

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF LEO ETTLEMAN  
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**BEFORE THE**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GENERAL FARM  
COMMODITIES AND RISK MANAGEMENT**

**HEARING ENTITLED  
“HOW FARM POLICY HELPS FARMERS IN  
ADVERSE CONDITIONS”**

**THURSDAY, JUNE 20, 2019 AT 10:00AM**

Good morning, Chairman Vela, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Subcommittee. A sincere “thank you,” Congresswoman Axne, for inviting me to speak. I am honored to address you here today. In doing so, I give voice to a topic that affects countless Americans in the heart of the Midwest.

Call me biased, but I believe farming is one of our nation’s most noble and rewarding professions. For six generations, the Ettleman family has farmed the rolling countryside of southwest Iowa. I was raised on a farm located just a few rods and reels away from the banks of the Missouri River. For more than 100 years, our families have farmed Missouri River bottom ground. It is good and productive soil. When managed correctly, it provides a good life and living for my family. It also sustains countless others while contributing to the jobs and economic activity created by production agriculture.

While we make the choice to farm, we have little say over the price we receive for what we grow, or the multitude of challenges that we face. Trade disputes. Monetary values. Geo-political unrest. Pests and disease. Too much rain. Not enough rain. Ill-timed hail storms and straight-line winds. These are just a few of the unpredictable events that hit us financially and emotionally.

We accept this as a part of farming. It’s been that way for generations. Farmers have a history of dealing with challenges. We’re often heralded for our strong work ethic and ability to rise above problems and persevere. This holds true even when the situation seems hopeless or the odds of succeeding insurmountable. While having such a respected brand is humbling, it can sometimes mask the true extent of the challenges we face and the emotional and financial pain they inflict.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Iowa’s had the wettest 12-month period since official records began in 1895. The catastrophic flooding across farm country has been well-publicized. What’s largely ignored; however, is the mismanagement of our inland waterways and the effect a lack of flood control prioritization is having on farmers, landowners, wildlife populations, commerce and the ability of those who live near rivers to live their lives.

Before I get into the specifics, let me first thank Congress for acting and passing much-needed disaster aid. It is greatly appreciated as it will keep some farmers in business as they wade through this terrible situation.

Close to my home, I’ve heard, and more recently seen, changes made to the management and flow of the Missouri River. These changes go back to when my dad was born on the home farm and before passage of the U.S. Flood Control Act in 1944. Since that time, the river and river channels have been dredged and levies built.

In 2004, these changes were accelerated with an update to the River’s master manual. A subsequent amendment to the manual in 2006 deprioritized flood control.

Since that time, flooding events have become more frequent, severe and costly. Flooding has occurred along the Missouri River almost every year since 2007. In 2008, we experienced tremendous damage due to seep water and blocked drainage.

In 2010, the situation worsened, and come 2011, we had an all-out levee breach of the Missouri River just a half-mile from our family farm. Our land sustained devastating scouring caused by the swift-moving floodwaters. To make matters worse, there was significant sand and debris deposits. It took nearly four years to clean up the mess.

More wet years followed. Last year was extremely challenging with land drainage blocked because of extended high river flows for six consecutive months. Rain water fell and ponded on our land. When harvest started last fall, our combines sat idle for days on end. Acres of mature corn and soybeans went unharvested.

Soon, the calendar read 2019, and with it came significant snow and ice. By early March, unusually warm weather had arrived, allowing us to bring in the reduced, belated harvest. We suspected the 50-degree weather and rain forecasts of up to 3 inches over a large area would cause trouble.

We weren't wrong. It was 50-plus degree weather and rainfall totals that surpassed 6-8 inches in locations throughout the Missouri River basin. The quick escalation of temperatures and massive amounts of rain on top of frozen ground over such a large area was a recipe for disaster.

On March 14th, I received a call at 9:00 in the evening. It was a friend who lives and farms just to the north of us. A levee at river-mile 601 was over-topping. A wall of water was rushing downriver. Our farm, and thousands of farmers and homeowners were directly in its path.

We helped evacuate a friend's home that night around 11:00. By early the next morning, the levee had been breached. We immediately began evacuating our equipment and spent the next two days preparing for the worst. Roads began deteriorating quickly, complicating and hindering our efforts to move equipment, let alone stored grain. As the river's crest moved south, levees continued to fail with no warnings from the federal government. We were out there on our own evacuating and helping those we could.

