



October 31, 2013

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1305 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Cochran, Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson:

The Campaign for Renewed Rural Development (CRRD) is a coalition of over thirty of our nation's rural policy advocacy organizations that represent a broad spectrum of rural interests and work together to assure federal commitment to rural development.

The CRRD applauds your hard work and leadership in moving a comprehensive Farm Bill through Congress. The undersigned organizations respectfully urge you to provide a robust Rural Development title that promotes economic growth and stability in rural areas by creating jobs and ensuring the success of our next generations.

As you enter conference negotiations, we urge you to support the following provisions within the Rural Development title that reflect the policy changes that are supported by our organizations and the rural people, places and businesses we represent.

Funding Level

Since 1996, the Rural Development title has averaged \$413 million in mandatory funding per Farm Bill. We urge you to support, at a minimum, the \$228 million mandatory funding level in the Senate bill for the Rural Development Title instead of the \$1.5 billion cut in authorization levels found in the House bill.

We applaud both the House (\$50 million) and the Senate (\$62.5 million) investments in mandatory funding for the Value-Added Producer Grant Program (VAPG). We urge you to accept no less than the Senate level, but to look for ways to increase VAPG funding in the final bill to its \$20 million per year historic average mandatory funding level as part of the conference agreement. We also urge the conference to support no less than the Senate level of \$15 million in mandatory funding for the Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program and the \$150 million in mandatory funding for the over \$3 billion water/wastewater backlog, though again we would urge you to look for additional resources for both in the final conference bill.

Policy Changes

Our organizations have spent years researching the ideas and suggestions of our members regarding policy changes that ensure federal rural development programs are improved. We urge you to support these common sense policy improvements during the conference negotiations. This will ensure that federal rural development investments are more effective and responsive to rural priorities. Below is a list of policy changes that we urge you to support:

- The Senate bill organizes the Rural Development title into a more simplified format that is easier for rural stakeholders to understand and will ensure better program delivery by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). We urge conferees to support this approach.
- Sec. 3702 of the Senate bill makes rural development programs more focused on funding the strategic economic and community priorities of rural stakeholders as they have requested. This is a critical policy change that will assist all rural communities by ensuring USDA considers the strategic projects of rural areas.
- The House bill requires USDA to improve program metrics that will lead to better program evaluations and increased effectiveness of funding decisions. We support this good government policy change.
- Both the House and Senate bills require the application processes to be streamlined for rural communities, people and businesses, and this policy change should be maintained.
- The authorization of Technical Assistance funding for the Community Facilities Program is critical to helping communities lacking the capacity to apply for sophisticated facilities projects.
- We support the set aside for local and regional food systems under the Business and Industry Loan Program that is found in both versions of the bill, but oppose the seven percent cap found in the House bill. We also urge you to adopt the important technical changes to the Value-Added Producer Grants program that were included in the floor amendments filed by Senator Brown and by Reps. Fortenberry and Pingree.

- The Rural Business Opportunity Grant Program and Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program are effective at leveraging local resources to create rural jobs. Through these programs, rural America will gain increased access to important seed capital, infrastructure financing, professional expertise and support services that help strengthen their communities. At a minimum, the functions of each program should be maintained and the Senate authorization level of \$65 million annually should be supported.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues. We look forward to a continued dialogue as the process moves forward and stand ready to work with you to complete passage of the new five-year Farm Bill.

Sincerely,

American Public Works Association
American Sustainable Business Council
California FarmLink
Center for Rural Affairs
Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Delta Land & Community
Farmers Market Coalition
Fay-Penn Economic Development Council
Housing Assistance Council
League of Rural Voters
Main Street Project
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Michigan Land Use Institute
National Association of Counties
National Association of Development Organizations
National Association of Regional Councils
National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils
National Association of Towns and Townships
National Catholic Rural Life Conference
National Center for Frontier Communities
National Grange
National Rural Health Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society
Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship
Rural Coalition
Rural Community Assistance Partnership
Rural Community Assistance Corporation
State Agriculture and Rural Leaders