

June 17, 2022

Vanessa A. Countryman  
Secretary  
Securities and Exchange Commission  
100 F Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20549-1090

Re: Comments by Michigan Farm Bureau on SEC's Proposed Rules on the Enhancement and Standardization of Climate-Related Disclosures for Investors (File No. S7-10-22)

Dear Ms. Countryman,

Michigan Farm Bureau appreciates the opportunity to submit our comments to the request by the Securities and Exchange Commission (the "SEC" or the "Commission") for public input on the enhancement and standardization of climate-related disclosures for investors (File No. S7-10-22) (the "Proposed Rules").

Michigan Farm Bureau is Michigan's largest general farm organization, representing more than 40,000 farming families. Michigan's agricultural sector is also the second most diverse in the country, after California. This diversity in commodities lends itself to the diversity of farm operations and processing across the state. Michigan is also known as the "Great Lakes State" and farmers in the state have shown their commitment to protecting water quality through voluntary participation in the state's premier environmental program, [the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program \(MAEAP\)](#), the various Farm Bill conservation programs, opportunities provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, and other voluntary opportunities such as the Michigan Manure Hauler Certification Program.

While this rule is centered around greenhouse gas emissions disclosure, it is imperative to note the overlap between water quality and climate-smart agriculture. Many conservation practices in agriculture fit into overlapping categories. For example, cover crops are commonly recommended as a practice that helps protect water quality, sequester carbon, improve soil health, and are a tenet of regenerative agriculture. This means voluntary efforts that Michigan farmers have been taking to protect water quality, can also have a positive impact on the climate. Regulations such as the Proposed Rules that shift limited resources to mandatory, complex reporting rather than these voluntary efforts risk progress both in climate efforts and water quality.

In addition, Michigan Farm Bureau has also noticed companies collaborating with farmers in their supply chains to support and incentivize conservation practice implementation, whether around regenerative agriculture or climate-smart agriculture. This collaboration between companies and farmers, whether they are incentivizing practices and/or providing agronomic assistance, is extremely valuable as it allows the farmer to be supported as they take on the risk of changing their operational practices. It also allows farmers to make the best decision for their operation. With the diversity of the agricultural sector in Michigan, farmers need to be able to make changes that make sense for their operation and there is not a "one-size-fits-all" option. We strongly believe this illustrates *voluntary, market-based* incentives and programs are best at helping farmers achieve additional positive environmental impacts and the reporting burden created by this rule would consume limited resources, detracting from voluntary, collaborative climate-smart agriculture efforts.

Michigan Farm Bureau and our members are committed to transparency in climate-related matters to inform our stakeholders in a manner consistent with existing practices in the agriculture industry.

However, without changes and clarifications, the Proposed Rules would be wildly burdensome and expensive if not altogether impossible for many small and mid-sized farmers to comply with, as they require reporting of climate data at the local level. When farmers and ranchers cannot afford the overhead required to comply, they will have no choice but to consolidate. Such consolidation would have far-reaching socioeconomic consequences, including further eroding rural tax bases<sup>1</sup>. If further consolidation were to occur, this could seriously impede the ability of local communities to fund education, social services and access to health care. It is important to also realize that farming and ranching plays a vital role in the social fabric of rural communities that largely revolve around the agricultural industry, especially small and medium-sized farmers and ranchers. We do not believe the SEC fully considered nor has it sufficiently sought to mitigate the potential socioeconomic impact of the Proposed Rules on agricultural communities. We also believe that the Proposed Rules will not only adversely impact farmers and ranchers, but also harm consumers and erode the strength of America's agricultural industry. To avoid these consequences, in the final adopted rules (the "Final Rules"), we highly encourage the Commission to consider the following:

- Remove the "value-chain" concept from the Proposed Rules;
  - Remove or substantially revise the Scope 3 emissions disclosure requirement to include a carveout for the agricultural industry;
  - Remove the requirement that registrants provide disclosures pertaining to their climate-related targets and goals;
  - Provide guidance with respect to the Consolidated Appropriations Act's (2022) (the "CAA") prohibition on mandatory GHG emissions reporting for manure management systems;
  - Revise the Proposed Rules so that disclosures of GHG emissions operate in unison with existing federal emissions reporting programs;
  - Ensure the Final Rules do not include location data disclosures for GHG emissions, which may inadvertently disclose the private information of our members; and
  - Disimply a private right of action for Scope 1, 2, and 3 disclosures.
- 1. The Proposed Rules' Focus on the "Value-Chain" Concept Will Place Harmful Burdens and Costs on Farmers and Ranchers.**

The requirement in the Proposed Rules for registrants to gather information from their value chain as it relates to climate-related risks and impacts from those risks and Scope 3 emissions will be extremely detrimental to farmers and ranchers.