Until you witness and experience the catastrophic forces of flooding firsthand, you cannot fully appreciate and understand the disruption to life, upheaval of normalcy, and emotional and economic toll it extracts.

Firsthand examples include:

- Grain bins and stored grain destroyed.
- Livestock washed away, perished or stranded.
- Gates, pens and fences gone.
- Crops that went unharvested in the fall of 2018 ruined.
- Homes, furniture and memories submerged.
- Roads, bridges and railways decimated.

Every year is different. So, too, are the floods. This year, the devastation came with no warning. Within three days, we were inundated with tremendous amounts of water. Hundreds of homes and businesses were affected. People didn't have time to act proactively. The losses were much greater because of this.

The flooding is ongoing, and the negative impact will be felt for years to come. As I sit before you today:

- Hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland remain underwater.
- Vital infrastructure like roads and bridges – lifelines for farm-to-market commerce – are impassable. They will remain that way for years. Some will never be repaired. Roads running east-west are destroyed. It resembles a war zone. Even when the water goes down, it could be weeks until we can return to our farms to begin the arduous task of cleaning and repairing.
- A strategically important section of the Burlington Northern Railroad has been closed for months, costing billions in lost commerce and inefficiencies.
- Sections of I-29 remain closed. Traffic that should be coursing up and down Interstate-29 has been rerouted to county highways. These two-lane roads were not designed for safely handling such heavy traffic flows, resulting in spikes of traffic accidents and motorist injuries and fatalities.
- Farmland must be surveyed and determined how it can be salvaged and when it can return to productivity. Land located within a mile or so of a levee breach is inundated with millions of tons of sand – up to 5 feet in some locations. Massive trees and other debris litter the landscape. Tons of topsoil have washed away.
- With roads impassable in many locations and floodwaters slow to recede, we still have nearly 85,000 bushels of grain stranded. This includes 65,000 bushels of corn and 20,000 bushels of soybeans valued at nearly \$450,000. Floodwater has impacted the first 12-14 inches of the pile. The moisture along with warming summer temperatures create the perfect scenario for rotting grain. So, as we sit on the sidelines, our grain supplies shrink along with the much-needed income it represents.

Thousands upon thousands of acres of farmland impacted by the floods will never be as productive as it once was – another lost income opportunity. This year's flood will impact farmers like never before. No one knows for sure when the situation will ease because there are so many levee breaches. If they aren't repaired back to the 100-year protection level, our crop insurance and our farmland could be re-rated. If it is, we could become high-risk, resulting in higher insurance premiums. That's just one more domino to fall in a long line of dominos. As each one does, it impacts our families, health, livelihood, farms, neighbors, communities and all who depend on our productivity.

And that's not all. Because of the continued mismanagement of the Missouri River, we no longer forward contract grain. That's because at any given time, we run the risk of losing our entire crop. Lacking the ability to use this simple marketing strategy places us at a competitive disadvantage to farmers who do not operate near the river.

Storing grain is another important management practice for farmers. Holding grain rather than selling it directly out of the field at harvest time helps farm families increase profit opportunities. But continued flooding destroys grain bins and contaminates the corn and soybeans within. To help alleviate the situation, we've elevated grain bins and other structures. However, mismanagement of the Missouri River renders this approach futile as the waters continue to rise faster than we can lift our buildings. Many operations owe money against the grain that was

destroyed during this year's flood. Sadly, a good number of them may not recover. Even though the grain bins and farm buildings are insurable, they require separate policies for each structure; therefore, there are annual fees for each policy. Often farmers find it too expensive to adequately insure their properties.

We know the challenges. We've seen the impact associated with mismanaging this important river. The question now is: Will the lost productivity and increased costs of doing business be a sufficient catalyst for change?

We remain hopeful that they will. I want to recognize Congresswoman Axne and all who rolled up their sleeves to address some of these questions and pass much-needed disaster assistance. It will help. But more, much more, must be done.

In the short-term:

- Levee breaches must be closed. That's step one. The Corps' is working on that as we speak.
- We need to get the water off our ground and sand and debris removed. This will be costly and take time.
- Roads and rail must be repaired, and in some cases, rebuilt entirely.

Long-term, we must not only rethink how we manage the Missouri River, but also how we sharpen the policy tools that will inevitably shape agriculture's future.

Sure, Mother Nature plays a role in how we farm. You can't have a flood without water. But it's how that water is managed when it hits the ground that's key.

