

September 17, 2015

The Honorable Hal Rogers, Chairman
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Robert Aderholt, Chairman
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Sam Farr, Ranking Member
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairman Rogers, Chairman Cochran, Chairman Aderholt, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Lowey, Ranking Member Mikulski, Ranking Member Farr, and Ranking Member Merkley:

As you negotiate final appropriations legislation for FY 2016, the undersigned organizations urge you to protect mandatory funding for farm bill conservation programs, support robust discretionary funding for Conservation Technical Assistance, and reject any attempt to undermine highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance.

Last year, the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the farm bill) consolidated or eliminated nearly a dozen conservation programs and reduced mandatory funding by \$4 billion, with sequestration scheduled to cut an additional \$2 billion. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees did their part to reduce federal spending and did so voluntarily. The cuts contained in the new farm bill were real, serious, and deep. Under current law, new enrollments in conservation programs will decline by millions of acres in FY 2016; sequestration alone will cut \$260 million from mandatory funding for agricultural conservation programs in FY 2016. Opening up the farm bill to reduce these programs even more should be off the table in the appropriations bill.

Unfortunately, the FY 2016 agriculture appropriations bills passed by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees cut hundreds of millions of dollars from the farm bill Conservation Title. The House bill includes a 2.26 million acre cut to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a 23 percent reduction below the level mandated by the 2014 Farm Bill. Fortunately, the Senate bill does not cut funding for CSP. However, both the House and Senate bills slash funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the House by \$301 million and the Senate by \$303 million. The Senate bill further cuts EQIP by permanently rescinding an additional \$73 million in carryover funding. While not cut directly in either bill, the extremely popular Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) would also be impacted by the proposed cuts to CSP and EQIP because RCPP draws its funding from the CSP and EQIP funding baselines. These proposed cuts are shortsighted and would severely limit the capacity of farmers, ranchers, and foresters to conserve water, maintain their soil, and prepare for extreme weather events.

In addition to rejecting cuts to mandatory spending for conservation programs, we urge you to adopt the Senate funding level of \$855 million for discretionary Conservation Operations, which includes Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA). USDA's ability to deliver conservation programs to farmers

and ranchers depends heavily on on-the-ground technical assistance. CTA provides landowners with the site-specific solutions needed to implement conservation practices on their lands, while providing accountability to ensure maximum return on the public investment. Inadequate technical assistance would reduce the effectiveness of conservation practices on the land. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

We continue to have serious concerns about any policy rider that would open up the farm bill. The House bill contains a policy rider to delay by one year the new conservation compliance provisions established by the 2014 Farm Bill. However, USDA has taken extraordinary steps to ensure that every covered producer is able to self-certify compliance by the relevant deadlines. We believe that the concerns that prompted the policy rider have been addressed administratively and do not require any legislative action.

As you finalize FY 2016 appropriations legislation, we urge you to keep the farm bill intact, to reject cuts to mandatory funding for conservation programs, support robust funding for conservation technical assistance, and keep the legislation free of any riders that render conservation compliance ineffective.

Sincerely,

Alaska Association of Conservation Districts
American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
American Forests
American Rivers
American Water Works Association
Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
Association of State Floodplain Managers
Audubon
Bluestem Communications
California Association of Resource Conservation Districts
California Certified Organic Farmers
California FarmLink
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Colorado Association of Conservation Districts
CROPP Cooperative | Organic Valley | Organic Prairie
Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America
Dakota Rural Action
Defenders of Wildlife
Delaware Association of Conservation Districts
Delta Land and Community
Delta Waterfowl
Environmental Working Group
Florida Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Florida Keys Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America
Grassworks
Gulf Coast Land Trust
Gulf Restoration Network

Illinois Stewardship Alliance
Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Iowa Environmental Council
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
Izaak Walton League of America
Kansas Alliance of Wetlands and Streams
Kansas Rural Center
Land Improvement Contractors of America
Land Stewardship Project
League of Women Voters
Louisiana Environmental Action Network
Maine Association of Conservation Districts
Maine Farmland Trust
Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Michigan Association of Conservation Districts
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service
Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy
Minnesota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
Mississippi River Trust
Missouri Coalition for the Environment
Montana Wildlife Federation
National Association of Clean Water Agencies
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of RC&D Councils
National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative
National Farmers Union
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Young Farmers Coalition
Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society
Nebraska Wildlife Federation
Nevada Association of Conservation Districts
New England Farmers Union
New Hampshire Association of Conservation Districts
New Jersey Association of Conservation Districts
New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts
New York State Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Northeast Organic Farming Association
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association
Oregon Association of Conservation Districts
Oregon Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Oregon Tilth

Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts
Pheasants Forever
Pinchot Institute for Conservation
Pollinator Partnership
Practical Farmers of Iowa
Prairie Rivers Network
Quail Forever
Rapid City Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America
Slow Food USA
Soil and Water Conservation Society
South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts
South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
South Dakota Wildlife Federation
Tennessee Clean Water Network
Texas Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
The Conservation Fund
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Utah Association of Conservation Districts
Vermont Association of Conservation Districts
Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Water Environment Federation
Western Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Wildlife Mississippi
Wisconsin Farmers Union
Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association
Women, Food and Agriculture Network
World Wildlife Fund
Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts
Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

Cc. Members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees