

# **The Farmers First Act of 2023**

Introduced by Senators Tammy Baldwin and Joni Ernst

*A bill to reauthorize the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) to ensure that our nation's agricultural communities have access to critical mental health support and resources.*

**Background:** In the 2018 Farm Bill, Senators Baldwin and Ernst led the effort to respond to the mental health crisis among agricultural workers, who experience higher rates of death by suicide. To assist these farmers in crisis, their bipartisan legislation provided seed funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reestablish the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN), a program that supports a service provider network connecting farmers, ranchers, and other agriculture workers to stress assistance programs and resources. Through FRSAN, state departments of agriculture, state extension services, and non-profits received funding to establish helplines, provide suicide prevention training for farm advocates, and create support groups.

**Social and geographical isolation, weather variability, limited access to health care, and fluctuating commodity prices are unique factors that affect farmers' mental health.**

A Morning Consult poll found that during 2021, most farmers and farm workers (61%) and rural adults (52%) reported experiencing more stress and mental health challenges compared to the prior year. The same poll also found that while stigma around seeking help or treatment for mental health has decreased, it remains a factor, especially in agriculture.

**The Farmers First Act of 2023** would reauthorize the FRSAN and build on the work that Senators Baldwin and Ernst led in the 2018 Farm Bill. Four regional centers established through FRSAN are currently increasing access to farm stress services across the U.S. by coordinating efforts to serve the unique needs of the populations in each region. Funding for this critical program has supported the expansion of telephone helplines and hotlines; training programs to increase mental health literacy and stress management among agricultural producers and individuals engaged in other agricultural occupations; and support groups for farmworkers.

The Farmers First Act of 2023 increases funding available for the program to \$15 million per year for fiscal years 2023 through 2028 to continue these efforts and help grantees hire additional staff to support farmers, including behavioral health specialists to provide counseling to agricultural workers and producers. Additional funding will also support efforts to address the unique needs of different farming populations, including veteran farmers and farmers of color. The bill also makes clear that funding can be used to establish crisis lines, and that grantees are encouraged to establish referral relationships with providers, including Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs), health centers, and critical access hospitals.