

September 17, 2015

The Honorable Hal Rogers, Chairman  
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member  
House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman  
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, Ranking Member  
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Robert Aderholt, Chairman  
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Sam Farr, Ranking Member  
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman  
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Ranking Member  
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairman Rogers, Chairman Cochran, Chairman Aderholt, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Lowey, Ranking Member Mikulski, Ranking Member Farr, and Ranking Member Merkley:

As you negotiate final appropriations legislation for FY 2016, the undersigned organizations urge you to protect mandatory funding for farm bill conservation programs, support robust discretionary funding for Conservation Technical Assistance, and reject any attempt to undermine highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance.

Last year, the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the farm bill) consolidated or eliminated nearly a dozen conservation programs and reduced mandatory funding by \$4 billion, with sequestration scheduled to cut an additional \$2 billion. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees did their part to reduce federal spending and did so voluntarily. The cuts contained in the new farm bill were real, serious, and deep. Under current law, new enrollments in conservation programs will decline by millions of acres in FY 2016; sequestration alone will cut \$260 million from mandatory funding for agricultural conservation programs in FY 2016. Opening up the farm bill to reduce these programs even more should be off the table in the appropriations bill.

Unfortunately, the FY 2016 agriculture appropriations bills passed by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees cut hundreds of millions of dollars from the farm bill Conservation Title. The House bill includes a 2.26 million acre cut to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a 23 percent reduction below the level mandated by the 2014 Farm Bill. Fortunately, the Senate bill does not cut funding for CSP. However, both the House and Senate bills slash funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the House by \$301 million and the Senate by \$303 million. The Senate bill further cuts EQIP by permanently rescinding an additional \$73 million in carryover funding. While not cut directly in either bill, the extremely popular Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) would also be impacted by the proposed cuts to CSP and EQIP because RCPP draws its funding from the CSP and EQIP funding baselines. These proposed cuts are shortsighted and would severely limit the capacity of farmers, ranchers, and foresters to conserve water, maintain their soil, and prepare for extreme weather events.

In addition to rejecting cuts to mandatory spending for conservation programs, we urge you to adopt the Senate funding level of \$855 million for discretionary Conservation Operations, which includes Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA). USDA's ability to deliver conservation programs to farmers

and ranchers depends heavily on on-the-ground technical assistance. CTA provides landowners with the site-specific solutions needed to implement conservation practices on their lands, while providing accountability to ensure maximum return on the public investment. Inadequate technical assistance would reduce the effectiveness of conservation practices on the land. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

We continue to have serious concerns about any policy rider that would open up the farm bill. The House bill contains a policy rider to delay by one year the new conservation compliance provisions established by the 2014 Farm Bill. However, USDA has taken extraordinary steps to ensure that every covered producer is able to self-certify compliance by the relevant deadlines. We believe that the concerns that prompted the policy rider have been addressed administratively and do not require any legislative action.

As you finalize FY 2016 appropriations legislation, we urge you to keep the farm bill intact, to reject cuts to mandatory funding for conservation programs, support robust funding for conservation technical assistance, and keep the legislation free of any riders that render conservation compliance ineffective.

Sincerely,

Alaska Association of Conservation Districts  
American Bird Conservancy  
American Farmland Trust  
American Forests  
American Rivers  
American Water Works Association  
Arizona Association of Conservation Districts  
Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts  
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  
Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts  
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies  
Association of Northwest Steelheaders  
Association of State Floodplain Managers  
Audubon  
Bluestem Communications  
California Association of Resource Conservation Districts  
California Certified Organic Farmers  
California FarmLink  
Center for Rural Affairs  
Chesapeake Bay Foundation  
Colorado Association of Conservation Districts  
Colorado Wildlife Federation  
CROPP Cooperative | Organic Valley | Organic Prairie  
Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Dakota Rural Action  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Delaware Association of Conservation Districts  
Delta Land and Community  
Delta Waterfowl  
Environmental Working Group

Florida Division of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Florida Keys Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Georgia Wildlife Federation  
Florida Wildlife Federation  
Grassworks  
Gulf Coast Land Trust  
Gulf Restoration Network  
Illinois Stewardship Alliance  
Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts  
Iowa Environmental Council  
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation  
Izaak Walton League of America  
Kansas Alliance of Wetlands and Streams  
Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition  
Kansas Rural Center  
Kansas Wildlife Federation  
Land Improvement Contractors of America  
Land Stewardship Project  
League of Women Voters  
Louisiana Environmental Action Network  
Maine Association of Conservation Districts  
Maine Farmland Trust  
Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts  
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts  
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute  
Michigan Association of Conservation Districts  
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service  
Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts  
Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy  
Minnesota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture  
Mississippi River Trust  
Missouri Coalition for the Environment  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
National Association of Clean Water Agencies  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Association of RC&D Councils  
National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative  
National Farmers Union  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
National Wildlife Federation  
National Young Farmers Coalition  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society  
Nebraska Wildlife Federation  
Nevada Association of Conservation Districts  
Nevada Wildlife Federation  
New England Farmers Union

New Hampshire Association of Conservation Districts  
New Jersey Association of Conservation Districts  
New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts  
New Mexico Wildlife Federation  
New York State Division of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Northeast Organic Farming Association  
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group  
Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides  
Northwest Guides and Anglers Association  
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association  
Oregon Association of Conservation Districts  
Oregon Division of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Oregon Tilth  
PennFuture  
Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts  
Pheasants Forever  
Pinchot Institute for Conservation  
Pollinator Partnership  
Practical Farmers of Iowa  
Prairie Rivers Network  
Quail Forever  
Rapid City Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America  
Slow Food USA  
Soil and Water Conservation Society  
South Carolina Wildlife Federation  
South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts  
South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America  
South Dakota Wildlife Federation  
Tennessee Clean Water Network  
Texas Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts  
The Conservation Fund  
The Nature Conservancy  
The Wildlife Society  
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership  
Trout Unlimited  
Utah Association of Conservation Districts  
Vermont Association of Conservation Districts  
Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts  
Water Environment Federation  
West Virginia Rivers Coalition  
Western Sustainable Agriculture Working Group  
Wildlife Mississippi  
Wisconsin Farmers Union  
Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association  
Women, Food and Agriculture Network  
World Wildlife Fund  
Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts  
Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

Cc. Members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees