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56 Groups Urge Budget Cutters to Protect Agricultural Conservation

Protecting Water, Soil and Wildlife Provides Great Public Benefit

WASHINGTON - A national coalition of 56 policy and advocacy organizations is urging Congress to preserve funding for essential U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation programs and to take additional steps to enhance soil, water quality and wildlife on agricultural land. The coalition outlined a set of key principles that lawmakers should observe as they write the Conservation Title of the 2012 farm bill and seek ways to trim the federal deficit.

The 56 coalition members are asking Congress to:

- Put a high priority on funding critical conservation programs at the current baseline level of \$6.5 billion a year.
- Strengthen and enforce provisions that require farmers to implement basic conservation practices in return for farm subsidies and extend them to insurance subsidies.
- Target conservation dollars where the opportunities for conservation and environmental outcomes are greatest.
- Streamline existing programs by reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and ramp up their effectiveness by linking payments to performance and focusing more on whole-farm and whole-ranch conservation systems.
- Ensure that all segments of the farming community – women, minorities and beginning farmers – have access to funding and technical assistance.

The 2011 Survey on Agriculture and Environment conducted on behalf of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, released today, shows clearly that Americans overwhelmingly view conservation as an important priority in national farm policy and don't want to see conservation programs cut.

USDA's conservation programs are the main tools for implementing best management practices that help crop and livestock producers conserve our soil resources and avoid deposition of nutrient and sediment into our rivers and lakes. Agricultural conservation is also the primary means to protect vital habitat and endangered and threatened species on the privately held land that constitutes the majority of our nation's land base.

Current market pressures and competition for land are exacerbating our conservation challenges and threatening to roll back the past gains of federal conservation programs. The nation will not be able to meet the natural resource and environmental challenges it faces without well-funded and effective conservation provisions in the 2012 farm bill.

Conservation leaders from across America endorsed the principles laid out in the group's document:

“The public and the conservation community is sending a unified message to Capitol Hill: the worthy goals of deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility must not be an excuse to reduce support for conservation. As a matter of national security, it is imperative that we maintain our robust investment in conservation and simultaneously work to make the conservation programs smarter and more

efficient,” said Jon Scholl, president of the American Farmland Trust.

“Chronically underfunded conservation programs can’t stand up to the pressure we are putting on our land and water,” said Craig Cox, senior vice president for agricultural and natural resources at the Environmental Working Group. “The progress farmers have made is real, but pressing problems remain unaddressed; we will lose the ground we have gained if Congress fails to ensure that conservation intensifies in lock-step with production.”

“With heightened pressures on the agricultural resource base and with farmer demand for conservation assistance far outstripping the supply of dollars, we need a robust system now more than ever. Congress can meet the challenge if it pays careful attention to these principles,” said Ferd Hoefner, policy director of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

“There are many ways to improve the farm bill’s environmental impact without increasing funding,” said Tim Male, vice president for conservation policy at Defenders of Wildlife. “Streamlining programs and better focusing where and how dollars are spent would beef up the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s positive impact on wildlife, water and our environment.”

“In a clearly transitional environment for agriculture policy, where crop insurance has become the dominant means of public support to producers and special congressional committees may be poised to re-write the broad system of production subsidies, conservation compliance will still serve as a simple and logical covenant between the public and producers that ensures soil and wetland protections accompany the receipt of taxpayer dollars,” said Brad Redlin, agricultural program director at the Izaak Walton League of America.

The 2012 farm bill will encompass a wide array of programs affecting the farming industry, nutrition programs and rural development. Congress is scheduled to finalize the legislation next year, but the Congressional Super Committee is expected to make recommendations in the coming weeks that will likely impact the bill’s conservation provisions.

“It is critical that the 2012 farm bill funds programs that show proven soil and water conservation benefits and that are open to all sectors of agriculture production, including fruit, vegetable and organic growers. Local foods production and delivery is a growing industry and needs to be treated equally,” said Claudia Emken, conservation policy advocate for the Illinois Stewardship Alliance.

Collectively, the 56 organizations supporting the conservation principles represent millions of members and supporters nationwide across a variety of ideologies and interests. These groups and others have worked successfully to protect conservation programs and advocate for additional funding in previous farm bills.

“The importance and value of conservation programs for clean water, healthy soil and wildlife habitat must be recognized. Not only are these programs critical for ensuring healthy wildlife populations, they also benefit rural economies through revenues from hunting, fishing and other wildlife-based recreation,” said Aviva Glaser, agriculture policy coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation.