

February 28, 2013

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Chairwoman
The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Appropriations
Capitol Building, S-128
Washington, DC 20510

House Committee on Appropriations
Capitol Building, H-307
Washington, DC 20515-6015

Dear Chairwoman Mikulski, Ranking Member Shelby, Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Lowey:

The undersigned organizations, representing millions of people across the country, urge you to oppose cuts to mandatory farm bill agricultural conservation programs and discretionary conservation technical assistance in the remaining fiscal year 2013 agriculture appropriations legislation. We also urge you to work for a sequester replacement package that will stop the sequester cuts to mandatory farm bill conservation programs.

Over the past decade, and particularly in the last few years, the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill has been disproportionately targeted for severe cuts in appropriations bills. In fact, since the enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill, appropriations bills have taken \$4.4 billion from Farm Bill mandatory conservation spending through the backdoor “changes in mandatory program spending” (CHIMPS) approach. In FY 2012 alone, Farm Bill mandatory conservation spending was cut, via “chimping,” by \$745.5 million. These changes to mandatory program spending are not made to save money, but rather to offset funding for discretionary programs, a move necessitated by unrealistically low allocations made to the USDA and FDA funding bill.

In addition to the huge recent CHIMP cuts, the sequester is projected to cut an additional \$2.4 billion from the Farm Bill Conservation Title baseline. Given cuts of that magnitude, working for a sequester replacement is no less important than stopping the conservation CHIMPs in the final fiscal year 2013 appropriations bill.

On top of the cuts to mandatory conservation funding, appropriations bills have cut \$60 million from discretionary Conservation Operations spending since 2010. This severely limits USDA’s ability to provide the technical assistance necessary to ensure effective delivery of conservation programs to farmers and ranchers.

Until March 27, the government is operating under a six-month continuing resolution (CR) that extends the deep cuts included in the FY 2012 agriculture appropriations bill. These cuts have real consequences for farmers and ranchers across the country.

For instance, due to a lack of funds, USDA has yet to begin a FY 2013 sign up for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). If funding is not restored, more than 9,000 producers will lose the opportunity to work with USDA to conserve and improve soil, water, and wildlife on their land. These practices protect critical resources, increase productivity, and decrease vulnerability to drought

and other disasters all at once. Congress still has the opportunity to fix this problem. However, it must be done as soon as possible to allow USDA to adequately administer a sign up.

With increased pressures on working lands to produce food, fuel, and fiber for our nation and the world, mandatory farm bill conservation programs are needed now more than ever. They help farmers, ranchers and foresters to voluntarily address their key resource concerns and assist them in complying with local, state, and federal regulations. They deliver demonstrated environmental benefits including clean air, clean water, and abundant habitat for wildlife. They protect soil and farmland to provide lasting food security. And they bring important money and jobs to rural areas.

The demand for enrollment in these programs routinely exceeds the funds available, even without any cuts. Farmers and ranchers are waiting to enroll hundreds of thousands of acres in the Wetlands Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program. Applications for the Conservation Stewardship Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program outstrip available funds by two to three times.

Failure to support our farmers, ranchers, foresters, and natural resource base today will jeopardize our agricultural industry, drive up long term costs for environmental mitigation, and threaten our nation's food security. This is increasingly true in the face of the ongoing drought. Extreme weather events have underscored the importance of good conservation practices to increasing the resilience of the land and supporting and enhancing agricultural productivity over the long term.

We ask the Appropriations Committees to recognize the importance of agricultural conservation by rejecting cuts to Farm Bill conservation programs, including backdoor "changes in mandatory program spending" and the sequester.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
American Society of Agronomy
Association of State Floodplain Managers
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Environmental and Energy Study Institute
Environmental Defense Fund
Land Trust Alliance
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 Farmers Union
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
Partners for Sustainable Pollination
Pollinator Partnership
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
The Izaak Walton League of America
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
Water Environment Federation

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations
Members of the House Committee on Appropriations