

April 2, 2020

The Honorable Sanford Bishop Jr., Chairman
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry, Ranking Member
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable John Hoeven, Chairman
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairman Bishop, Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and Ranking Member Merkley:

The undersigned organizations urge you to protect farm bill conservation program mandatory funding as you consider agriculture appropriations legislation for fiscal year 2021. We further request that you provide robust discretionary funding and support for NRCS field staff, as technical assistance is essential for the delivery of conservation support for farmers and ranchers across the country.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress reaffirmed the importance of voluntary, incentive-based conservation by maintaining level funding for the conservation title. Demand for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) consistently exceeds available dollars by at least two to one; in some years, USDA has been forced to turn away as many as three-quarters of eligible applicants. We are pleased that, since fiscal year 2018, appropriations legislation included no cuts to these programs below authorized levels, and we urge you to ensure that these programs remain fully funded in the FY 2020 appropriations bill as well.

Full funding for conservation programs such as EQIP, CSP, Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is critical to enable farmers, ranchers, and foresters across the country to conserve water, maintain their soil, protect farmland and wetlands, create and maintain fish and wildlife habitat, and produce abundant food and fiber. The funding already authorized for these programs should be protected as a vital investment in the infrastructure of rural America and in our future. Conservation support for healthy soil, clean water, and overall farm viability is essential as farmers struggle to stay afloat.

In addition to leaving farm bill conservation funding intact, we urge you to provide at least \$840 million for Conservation Operations, including \$749 million in critical funding for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

NRCS field staff provide direct technical assistance and planning support for farmers and ranchers across the country, and USDA's ability to deliver conservation programs 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. On-the-ground capacity continues to be a limiting factor for conservation implementation, and we must not hamstring our investment in conservation by under-funding technical assistance.

Funding for conservation support is more important now than ever, as farmers, ranchers, and rural communities continue to endure a multiyear slump in the farm economy. Any further cuts to voluntary conservation programs would severely limit the ability of farmers to protect water quality, build soil

health, create and maintain habitat for threatened, endangered, or economically important fish and wildlife, and prepare for and manage drought and flooding. Cuts to farm bill conservation programs through the FY 2021 appropriations process would severely limit the number of qualified farmers able to access the programs, leading to more pollution as well as less productive and profitable farmlands as soil erodes and nutrients are lost.

As the Subcommittees develop FY 2021 appropriations bills, we urge you to reject any cuts to conservation programs, and to provide at least \$840 million in discretionary funding for Conservation Operations, including \$749 million for Conservation Technical Assistance.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
American Honey Producers Association
American Seed Trade Association
American Society of Agronomy
American Water Works Association
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Association of State Floodplain Managers
CA Climate & Agriculture Network (CalCAN)
Center for Rural Affairs
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Church Women United in New York State
Coastal Enterprises, Inc.
Corazon Latino
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Working Group
Farmer Veteran Coalition
Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)
Good Food Brigade
Greater Atlanta Pollinator Partnership
Houston Wilderness
Illinois Stewardship Alliance
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Izaak Walton League of America
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Land Improvement Contractors of America
Land Trust Alliance
Louisiana Hypoxia Working Group
Lowcountry Biodiversity Foundation
Maine Farmland Trust
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Montana Organic Association
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Conservation Agencies
National Association of State Foresters
National Audubon Society
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Farmers Union
National Organic Coalition
National Parks Conservation Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Young Farmers Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
New Jersey Conservation Foundation
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont
Northeast Organic Farming Association-Interstate Council
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association
Oregon Tilth
Pesticide Action Network North America
Pollinator Partnership
Practical Farmers of Iowa
Rural & Agriculture Council of America
Rural Coalition
Society for Range Management
Society of American Foresters
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Toxin Free USA
Union of Concerned Scientists
United States Cattlemen's Association
Virginia Association for Biological Farming
Virginia Foodshed Capital
Water Environment Federation
Western Landowners Alliance
Wild Farm Alliance
World Wildlife Fund