The 1944 Flood Control Act disconnected the flood plain from the river. If we are to stop the reoccurring, devastating floods of the past twelve years, flood control must be moved back to the top priority of the Missouri River management. The water control structures in the channel below the dams must also be rehabilitated.

When flood control fails, everything fails.

One vivid example has been repeated attempts to slow the water flow to enhance fish and wildlife populations by implementing The Missouri River Recovery Program. While the goal may have been well-intended, the efforts have backfired. When a river can no longer handle the volume of water it once did, catastrophic flooding occurs. Often, the flooding occurs during prime mating and nesting season, which has been the case again this year. Fish and wildlife populations have been destroyed as a result.

In 2014, nearly four hundred farmers, businessmen, community members, and other stakeholders filed suit against the United States Army Corp of Engineers in a Fifth Amendment Takings Case – Ideker et al, vs USA. I'm a Bellwether Plaintiff in this case. In March of 2019, we received a positive ruling for five years of flooding – 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2014. This is just one more affirmation that the damage done by the river's management is real and credible for farmers and businesses like mine.

It's imperative that Congress understands that even with a positive ruling, future disasters will occur until flood control returns as the dominant authorized purpose of the USACE in their management of the Missouri River. They are a military branch of the United States Government and they must follow the orders given to them by you, their boss. Many are depending on you to make sure your orders are followed. If not, more productive farm ground will be destroyed as will the lives of those who depend on our productivity.

Furthermore, the river's water quality is terrible. Waste water treatment plants upriver can't operate when the water levels are so high. As a result, human effluent is discharged directly into the river. When flooding occurs, the use of the river grinds to a halt. Water quality, the land and private property is decimated. Infrastructure is ruined. Schedules, routines, and one's way of life is altered.

What my family and neighbors have experienced this year would be catastrophic during the best of times, so imagine piling two one-hundred-year floods in the same decade on a subset of Americans who have been living through an extremely difficult period of uncertainty – trade disputes, retaliatory tariffs and market turmoil. We must explore ways to drive more investment into flood-ravaged communities. Policy can serve as the catalyst and help make this happen. It is my sincere hope that Congress acts.

- acts to approve the USMCA trade agreement,
- to aid the implementation of a 2018 Farm Bill that vastly improved farmers' safety net,
- to address the very basic infrastructure needs necessary for commerce, and
- to ensure that flood control is the dominant function of the Missouri River.

If these actions are not taken, we can expect larger and more expensive floods, Farm Belt bankruptcies will soar even higher, and farmers and the rural communities to which they're so closely linked to begin disappearing from the map. That's not what this farmer – or our country – wants or needs. Let's get to work, reclaim our rivers, farms and towns, and protect the lives and livelihoods of future generations. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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**Education:** K-12

Sidney Community Schools; Sidney, Iowa  
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Fremont County, Iowa  
Chairman, Responsible River Management

- 2011/2012: Member, Missouri River Flood Task Force
  - Regulator/Permitting Working Group
- Current Member Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee
  - Alternate, Agriculture Subcommittee
- Appointed by Iowa Governor Reynolds to Governor's Flood Recovery Advisory Board
  - Chairman, River Management and Infrastructure Working Group
- 04/17/2019: Testified before the U. S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Field Hearing on the 2019 Missouri River Flood

# Truth in Testimony Disclosure Form

In accordance with Rule XI, clause 2(g)(5)\*, of the *Rules of the House of Representatives*, witnesses are asked to disclose the following information. Please complete this form electronically by filling in the provided blanks.

Committee: Agriculture

Subcommittee: General Farm Commodities and Risk Management

Hearing Date: June 20, 2019

Hearing Title :

"How Farm Policy Helps Farmers in Adverse Conditions"

Witness Name: Leo Etleman

Position/Title: Ag Producer

Witness Type:  Governmental  Non-governmental

Are you representing yourself or an organization?  Self  Organization

If you are representing an organization, please list what entity or entities you are representing:

If you are a non-governmental witness, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) related to the hearing's subject matter that you or the organization(s) you represent at this hearing received in the current calendar year and previous two calendar years. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract. *If necessary, attach additional sheet(s) to provide more information. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as farm program payments or assistance to agricultural producers.*

N/A

If you are a non-governmental witness, please list any contracts or payments originating with a foreign government and related to the hearing's subject matter that you or the organization(s) you represent at this hearing received in the current year and previous two calendar years. Include the amount and country of origin of each contract or payment. *If necessary, attach additional sheet(s) to provide more information.*

N/A