

October 17, 2017

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen,
Chairman
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Robert Aderholt, Chairman
House Agriculture Appropriations
Subcommittee

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Ranking Member
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable John Hoeven, Chairman
Senate Agriculture Appropriations
Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members:

As you prepare to finalize appropriations legislation for FY 2018, we urge you to oppose re-opening the farm bill through the appropriations process in order to cut mandatory funding for farm bill conservation programs. We further urge you to provide a much needed increase in discretionary funding for Conservation Technical Assistance.

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated or eliminated nearly a dozen conservation programs and reduced mandatory conservation spending by \$4 billion, \$6 billion when sequestration is included. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees did their parts to reduce federal spending and did so voluntarily. Since then, repeated annual cuts have kept thousands of highly qualified farmers, ranchers, and foresters out of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

We are pleased that both the House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations bills for FY 2018 leave CSP intact, and reductions in CSP funding, as well as any other farm bill conservation programs, should remain off the table. We are disappointed, however, that the Senate bill proposes to cut EQIP by \$178.5 million, which is nearly 20 percent of the funding authorized to be available for the FY 2018 enrollment. If included in final FY18 funding legislation, this cut to EQIP would force USDA to turn away thousands more eligible producers, and it would also impact funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), which derives its funding from EQIP, CSP, and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

The cut made to EQIP in the Senate bill would contribute to enormous backlogs of applications among highly qualified producers, and make it difficult for farmers to maintain healthy soil, protect water, and mitigate and adapt to the impacts of drought and flooding. We therefore strongly urge you to adopt the House's funding level for EQIP and reject the proposed cut included in the Senate bill.

It is estimated that sequestration alone will cut \$254 million from mandatory conservation spending in FY 2018. Opening up the farm bill to further cut EQIP, CSP, or other farm bill conservation programs, such as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, should be off the table in the FY 2018 appropriations bill. Additionally, as we approach the expiration of the 2014 Farm Bill, any cuts to mandatory spending that are made in FY 2018 will carry over into the baseline assumptions for the next farm bill. A reduction in the CBO baseline for conservation programs will mean less money available for the next farm bill, thus further reducing available resources for conservation well into the future.

In addition to leaving farm bill conservation funding intact, we urge you to adopt the Senate level of \$874 million for NRCS' Conservation Operations account, and within that account, to adopt the funding level of \$769 million for 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. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

Cuts to voluntary conservation programs and technical assistance would leave producers high and dry when trying to build soil resilience, create and maintain habitat for threatened, endangered, or economically important fish and wildlife, and prepare for and manage drought and flooding. Less funding would mean more water pollution and more regulation, as well as less productive and profitable farmlands as soil erodes and nutrients are lost. Moreover, the number of qualified farmers denied access to the programs would grow even larger.

As you work to finalize FY 2018 appropriations legislation, we urge you to keep the farm bill intact, to reject cuts to farm bill conservation programs, and to adequately fund Conservation Technical Assistance.

Sincerely,

American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
American Rivers
American Seed Trade Association
American Society of Agronomy
American Water Works Association
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Association of State Floodplain Managers
Center for Rural Affairs
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Working Group
Great River Greening
Gulf Restoration Network
Izaak Walton League of America

Land Improvement Contractors of America
National Association of Clean Water Agencies
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Audubon Society
National Farmers Union
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Young Farmers Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
Pollinator Partnership
Prairie Rivers Network
Rural & Agriculture Council of America
Society for Range Management
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
The Conservation Fund
The Land Trust Alliance
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
World Wildlife Fund

Cc: Members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees