May 6, 2013

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow,
Chairwoman

The Honorable Thad Cochran,
Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Frank D. Lucas,
Chairman

The Honorable Collin Peterson,
Ranking Member

House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC, 20515

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

As former Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, we are writing to share our strong support for conservation compliance and to highlight this conservation success story as you develop the 2013 Farm Bill.

America's farmers produce far more than food and fiber — they also produce cleaner water, cleaner air, open spaces, and abundant habitat for wildlife and recreation. When conservation compliance was enacted as a part of the 1985 Farm Bill, it sparked a decade of unprecedented progress in limiting erosion, cleaning up waterways, and protecting wetlands.

In exchange for farm program benefits, farmers agreed to adopt land management practices to reduce soil erosion and protect remaining wetlands on their cropland. As a result, soil erosion was cut by 40 percent on 140 million acres of cropland. Productivity was improved, drinking water protected, and streams ran clearer in agricultural watersheds. Conservation compliance has contributed to a more sustainable agriculture and served both farmers and the environment very well. It must be continued.

Conservation practices not only provide substantial environmental benefits, but also help producers adapt to weather variability and enable them to successfully produce crops under adverse conditions. When implemented and maintained, cover crops, no till, active drainage water management, and many other practices help the land withstand drought and recover from flooding and other weather-related issues while still maintaining yields.

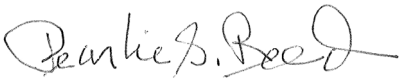
Today, high prices driven by strong demand for our commodities are boosting farm income but putting enormous pressure on our land and water resources. Maintaining the current conservation compliance provisions, which are both effective and achievable, is essential to our efforts to maintain the conservation gains of recent decades. As you take steps to modernize our farm safety net, we urge you to make sure that compliance provisions cover all income support, including eligibility for crop and revenue insurance premium subsidies.

We also encourage you to provide incentives to actually lower the cost of crop insurance to producers who use conservation practices the Secretary determines to provide resilience to extreme weather events. We believe such an incentive would lead to increased adoption of conservation and result in savings to the Treasury as fewer claims would have to be paid out. Further, to ensure the widest participation possible, we believe crop insurance should continue to be available to all producers regardless of income. Doing so will benefit farmers, the environment, and all Americans going forward.

Sincerely,

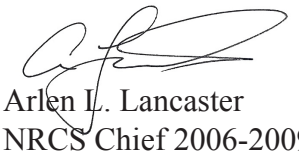
William J. Richards
SCS Chief 1990-1993

Paul W. Johnson
NRCS Chief 1994-1997

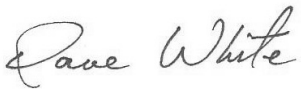


Pearlie Reed
NRCS Chief 1998-2002

Bruce Knight
NRCS Chief 2002-2006



Arlen L. Lancaster
NRCS Chief 2006-2009



Dave White
NRCS Chief 2009-2012