

April 4, 2016

The Honorable Robert Aderholt, Chairman
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairman Aderholt and Senator Shelby:

The undersigned Alabama organizations and businesses urge you to oppose cuts to mandatory funding for Farm Bill agricultural conservation programs in FY 2017 appropriations legislation.

As you know, the 2014 Farm Bill consolidated or eliminated nearly a dozen conservation programs and reduced mandatory funding by \$6 billion, saving American taxpayers billions of dollars. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees did their part to reduce federal spending and did so voluntarily. The cuts contained in the farm bill, combined with changes in mandatory spending, have already caused new enrollments in conservation programs to decline by millions of acres. On top of these cuts, it is estimated that sequestration alone will cut \$265 million from mandatory conservation spending in FY 2017.

We appreciate that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not propose any cuts to Farm Bill conservation programs in FY 2017, and we urge you to prioritize conservation and enhancement of our natural resource as a vital investment in our future. USDA's request includes full funding for critical working lands conservation programs including the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the recently created Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). We urge you to protect these programs that enable Alabama's farmers, ranchers, and foresters to conserve water, maintain their soil, and produce abundant food and fiber.

Between 2009 and 2015, **Alabama's farmers, ranchers, and foresters enrolled more than 600,000 acres in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**. The program is popular among the state's corn, cotton, and forage and hay producers; however, it is particularly important for Alabama foresters, who account over three quarters of the state's CSP contracts. Unfortunately, **due to inadequate funding, last year, less than 10 percent of eligible CSP applicants were enrolled in Alabama**, turning away more than 300 qualified producers.

Alabama's producers also depend on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to protect and enhance their land. **Overall, Alabama ranks 6th nationally in terms of the number of producers enrolled in EQIP**. Producers in Alabama brought in nearly \$100 million through EQIP from 2009 to 2015.

The recently created **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**, which in its first three years has already seen great success in Alabama, pulls its funding from EQIP and CSP; so cuts to EQIP and CSP would mean cuts to RCPP as well. Since 2014, RCPP has been helping farmers protect Alabama watersheds and restore ecosystems that are vital to long-term viability of agricultural producing communities. The 205,000-acre Coastal Headwaters Forest project along the Longleaf Pine Range and the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Rivers Conservation Partnership both won highly competitive awards during the program's inaugural year. The Alabama Farmers

Federation has tapped RCPP to help ensure that future irrigation practices will be efficient, sustainable, and environmentally friendly in order to protect and improve Alabama watersheds.

Producers in Alabama value the investments that the Agriculture Committees and USDA have made through these voluntary, private lands conservation programs. Additional cuts to farm bill conservation spending would leave producers high and dry when trying to prepare for and manage drought, flooding, and other extreme weather. It would mean more water pollution and less wildlife habitat. And it would drive up long-term costs for environmental mitigation, and threaten our nation's food security.

As the House and Senate Appropriations Committees consider FY 2017 appropriations legislation, we urge you to keep the commitment made in the 2014 Farm Bill to the original and best stewards of the land: America's farmers and ranchers.

Sincerely,

Alabama Association of Conservation Districts

Alabama Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils, Inc.

Alabama Farmers Federation

Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network

Alabama Wildlife Federation

Alabama Women in Agriculture

ALA-TOM Resource Conservation and Development Council

AMRV RC&D Council, Inc. (Lawrence Co., Cullman Co., Jackson Co., Marshall Co., Dekalb Co.)

Bullock Barbour Farmers Association

Camp McDowell (Walker Co., Winston Co.)

Cawaco Resource Conservation & Development Council, Inc. (Blount Co., Walker Co.)

Coosa Valley RC&D Council (Cherokee Co., Etowah Co.)

Cottage House Resource Center

Gulf Coast Resource Conservation and Development Council

Mid-South RC&D Council, Inc.

McDowell Farm School (Walker Co., Winston Co.)

Natures Way Farm (Marshall Co.)

Tombigbee RC&D Council (Fayette Co., Lamar Co., Tuscaloosa Co.)

Veteran Farms MRT Cattle Company (Cullman Co.)

Wiregrass Resource Conservation and Development Council