

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