

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 4, 2014

Honorable Mark Pryor
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Pryor and Ranking Member Blunt:

As the subcommittee considers the FY 2015 appropriations bill, we urge you to support the mandatory funding authorized for conservation programs in the 2014 farm bill. The new farm bill prioritizes investment in conservation, and offers reforms that streamline and improve programs, while also saving taxpayer dollars. We recognize the challenges of allocating limited financial resources among a wide variety of worthy programs, but we believe that prioritizing conservation and enhancement of our natural resources is a vital investment in our future.

Conservation programs offer crucial tools that support voluntary, cooperative efforts to protect water quality, conserve soil, enhance wildlife habitat, and protect land. These programs not only conserve our nation's natural resources, they also sustain our hunting and fishing traditions, and help keep America's working lands in the hands of farm families for generations to come. Importantly, the 2014 farm bill includes measures that help to improve the ability of farmers and ranchers to establish conservation easements on their land, increase flexibility of regional conservation programs to meet local needs, and support beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Private land comprises nearly seventy percent of the land in the U.S., and conservation programs help farmers and ranchers achieve their goals to be good stewards of that land. They also help defray the costs of meeting environmental standards and regulations. As our nation faces increasing agricultural and environmental challenges, in the forms of prolonged droughts, increasing wildfires, devastating floods, and weather variability, conservation programs will continue to serve as vital tools to help us address those challenges, while protecting the long-term economic viability of family farms across the country.

Conservation partnerships with farmers and ranchers are a benefit to communities in our states and across the nation. These programs play a dual role of supporting stewardship on private lands and enabling economic growth, particularly in rural communities. Over the last five years, farm bill programs have protected over 580,000 acres of farm and ranch land and nearly 850,000 acres of wetlands through conservation easements, and enrolled over 58 million acres in practices to improve conservation performance, among other accomplishments. The success of these programs has not been limited to any particular region or part of the country, but rather, stretches across all types of agricultural lands nationwide.

The 2014 farm bill included \$4 billion in savings from the conservation title, in addition to \$2 billion in sequestration cuts, which will occur over the next ten years. In FY 2015 alone, sequestration cuts to mandatory conservation programs will generate more than \$265 million in savings. These programs should not be cut further. Since 2008, conservation programs have borne a significant share of the deficit reduction burden with nearly \$3.2 billion in cuts to mandatory spending for these programs. Yet for a number of affected programs, demand continues to exceed resource availability. For example, in FY 2013 the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) had a total demand for over 135,000 contracts, but available resources could meet less than half that number. This story is similar for most conservation programs.

Farm bill conservation programs help working lands stay in production while achieving significant conservation goals and environmental benefits. Given the savings that passed into law in the farm bill, we urge you to give strong support to mandatory funding for conservation programs in your FY 2015 appropriations bill.

Sincerely,

Cheri Coen

Mark F. B. A

Debbie Stabenow

Al Franken

Jeffrey A. Mankley

Elizabeth Han

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Shirley

Deanne Shaker

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