

October 17, 2016

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 Chairmen and Ranking Members:

As you prepare to finalize appropriations legislation for FY 2017, we urge you to oppose re-opening the farm bill through the appropriations process in order to cut mandatory funding for farm bill conservation programs. We further urge you to meet USDA's discretionary funding request for Conservation Technical Assistance.

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated or eliminated nearly a dozen conservation programs and reduced mandatory conservation spending by \$4 billion, \$6 billion when sequestration is included. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees did their parts to reduce federal spending and did so voluntarily. Since then, repeated annual cuts have kept thousands of highly qualified farmers, ranchers, and foresters out of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

We are disappointed that the House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations bills for FY 2017 continue along this trajectory. The cut made to CSP in the FY 2017 House bill would reduce the size of the 2017 enrollment by 20 percent, from 10 million acres to 8 million acres, and over 10 years would mean a \$325 million cut from baseline farm bill funding. While the Senate bill leaves CSP funding intact, both bills reduce funding for EQIP. Similar cuts to CSP and EQIP in the FY 2015 CRomnibus resulted in NRCS state offices rejecting 75 percent of eligible applicants.

It is estimated that sequestration alone will cut \$265 million from mandatory conservation spending in FY 2017. Opening up the farm bill to further cut EQIP, CSP, or other farm bill conservation programs, such as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, should be off the table in the FY 2017 appropriations bill.

In addition to leaving farm bill conservation funding intact, we urge you to adopt the Senate level for NRCS' Conservation Operations account, and within that account, to meet USDA's request for \$760.7 million for 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. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

Agricultural conservation programs are the first line of defense in preparing for extreme weather events and complying with environmental regulations. Additional cuts to voluntary conservation programs would leave producers high and dry when trying to build soil resilience, create and maintain habitat for threatened, endangered, or economically important fish and wildlife, and prepare for and manage drought and flooding. Less funding would mean more water pollution and more regulation, as well as less productive and profitable farmlands as soil erodes and nutrients are lost. Moreover, the number of qualified farmers denied access to the programs would grow even larger.

As you work to finalize FY 2017 appropriations legislation, we urge you to keep the farm bill intact, to reject cuts to farm bill conservation programs, and to adequately fund Conservation Technical Assistance.

Sincerely,

American Bird Conservancy  
American Farmland Trust  
American Forests  
American Rivers  
American Seed Trade Association  
American Society of Agronomy  
American Water Works Association  
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies  
Association of State Floodplain Managers  
Bluestem Communications  
Center for Rural Affairs  
Chesapeake Bay Foundation  
Crop Science Society of America  
CROPP Cooperative | Organic Valley  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Delta Waterfowl  
Environmental Defense Fund  
Gulf Restoration Network  
Izaak Walton League of America  
Land Improvement Contractors of America  
National Association of Clean Water Agencies  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils  
National Association of State Conservation Agencies  
National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative  
National Deer Alliance  
National Farmers Union  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
National Wildlife Federation  
National Young Farmers Coalition

Pheasants Forever  
Pollinator Partnership  
Quail Forever  
Soil and Water Conservation Society  
Soil Science Society of America  
The Conservation Fund  
The Nature Conservancy  
The Wildlife Society  
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership  
Trout Unlimited  
Trust for Public Land  
Water Environment Federation  
Western Landowners Alliance  
World Wildlife Fund

Cc: Members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees