

April 3, 2014

The Honorable Robert Aderholt
Chairman
House Subcommittee on Agriculture
Appropriations

The Honorable Mark Pryor
Chairman
Senate Subcommittee on Agriculture
Appropriations

The Honorable Sam Farr
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Agriculture
Appropriations

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Senate Subcommittee on Agriculture
Appropriations

Dear Chairmen Aderholt and Pryor and Ranking Members Farr and Blunt:

The undersigned organizations, representing millions of people across the country, urge you to **oppose cuts to mandatory Farm Bill agricultural conservation programs in FY 2015** appropriations legislation.

After several years of negotiations, Congress recently passed the Agriculture Act of 2014 with broad bipartisan support. This recently passed Farm Bill renewed a suite of extremely popular and effective conservation programs, but reduced mandatory funding by \$4 billion. It is critical that Congress ensure that all of direct spending on conservation programs, as provided by the authorizing committees in the Farm Bill, can be spent as Congress intended in FY 2015.

With increased pressures on working lands to produce food, fuel, and fiber for our nation and the world, Farm Bill conservation programs are needed now more than ever. They deliver demonstrated environmental benefits, including clean air and water and abundant wildlife habitat. They protect soil and farmland to provide lasting food security. And they bring important money and jobs to rural areas. Failure to support our farmers, ranchers, foresters, and natural resource base today will jeopardize our agricultural industry tomorrow; driving up long term costs for environmental mitigation, and threatening our nation's food security.

Since 2008, mandatory conservation program funding has been cut by nearly \$3.2 billion through "changes in mandatory program spending" (CHIMPS) in appropriations bills. Nearly 80 percent of all CHIMPS made to Farm Bill programs since 2007 have targeted conservation programs. Most recently, Congress completed its work on the 2014 Farm Bill, which cuts \$4 billion from the Conservation Title over ten years. These reductions come on top of more than \$2 billion in sequestration cuts. In FY 2015 alone, sequestration cuts to mandatory conservation programs will amount to more than \$265 million.

The decisions made by Congress during the three-year farm bill debate mean that new enrollments in conservation programs will decline by millions of acres in FY 2015. Farmers, ranchers, and the American public cannot afford additional cuts to the critical programs that help protect our water, soil, air, and wildlife populations.

In addition to rejecting cuts to mandatory conservation spending, **we urge you to provide \$843.4 million for Conservation Operations, which includes Conservation Technical Assistance**

(CTA). Due to the General Services Administration's recent decentralization of responsibility for making building rental payments, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) will for the first time have to make rental payments out of the Conservation Operations budget. NRCS expects to pay \$28.6 million in rent in FY 2015. When this change is taken into account, the Administration's request of \$814.8 million for Conservation Operations would actually *reduce* the amount of funding available for conservation operations by \$26.6 million relative to FY 2014.

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

We ask you to recognize the importance of agricultural conservation by rejecting cuts to Farm Bill mandatory conservation programs and supporting discretionary Conservation Technical Assistance.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
American Society of Agronomy
Association of State Floodplain Managers
Center for Rural Affairs
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Working Group
Hmong National Development, Inc.
Izaak Walton League of America
Land Stewardship Project
Land Trust Alliance
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of Resource
Conservation & Development Councils

National Association of State Conservation
Agencies
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
Pheasants Forever
Pollinator Partnership
Quail Forever
Rural Advancement Foundation International
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
The Land Improvement Contractors of America
The Nature Conservancy
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Union of Concerned Scientists

cc: Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies