



National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

December 17, 2013

Dear Representative / Senator:

As you work to finalize appropriations legislation for FY 2014, we write on behalf of our forty farm, conservation, and rural member organizations to highlight a number of issues that are critically important to agriculture.

The FY 2014 budget deal partially replaces sequestration cuts for two years, providing for additional discretionary funding in FY 2014 and 2015. Some of that money should be directed to the Agriculture Appropriations sub-allocation to help build upon successful investments and reverse the trend of repeatedly shortchanging important programs due to an unreasonable low 302a allocations and sequestration. We call attention in particular to the following pending sustainable agriculture and rural economic development issues.

1. SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION COMPETITIVE GRANTS

Investment in agricultural research is vital to continued productivity and innovation in American agriculture. The **Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)** program is the only USDA competitive grant research program with a consistent focus on sustainability and farmer-driven research at its core. Despite SARE's popularity, technological breakthroughs, and demonstrated administrative efficiency over the past 25 years, its funding *rests at less than a third of its authorized amount*. As a result, only 1 out of 10 meritorious proposals is funded. We strongly urge you to **provide at the very least the Senate funding level of \$22.7 million** for the SARE program. In order to meet future challenges, which require increased production and profitability in a sustainable manner, farmers need cutting-edge research that is easily accessible and relevant to their farming systems. SARE is uniquely able to meet that need.

2. WETLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM

We commend both the House and Senate for not limiting mandatory funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative, and Farmland Protection Program. We remain opposed, however, to other Changes in Mandatory Program Spending (CHIMPS) to mandatory conservation programs contained in both bills. In particular, we **strongly oppose the limitation that the House bill places on the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)**. The House bill limits the FY 2014 WRP enrollment to 71,104 acres, a cut of over 193,000 acres. This limitation would have an enormous impact on USDA's ability to conserve wetlands, and we urge you to reject it and other CHIMPS in the final FY 2014 appropriations bill.

3. CONSERVATION OPERATIONS

We also urge that the appropriations legislation **include the Senate funding level of \$818 million for Conservation Operations**. Even at this level, the Conservation Operations account would be at \$10 million below its FY 2012 funding level. USDA's ability to deliver conservation programs to farmers and ranchers depends heavily on on-the-ground conservation technical assistance. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

4. RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND FARM LOAN PROGRAMS

Several programs help farmers and rural businesses gain access to important capital, enterprise financing, and technical assistance. Chief among them are the Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG) program, Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program (RMAP), and Direct Operating Loan program. We are pleased that funding for the VAPG program is increased slightly in both the House and Senate bills; however, we believe that \$15 million is too low for a program that has been cut by more than 32 percent since 2010, despite being a key part of a proven job-creation strategy for over ten years. We urge you to **adopt the Senate funding levels for both RMAP and Direct Operating Loans**. The House bill provides no money for RMAP, while the Senate bill provides \$1.4 million. For Direct Operating Loans, the House bill provides \$1.13 billion while the Senate bill provides \$1.22 billion. These programs help new farmers and rural businesses in the beginning so that they can expand their operations and drive economic growth in rural areas.

Finally, we are extremely disappointed that the House bill includes a harmful legislative rider that **overrides the Farm Bill and denies poultry and livestock farmers protection under the Packers and Stockyards Act**. The House provision severely limits USDA's ability to implement the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Act (GIPSA) contract fairness rule that it began to implement in 2010. This is an affront to justice and fairness for farmers and is an unfortunate example of legislating on an appropriations bill on behalf of a very few powerful corporations. The Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 is the nation's primary statute providing basic protections for livestock and poultry growers against fraudulent, deceptive, and retaliatory trade practices by meatpackers and poultry companies. The statute's importance is even more relevant now than in 1921, because the extent of such practices has expanded significantly. NSAC vehemently opposes the limitation to full implementation of the GIPSA contract fairness rule, and strongly urges that the rider be left out of the final FY 2014 appropriations bill.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,



Ferd Hoefner, Policy Director



Greg Fogel, Senior Policy Specialist