The proposal defines "value chain" vaguely, extending upstream to "supplier activities" without a clear limitation and extends to an ill-defined downstream scope. Nearly every farmer and rancher, irrespective of size, at some point finds themselves in the upstream or downstream activities of a registrant's value chain. The agriculture supply chain is also extremely diverse in terms of the products produced and the

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Manier, *Study: Rural-urban divide grows in response to decades of state overhauls*, Purdue University (Jul. 15, 2020), available at <https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2020/Q3/study-rural-urban-fiscal-divide-grows-in-response-to-decades-of-state-tax-overhauls.html> (Stating that "[r]ising farmland values improve a rural county's ability to fund its basic services, but they also mean that more tax burden is placed on the shoulders of farmers as their county population declines.")

various roles in which the products play in the creation of a variety of other products as well (e.g., corn for livestock consumption as feed versus ethanol production as fuel).<sup>2</sup> Forcing the agriculture industry to disclose the litany of different ways in which our products are used will disproportionately impact our members. Many registrants will receive products from farmers and ranchers at different steps throughout their value chain. Further, asking registrants to evaluate all the material risks arising from all of the small- and medium-sized farms in their respective value chain will lead to further consolidated supply lines, harming the nation's rural communities in the process.

Moreover, registrants will likely demand additional data and information from farmers and ranchers or default to engaging only with larger farmers and ranchers that have more sophisticated data gathering and reporting systems or to simply vertically integrate their supply chains, leading to further consolidation.

In fashioning any Final Rule, the SEC should remove the expansive "value chain" concept, which departs from historical SEC materiality standards, is overly vague, would impose considerable burdens onto registrants and harm farmers and ranchers.

## **2. Mandatory Scope 3 Emissions Disclosures Will Squeeze Out Small and Mid-Sized Farmers and Ranchers.**

Under the Proposed Rules, a registrant would be required to disclose Scope 3 emissions if such emissions are material or included in a previously disclosed emissions reduction target or goal. The Proposed Rules define Scope 3 emissions as, "all indirect GHG emissions not otherwise included in a registrant's Scope 2 emissions, which occur in the upstream and downstream activities of a registrant's value chain." Our small- and medium-sized farm and ranch members are deeply concerned about the indirect economic effects of Scope 3 emissions disclosures and the impact on data privacy.

The Proposed Rules will inevitably require registrants to pass the costs and burdens of reporting Scope 3 emissions onto farmers and ranchers. This is particularly problematic for our small- to medium-sized family-owned farms and ranches, which are already dealing with increased production costs due to inflationary pressure and global supply chain disruptions. The burden of providing such disclosures and the estimation process would be hard for farmers and ranchers to overcome. The average family farm already must take significant time away from the actual business of farming to demonstrate compliance with a tangled web of federal, state, and local regulation. A farm is not a power plant where a known quantity of fuel produces a known quantity of energy. On any given day, a farm may require more or less water, more or less fertilizer or crop protection products. Tracking such fluctuations in the context of GHG emissions would be daunting. Additionally, the likelihood that estimation methodologies will change over time risks causing confusion.

Further, and as the USDA acknowledges, data shows that the profitability of farmers and ranchers increases with scale.<sup>3</sup> Meaning, inevitably, a significant cost of the proposed Scope 3 disclosure would be borne by the least able to afford it—small- and medium-sized farms and ranches. Because our small- and medium-sized members often deal with thinner profit margins compared to their large peers,<sup>4</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> As an example of the complexities in the system, ethanol is generally produced from corn. Its production into ethanol, which happens through fermentation, generates CO<sub>2</sub>. Much of that CO<sub>2</sub> is captured and then transformed into dry ice which is often utilized at meat packing plants. As well, distiller grains, a byproduct of the ethanol industry, are routinely sold and consumed as feed for livestock.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert A. Hoppe, Profit Margin Increases With Farm Size, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Feb. 2, 2015), available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2015/januaryfebruary/profit-margin-increases-with-farm-size/>.

