

May 20, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We the undersigned organizations urge you to establish a timely, robust, aggressive, and comprehensive approach to implementing the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The new CSP, properly administered and promoted, will produce real, measurable conservation and environmental benefits. It is USDA's most important new tool yet to help farmers tackle climate change mitigation, energy and water conservation, water quality impairment, loss of habitat and biodiversity, overuse of agrichemicals, and critical natural resource and environmental concerns.

We appreciate your strong statements of support for the program. With your continued leadership and the full commitment of your team, the CSP will:

- ***Deliver real environmental benefits.*** CSP's high natural resource and environmental standards guarantee that participating farmers and ranchers operate in a way that results in clean water, healthy soils and good wildlife habitat.
- ***Advance sustainability on working lands.*** We must grow our food and provide a healthy environment on America's farmlands in a way that fosters sustainable economic development in farming communities and helps launch new farmers on the landscape who are committed to a more sustainable agriculture.
- ***Reward farming systems that provide multiple benefits.*** This is the best model for future farm policy - we must support how farmers farm and reward the production of better soil and cleaner water rather than the maximum production of just a few commodities.
- ***Serve a diverse range of farmers and farming systems.*** CSP has the capacity to reach all types of agriculture by encouraging strong conservation practices on crop, pasture, range, and forested land. CSP can serve sustainable and organic operations, specialty crop farms, grazing operations of all kinds, and diversified crop-livestock farms.
- ***Be available year-round, nationwide.*** The new CSP is open to all farmers who now meet basic conservation thresholds and want to do better. The Department should take all necessary steps to ensure that thirteen million acres are enrolled each and every fiscal year, and should look for opportunities to grow the program beyond that before this farm bill cycle is over.

We strongly encourage you to initiate a CSP sign-up yet this spring with an adequate sign up period for the first ranking pool. As you know, the program has suffered in the past from consistently late sign-ups, always hitting the farm community during their busiest time, when

conservation program sign-up is least likely to be possible. A short sign up period before the first ranking pool will likewise make effective outreach and full participation more difficult to achieve.

We understand that a delayed sign up could not be avoided during this transition in administrations, and we trust the program will be up and running very soon, and will then stay consistently open for continuous sign-up on a nationwide basis with strong staff support for years and years to come. Once the program is established and on the ground, we need consistency in delivery, so farmers and ranchers can predict and plan for participation.

Before the program gets out the door, we ask for your assurance that the program will:

- Include a large number and wide variety of conservation enhancement activities. The enhancement list must be sufficient to address each land type (crop, pasture, range, forest), each major resource concern, and diverse production systems, including sustainable and organic systems.
- In addition to conservation enhancements, incorporate a significant suite of regular conservation practices, especially land management and vegetative practices, which are likely to be needed by many CSP participants as they create plans to meet and exceed the stewardship threshold on all priority resource concerns.
- Provide a seamless, farmer-friendly means for CSP participants to use the EQIP program for whatever technical and financial assistance they may require to adopt regular conservation practices, including but not limited to structural practices, to fulfill their CSP plan.
- Provide for active management and maintenance payments as well as planning and adoption or improvement payments for all CSP conservation enhancement activities and conservation practices.
- Afford resource-conserving crop rotations with muscular payment rates in accord with their statutory “supplemental payment” status and their substantial income forgone factor.
- Make enhancements available for advanced managed intensive rotational grazing, with robust payment rates, as well as for conversions of sensitive cropland to grass-based systems. Together with cover cropping and resource-conserving crop rotations on the crop side, these two enhancement activities should rate at the top of the list on the livestock side.
- Ensure that the long-promised CSP organic crosswalk is implemented fully, building on the recent experience with the EQIP organic initiative.
- Roll over into future years any unused acreage in a particular year’s sign-up. This is especially important this year, given the incredibly short time period before the end of the fiscal year, but should also be the permanent budgetary principle for the program.

We look forward to working together with you toward effective implementation of the new CSP to maximize its contribution to sustainability.

Sincerely,

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (CA)

Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network

American Farmland Trust

American Grassfed Association

Appalachian Sustainable Development

California Certified Organic Farmers

Carolina Farm Stewardship Association

Casa del Llano (TX)

Center for Rural Affairs (NE)

Center for Sustainable Living (NY)

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) (MN)

Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CA)

Cornucopia Institute (WI)

CROPP Cooperative, Organic Valley

Dakota Rural Action

Defenders of Wildlife

Ecological Farming Association (CA)

Farm Fresh Rhode Island

Flats Mentor Farm (MA)

Florida Certified Organic Growers & Consumers, Inc.

Georgia Organics

Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture Student Association (IA)

Grassworks (WI)

Hawaii Farmers Union

Illinois Stewardship Alliance

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement

Iowa Environmental Council

Iowa Farmers Union  
Island Grown Initiative (*MA*)  
Izaak Walton League of America  
Kansas Rural Center  
Land Stewardship Project (*MN*)  
Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (*WI*)  
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association  
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (*WI*)  
Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance  
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service  
Midwestern Legislative Conference  
Minnesota Citizens Organized Acting Together  
Minnesota Farmers Union  
Minnesota Food Association  
Minnesota National Farmers Organization  
Minnesota Sustainable Farming Association  
Missouri Farmers Union  
Missouri Rural Crisis Center  
National Catholic Rural Life Conference  
National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)  
National Farmers Organization  
National Farmers Union  
National Organic Coalition  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
New England Farmers Union  
New England Small Farm Institute  
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project  
New Jersey Conservation Foundation  
New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group  
Niman Ranch Pork Company  
Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) Interstate Council

Northeast Organic Dairy Producers' Alliance  
Northeast States Association for Agriculture Stewardship  
Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides  
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association  
Organic Farmer's Agency for Relationship Marketing, Inc  
Organic Farming Research Foundation  
Practical Farmers of Iowa  
Rural Advancement Foundation International USA (RAFI – USA)  
South Dakota Farmers Union  
Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group  
State Agriculture and Rural Leaders  
The Watershed Partnership, Inc,  
United Farmers USA  
Virginia Association for Biological Farming  
Wallace Center, Winrock International  
Wisconsin Farmers Union  
Women, Food and Agriculture Network

cc:

Deputy Chief of Staff Carole Jett  
Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan  
Chief of Staff Doug O'Brien  
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