

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

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Twenty-three sustainable agriculture, scientific, wildlife, conservation and environmental organizations today urged the Senate Agriculture Committee to oppose the pending budget reconciliation bill scheduled for mark-up tomorrow absent major reductions in the proposed cuts to farm bill conservation programs. The full letter to the Senate Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee is included below.

The groups maintain the pending mark unfairly targets conservation for more than \$1 billion in cuts. Conservation's share of total mandatory spending under the jurisdiction of the committee is just 8 percent, yet the mark targets it for 35 percent of the total 5-year cut, rising to 41 percent over 10 years. The letter also points out that, unlike the commodity and several other titles of the farm bill, the conservation title has already been cut by nearly \$4 billion since passage in 2002, forcing the programs to lag very far behind farmer demand for conservation funding.

The groups are particularly upset with the decision implicit in the proposed bill to shut down the Conservation Security Program following the 2006 enrollment process. The innovative, trade rule-compliant stewardship incentives program, which represents less than 1 percent of the mandatory spending baseline, is hit for a grossly disproportional 27 percent of the total cuts in the bill. The groups are likewise concerned that the size of the proposed cut to the Conservation Reserve Program would forestall environmentally important enrollments through the conservation buffer initiative.

The groups have been urging committee members and the full Senate to drop the cuts to the CSP, reduce the impact on the CRP, and to reduce overall conservation cuts to bring them in line with the stated intent of cutting fairly and equitably. Absent such changes, the groups are urging defeat of the bill.

The text of the letter follows.

October 18, 2005

Dear Senate Agriculture Committee Member:

We write to again express our strong opposition to the Agricultural Reconciliation Act of 2005, and we urge you to oppose it unless significant changes are made to restore cuts in conservation funding. As we have said since passage of the budget resolution, we believe that farm bill conservation programs, already cut by \$3.8 billion since passage of the farm bill in 2002 and targeted for another round of unwarranted cuts in the pending appropriations bill, should be exempt from further cuts. If cuts are nonetheless imposed over and above these already severe spending limitations, then, as we have stated previously, the following principles should apply:

- Total cuts to conservation should be no greater than conservation's proportional share of the total mandatory spending baseline.
- Cuts already enacted must be factored in prior to determining proportional share.
- Programs which have already been hit with particularly large cuts, including the Conservation Security Program, should be exempt from further tampering.
- Priority should be given to policy changes that save money but improve conservation performance or are at least neutral.

The Agriculture Reconciliation Act of 2005 fails to meet these principles. It proposes to cut voluntary conservation programs by more than \$1 billion over five years. The proposed package unfairly targets conservation spending -- which represents just 8 percent of total mandatory spending -- for 35 percent of the total 5-year reconciliation cuts, increasing to 41 percent of the total 10-year cuts. Even if only farm and conservation programs are included in the total, conservation represents just 19 percent of the total, yet is unfairly targeted for more than a third of the cuts.

The proposal also singles out the Conservation Security Program, an innovative new conservation program which has now been through its first two sign-ups and has experienced high farmer and rancher demand. The CSP has unfortunately already been cut in the appropriations process by more than \$3 billion, yet the reconciliation package targets it for the deepest cuts -- an additional \$821 million over five years, or 27 percent of the total cuts from a program that is less than one percent of the total mandatory spending baseline.

This proposal, if enacted, would allow the 2006 CSP sign-up to proceed but would then bring the program to a complete halt, providing for nothing more than payments on existing contracts. Singling out the CSP also means making an additional \$646 million in cuts in the outyears, reducing the farm bill baseline by a far greater amount than required by reconciliation and thus wasting resources that will be needed when the next farm bill is written. We urge you to reject these proposed additional cuts to the CSP, a critical environmental program that also offers the greatest hope for future delivery of meaningful economic support to agricultural producers in a trade neutral fashion.

We are also concerned that the reduced Conservation Reserve Program cap of 36.4 million acres will limit and possibly entirely eliminate new, targeted enrollments, including critical buffer enrollments through the CCRP and CREP. Currently, nearly 36 million acres are enrolled. The proposed new limit would hinder and, depending on the outcome of re-enrollments and extensions, possibly stop enrollments not only for the continuous sign-up but also for all 34 CREPs, the quail initiative, the nationwide farmable wetlands initiative, and the bottomland hardwood initiative. CRP policy should be addressed in a thoughtful and targeted way in the next farm bill, without such a drastic foreclosure of options via reconciliation.

The 2002 Farm Bill has worked well in increasing conservation interest and participation. Unfortunately, spending limitations since 2002 have caused the programs to lag far behind demand. According to USDA data, three out of every four farmers seeking to participate in the conservation programs are already being turned away. The proposed, highly disproportional cuts contained in the Agriculture Reconciliation Act of 2005 would serve only to drive the number of neglected producers still higher. In an increasingly global economy, it is vital that we broaden the safety net of farmer assistance to incorporate trade-sanctioned stewardship incentives that help preserve a vital rural environment and economy.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
American Society of Agronomy
California Coalition for Food and Farming
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense
The Minnesota Project
National Audubon Society
National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
National Catholic Rural Life Conference
National Environmental Trust
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
The Nature Conservancy
Sierra Club
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Union of Concerned Scientists
Water Environment Federation
The Wilderness Society