hearing, and I don't think it's particularly important for me to talk at length about the bill now, since the committee understands it already, and since today's hearing will include a number of very distinguished witnesses more expert on the technical aspects of this than me. But I would like to spend a couple of minutes framing the basic issues involved, and briefly describe the process which has led us to this point.

Mr. Chairman, the issue is simply this: America's topsoil is washing and blowing away at an unacceptable rate. The Soil Conservation Service estimates that we lose more than 5 billion tons of the best topsoil every year -- more than at any time during the dust bowl days of the 1930's. We're losing a great deal of this topsoil because of the rampant plowing of fragile grasslands, and the federal government is encouraging this process.
The various economic incentives provided by the federal government were established for reasons completely unrelated to this erosion issue. The price support system was intended to provide consumers with a steady and low-cost food supply, while ensuring our farmers of an adequate living. It is not the intent of this legislation to alter that basic system, though some good arguments can be made in another context for doing so.

But the fact of the matter is that these economic incentives -- price supports, farmers' home loans, crop insurance, disaster payments, farm storage facility loans, and the rest -- provide economic incentives for land speculators to buy and plow up rangelands that should be left alone. In some cases, a farmer can literally double the value of such lands, and the loans he can receive on them, by the very act of plowing them up. In the real estate market, a plowed wheat field subsidized by government programs may be worth more than an uncultivated cattle pasture, whether the land is any good or not. So when a farmer, an investor, or a speculator can plow such lands at virtually no economic risk to himself, he is provided a powerful incentive to plow.

And that's what these programs do -- they put the taxpayers in the position of taking the risk on such ventures. So the plows continue to turn under hundreds of thousands of acres of grasslands each year. If the crop should grow, price supports will roughly cover the cost of production. If not, the farmer can get crop insurance, even disaster payments under some circumstances. He can sometimes get an FmHA loan to buy the plows with, and a farm storage facility loan to build grain storage and further enhance the value of the property. Under such circumstances, a farmer trying desperately to eke out a living under what are already difficult conditions, may be led to conclude he should plow fragile lands even when his best instincts warn against such a move.
What this all means is that these government programs are interfering with sound farm management practices. The nation's farmers understand the vulnerability of these grasslands. And under normal conditions, they would not be plowing them. But the government is openly encouraging them to do so, at a time when many are near financial collapse.

And that's the issue in this bill, S.663. Should government continue to subsidize all crops, regardless of where they were grown, on what kind of land, with what kind of erosion, and whether the crop is already in surplus?

Mr. Chairman, there are 40 million acres of extremely fragile lands already under cultivation in this country -- that's 10% of our entire cropland base. But there are another 250 million acres -- half again as much as the entire base -- that could still be plowed if we continue to encourage this practice. And we must not misunderstand or underestimate the danger in terms of erosion of plowing this land.

The average soil loss to erosion in this country is about 5 tons per acre per year. But in the highly-erodible land classes addressed by this bill, the average can be as high as 30 tons per acre per year for class 7 land. Cultivating such lands is certain to cause severe erosion and often damages neighboring land, too.

And the damage caused by such erosion is permanent. It takes nature more than 100 years to produce a single inch of topsoil, but that inch of soil can blow away in less than an hour if not protected against erosion. In many parts of the West, land damaged by early dust storms of the 1930's has never fully recovered, particularly in the arid western plains.
This problem was first brought to my attention at a meeting in Limon, Colorado two years ago by a rancher who was convinced that the federal government is encouraging farmers to plow up these grasslands like there's no tomorrow. My state has seen more than half a million acres of such land put to the plow since 1979, more than any other state. But it's not a Colorado problem alone. Huge acreages of fragile lands are also being plowed in Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, California, New Mexico, and Arizona. The same problem exists, though on a smaller scale, in Kansas, Oregon, Washington, Georgia, and Alabama. In all of those states, at least 5 million acres of fragile grasslands are in danger of being plowed under and blown away unless Congress acts quickly to stop subsidizing the sodbusters.

This bill will not dictate farming practices to farmers. It will not allow any federal agency to determine who gets price supports and who doesn't. It will not interfere with the planting decisions of farmers. And it will not entirely stop all erosion. But it will simply say to farmers that if they want to plow up these grasslands, lands which have not been plowed before and which are highly erodible, they will do so at their own risk and they should not expect the taxpayers to bail them out when the land turns out not to be productive.

In fact, it will get the government out of the business of encouraging a practice clearly not in the best interests of the farm system. And this will mean that we can stop interfering with what would normally be the practice of farmers, not the other way around.
An extensive amount of research has been done on this simple proposal over the past couple of years. It has been endorsed by virtually every major farm and conservation organization, several of whom the committee will hear from today. The Administration strongly supports the measure, as you will also hear. And a number of technical changes have been made to strengthen the bill, and to make it easier to enforce. It is based on land class systems that have been in place for many years, and which are widely understood and accepted by farmers. The only discretion allowed is strictly maintained at the local level, and the local conservation districts exist in all but 1% of the agricultural areas of the country.

The technicalities have been worked out and it's time now to act. Many farmers across the nation have to make new planting decisions again in August, and this bill must be passed by that time if we are to avoid another full year of plowing.

I am submitting for the record a section-by-section analysis of the bill, along with some fact sheets and related materials showing where the problem lies, and exactly what the bill does about it. Again, I thank the committee for scheduling this hearing and urge speedy mark-up on S.663.