<sup>4</sup> See *id.*

Proposed Rules could lead to a market shift whereby registrants prefer to use only those farms that can afford to invest in the controls and processes necessary to track emissions down to the product level.<sup>5</sup>

We believe that such a consequence would be disastrous for our small- and medium-sized farms, lead to further monopolization and vertical consolidation within the agriculture sector (harming farmers, ranchers and consumers) and severally erode the gains made by farmers and ranchers from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

As well, for those farmers and ranchers that can afford to invest in such technology and controls, they will be less able to invest in renewable or sustainable technology that could actually reduce the environmental footprint of the farm or ranch. For example, modernized irrigation systems that would reduce a farm's water consumption, or reduced nitrogen fertilizer applications that would improve farming (land) regeneration, will be put aside in favor of emissions reporting and tracking software so that these farms and ranches do not risk losing business with their registrant partners.

Therefore, we believe that the Commission must remove the Scope 3 emissions disclosure in its entirety, or, alternatively, the Commission should provide a specific carveout for the agricultural industry. Such a carveout should explicitly make clear that registrants do not need to include Scope 3 emissions from the agricultural industry in their respective disclosures. This type of carve out is not unprecedented, and Congress has previously provided similar exemptions for the agricultural industry, such as Section 437 of CAA (discussed in Section 4).<sup>6</sup> By including such a carveout for the agricultural industry, the Commission would avoid the externalities associated with such a complex and difficult reporting regime, while also preserving the competitiveness of the agricultural industry.

### **3. Mandatory Disclosures on Climate-related Targets and Goals Will Disincentivize Registrants From Using Sustainable Agricultural Products.**

Our members are concerned that the Commission's Proposed Rule on climate-related targets and goals could disincentivize companies from setting targets in the first place, diminishing the ability of farmers and ranchers to economically capitalize on climate-smart agriculture opportunities. Given the level of granularity and detail the Proposed Rule requires for companies that make such targets and goals, it seems reasonable that this will cause some registrants to not set them in the first place, or cause other registrants to retract previously set targets or goals.

### **4. The SEC Should Provide Guidance to Registrants on How They Should Exclude GHG Emissions From Manure Management Systems in Their GHG Emissions Disclosures.**

The SEC should provide guidance on how registrants should report GHG emissions in light of the prohibition on GHG reporting set forth in Section 437 of CAA.<sup>7</sup> Section 437 of the CAA states that “[n]otwithstanding any other provision of law, none of the funds made available in this or any other Act may be used to implement any provision in rule, if that provision requires mandatory reporting of greenhouse gas emissions from manure management systems.”<sup>8</sup> Section 437 prohibits all agencies government-wide—including the SEC—from using funds to require mandatory reporting of GHG emissions from manure management systems.<sup>9</sup> This prohibition extends to the use of non-appropriations

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to realize that not everything produced for sale on a farm or ranch emits the same amount of GHG emissions and farms and ranches sell multiple products all of which emit varying levels of GHG emissions. Thus, our members will need to individualize their GHG emissions calculations down to the product level, which will cost even more resources than a system that purely tracks all gross emissions for a single product output.

<sup>6</sup> See Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, H. R. 2471—372, 117th Cong. §437 (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, H. R. 2471—372, 117th Cong. §437 (2022).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> See *id.*

funds (e.g., Section 31 fees) as money received by the government would be deposited in the Treasury per the Miscellaneous Receipts Act, and use of such funds would still be considered a federal appropriation.<sup>10</sup> Under the Proposed Rules, presumably, registrants would be required to disclose GHG emissions from manure management systems as the Proposed Rules provide no guidance with respect to how a registrant should exclude such emissions from its GHG emissions disclosure and manure management is a significant part of dairy, meat, poultry and protein production.

Manure management systems are ubiquitous features of farms and ranches, and our members are concerned with the lack of guidance with respect to the CAA prohibition and the SEC's Proposed Rules. Therefore, our organizations and members recommend that the SEC should clearly indicate that registrants that operate manure management systems are not required to disclose such GHG emissions and provide guidance to registrants and auditors on how they should exclude such emissions from their respective mandatory GHG disclosures.

