Statement of the
American Farm Bureau Federation

TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE AND TECHNOLOGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

RE: REAUTHORIZING THE NATIONAL INTEGRATED DROUGHT INFORMATION SYSTEM

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Presented By:
Patricia Langenfelder
President, Maryland Farm Bureau

600 Maryland Ave. SW | Suite 1000W | Washington, DC 20024 | p. 202.406.3600 | f. 202.406.3606 | www.fb.org

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Patricia Langenfelder. My husband, Dutch, is a fifth generation farmer, and together with our three children, we farm 3,000 acres in Kent County, Maryland where we grow corn, soybeans, wheat and barley. We also have a farrow-to-finish swine operation. I currently serve as President of the Maryland Farm Bureau, and I also serve on the board of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the nation's largest general farm organization, on whose behalf I am pleased to testify this morning.

I would like to commend Chairman Hall and Ranking Member Johnson for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify. Much of the nation is currently in the grip of a significant drought that will ultimately touch the lives of every agricultural producer and consumer in this country. For this reason alone, it is important to have the best, most up-to-date information on the nation's drought conditions. Farm Bureau strongly supports legislation to reauthorize the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) and is ready to work with you for swift approval of your legislation.

At the outset, I would like to give the committee an idea of the magnitude of the drought now facing farmers, particularly in the Midwest, and then I would like to speak to the importance of NIDIS.

While comparisons with prior drought years are imperfect at best, this year's drought is without question the worst in recent memory from a national perspective, and in some areas, unfortunately, it may well rank as the worst drought in decades. Objective measures of the drought's extent and severity are striking. Around 80 percent of the country is classified as abnormally dry, and more than 60 percent is classified as being in moderate to exceptional drought conditions, the highest percentages in the Drought Monitor data going back to 2000. More than 54 percent of the country's pasture and rangeland is rated as poor or very poor, by far the highest percentage in the available data going back to 1995. Corn crop condition ratings are the worst for this point in the growing season since the devastating drought of 1988.

The full economic impact of this drought is difficult to assess at this point because damage is still being done. It appears that corn and soybeans will be the most severely impacted of the major row crops. Nationally, corn production may be reduced by as much as 20 percent compared with early-season expectations. Soybean production may be off by 10 percent to 15 percent. Some parts of the eastern Corn Belt will experience a total loss.

While the effects on corn and soybeans are vivid, the impact is felt downstream as well, where reduced yields and tighter supplies will translate into higher feed costs for livestock and poultry producers. Dry pasture conditions have begun to force many ranchers to sell their cattle. Given the long biological lags in livestock and poultry production systems, it may take many months, in some cases years, for the full effects to be reversed. Ultimately, the reduced production of beef, pork, poultry, eggs and dairy products will be felt by consumers as higher retail prices, potentially reversing a trend of moderating prices for these products, which had been developing over the last few quarters.

Viewed in that context, it is clear what a significant and integral role NIDIS plays in providing important and timely information to farmers and markets. It provides an unparalleled set of data and graphics on drought conditions in the U.S. The NIDIS, by coordinating the data collection, summarization and dissemination efforts of multiple entities, has become an invaluable tool within the agricultural community. This system puts a wealth of relevant weather and climate data at the

fingertips of farmers, market analysts, researchers, extension professionals, crop consultants and anyone else with an interest in U.S. agricultural production. By providing relevant summaries of past data on rainfall and soil moisture, real-time rainfall and temperature data, and forecasts of key drought metrics, NIDIS provides a comprehensive view of drought conditions as they develop, allowing those affected – including farmers and ranchers – to more adequately plan for and respond to a drought's impacts.

As this year's drought has developed, the value of NIDIS has been vividly illustrated. For example, prior to the beginning of summer, NIDIS soil moisture data showed that key corn and soybean producing areas of the country were deficient in moisture and thus vulnerable to the effects of any dry weather that might develop. Later, it was possible to ascertain that in late June, with Midwest corn in its critical pollination phase of development, fully half of the country was experiencing moderate to exceptional drought with extremely high temperatures. Moreover, detailed drought maps were available to show precisely what areas of the country the drought was affecting. This kind of data allows market participants to determine what crops are being most directly impacted by drought and to incorporate that information into market analysis, price projections and risk management planning. In this way, NIDIS information is an extremely useful complement to more familiar Department of Agriculture (USDA) data on acreage, crop progress and production.

Products of NIDIS are also a vital supplement to longstanding and widely-utilized USDA reports in another important respect: NIDIS data is available with greater frequency than most other market-related information. Frequently-updated NIDIS data and maps – and even real-time information on precipitation and temperature – allow more informed adjustments to expectations for important USDA reports, like the weekly *Crop Progress* and monthly *Crop Production* reports. This makes it less likely that these reports will catch the market by surprise, resulting in episodes of extreme price volatility.

In conclusion, we appreciate the hard work of this committee to ensure that America's farmers, ranchers and the market system have the best information available to protect against the vagaries of uncertain weather and provides them the opportunity to continue to produce the safest, most abundant and least expensive food supply in the world. Farm Bureau supports the *National Integrated Drought Information System Act* because it provides the nation's farmers, ranchers and markets an effective drought warning system for key indicators of drought conditions and impacts.

We look forward to working with you toward that goal. It is vitally important that Congress reauthorize the National Integrated Drought Information System, and Farm Bureau will do everything it can to assist you in this effort.

Thank you for considering these views. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from the committee.