

March 1, 2011

Dear Senator,

As you consider fiscal year 2011 appropriations legislation, the undersigned 35 organizations urge you to deal fairly with funding for rural America, agriculture and agricultural conservation. We understand the critical need to right America's fiscal ship, but spending cuts must be done in a tempered and equitable way. Rural America's contribution to deficit reduction should not be larger than other sectors, and within agriculture, conservation's contribution should likewise be proportional.

Unfortunately, the House-passed FY2011 appropriations bill, H.R. 1, not only far overshoots reasonable reduction levels, but also singles out funding for agriculture and rural America for a disproportionately high cut. USDA and FDA discretionary spending – including critical funding for conservation technical assistance for farmers, ranchers and foresters – is cut 22 percent, relative to the non-defense average of 14 percent.

In addition to this extreme and highly disproportional discretionary spending reduction, H.R. 1 unfairly singles out for additional cuts the mandatory funding for conservation and renewable energy programs provided by the 2008 Farm Bill, which passed both the House and Senate with broad bipartisan support. H.R. 1 would cut over a half billion dollars from the Conservation Stewardship Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetland Reserve Program, and Biomass Crop Assistance Program relative to the direct spending levels provided by the 2008 Farm Bill.

We are especially concerned about the impact of permanent reductions to mandatory conservation programs contained in H.R. 1. The effect of these cuts is magnified because the funding is reduced for multiple years, though only the first year is credited for appropriations budgeting purposes. As a result, the savings are not fully realized, and further pressure is put on the farm bill baseline only a year before a new bill must be written. We urge you to minimize cuts to mandatory funding in the appropriations bill and to preserve the farm bill baseline.

With increased pressures on working lands to produce food, feed, fuel, and fiber for our nation and the world, both farm bill conservation programs and discretionary funding for technical assistance are needed now more than ever. These conservation programs are crucial to the health and viability of agriculture and rural America. They help farmers, ranchers and foresters to voluntarily address their key resource concerns and assist them in complying with local, state, and federal regulations. They deliver demonstrated environmental benefits including clean air, clean water, and abundant habitat for wildlife. They protect soil and farmland to provide lasting food security. And they support existing rural economies as well as bringing in important sources of new money and jobs, including increased revenues from hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities.

The demand for enrollment in these programs routinely exceeds the funds available, even without any cuts. Farmers and ranchers are waiting to enroll over 1,000,000 acres in the Wetlands Reserve Program and Grasslands Reserve Program. Applications for the Conservation

Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program often outstrip available funds by two to three times.

Failure to support our farmers, ranchers, foresters, and natural resource base today will jeopardize our agricultural industry, drive up long term costs for environmental mitigation, and threaten our nation's food security. We ask the Senate to recognize the importance of agricultural conservation programs and ensure that reasonable funding levels are continued. Ensuring that cuts are minimized today will give Congress the latitude to address these crucial issues in the upcoming farm bill debate.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
American Rivers
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Environmental Defense Fund
Gifford Pinchot Task Force
Gulf Restoration Network
Izaak Walton League of America
Land Trust Alliance
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Midwest Environmental Advocates
Missouri Coalition for the Environment
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Audubon Society
National Farmers Union
National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium
National Network of Forest Practitioners
National Organic Coalition
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Woodland Owners Association
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Organic Trade Association
Partners for Sustainable Pollination
Pinchot Institute
Pollinator Partnership
Prairie Rivers Network
Sierra Club

Soil and Water Conservation Society
Sustainable Northwest
Tennessee Clean Water Network
The Nature Conservancy
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Union of Concerned Scientists
Water Environment Federation
Wallowa Resources