#### **5. Location Data About the Source of Emissions May Create Privacy Concerns for Farmers.**

Question 108 of the proposing release requests if the SEC should require registrants to provide location data for its GHG emissions in the Final Rules.<sup>11</sup> We urge the SEC not to adopt such a requirement in Final Rules as this may result in serious privacy concerns for farmers. If registrants are required to disclose the location of sources of GHG emissions in their value chain, this may inadvertently reveal to the public data about a farmer at a particular location. Greater access to farmer data creates serious privacy concerns given farmers or workers may live on the farm and/or biosecurity concerns for the farm operation. Courts have protected farmers from disclosure of personal information and have recognized that farmers are uniquely situated in that they generally live on their farm, meaning that business information is also personal information.<sup>12</sup>

#### **6. The Final Rules Should Provide A More Robust Safe Harbor That Precludes All Implied Private Rights of Action for Alleging Defects in Quantitative Scopes 1, 2, or 3 disclosures.**

In the Final Rules, the Commission should provide a stronger safe harbor for the disclosures of Scopes 1, 2 and 3 emissions. Under the Proposed Rules, Scope 3 disclosures are deemed not fraudulent unless made or reaffirmed "without a reasonable basis" or disclosed "other than in good faith." However, we don't believe this would serve as a meaningful roadblock to litigation for a plaintiffs' class action counsel, who routinely plead around this requirement.

To remedy these concerns, we believe that the Commission can and should provide a more robust safe harbor that precludes all implied private rights of action alleging defects in quantitative Scopes 1, 2 or 3 disclosures. The Commission's authority to disimply the Rule 10b-5 private right of action for Scopes 1, 2

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<sup>10</sup> Congressional Research Service, Congress's Power Over Appropriations: A Primer, (Jun. 16, 2022), available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11577>.

<sup>11</sup> The Enhancement and Standardization of Climate-Related Disclosures for Investors, 87 Fed. Reg. 21334, 21382 (Apr. 11, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> See *American Farm Bureau Federation v. EPA*, 836 F.3d 963 (8th Cir. 2016) (public disclosure of farmers' personal information would constitute a "substantial" and "clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy" and is therefore exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act). See also *Campaign for Family Farms v. Glickman*, 200 F.3d 1180 (8th Cir. 2000) (whether acting in a personal capacity or as a shareholder in a corporation, disclosure of financial records of individually owned businesses invokes need of personal privacy exemption, citing *National Parks & Conservation Ass'n v. Kleppe*, 547 F.2d 673 (D.C. Cir. 1976)).

or 3 disclosures is supported both by prominent legal scholars and the Supreme Court.<sup>13</sup> A robust safe harbor of this nature would provide the appropriate level of liability protection for Scopes 1, 2 or 3 disclosures and incentivize registrants to provide voluntary disclosures. As well, the SEC and the Department of Justice would retain the authority to institute proceedings alleging defects in Scopes 1, 2, or 3 disclosures—providing the intended deterrent effect and ability to police against fraud—while minimizing the externalities, both in terms of increased insurance premiums and legal fees associated with such a novel and expansive disclosure regime as the Proposed Rules.

## 7. Potential Legal Challenges to the Proposed Rules.

In addition to the concerns with the specifics of the proposal, we urge the Commission to consider whether it has the legal authority to implement the Proposed Rules. For one, requiring this type of expansive disclosure raises questions under the compelled-speech doctrine. Many registrants publish sustainability reports and are voluntarily trying to meet investor demand for climate-related disclosures. However, the Proposed Rules could be viewed as the Commission seeking to compel such speech in the form of SEC disclosures. Because of the magnitude of the SEC's proposal that cuts across every aspect of the U.S. economy—and beyond—the Commission should consider whether this is a matter for the Congress to act or direct, before embarking on this rulemaking. Further and along the same lines, the SEC should revisit whether the Commission's existing statutory authority granted to it by Congress is sufficient to require the detailed disclosure of climate-related metrics, and in particular, whether the Proposed Rules satisfy the requirements set forth in Section 13(a) of the Exchange Act.<sup>14</sup> The SEC should strongly consider these and other legal principles before finalizing a climate-related disclosure rule.

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We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Proposed Rules and would be happy to discuss these comments and our members concerns or provide you with further information to the extent you would find it useful.

Respectfully submitted,

Tess Van Gorder

*Tess Van Gorder*

Conservation & Regulatory Relations Specialist, Michigan Farm Bureau  
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<sup>13</sup> See Joseph A. Grundfest, Disimplying Private Rights of Action Under the Federal Securities Laws: The Commission's Authority, 107 Harvard Law Review 961-1024 (1994); see also, *Stoneridge Investment Partners, LLC v. Scientific-Atlanta, Inc., et al.*, 552 U.S. 148 (2008).

<sup>14</sup> See generally 15 U.S. Code § 78m(a).