



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

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Coalition Applauds Senators on Conservation Position

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition today commended Senators Tom Harkin, Richard Lugar, Herb Kohl, and Gordon Smith for their February 4 letter to President Bush urging the President to reverse the Administration's erroneous interpretation of the conservation technical assistance provisions of the 2002 farm bill.

"The Senators are correct," said Ferd Hoefner, Washington Representative for the Coalition. "The Administration's misinterpretation of the law places implementation of the entire conservation title of the farm bill in jeopardy."

The Senator's letter to Bush calls attention to the Administration's position that "90 percent of the 2002 farm bill's investment in conservation will be nullified for lack of technical assistance unless Congress creates a new appropriations account for farm bill technical assistance and puts over \$300 million into it this year and over \$432 million next year."

According to CBO, the farm bill provides \$9.2 billion in new spending and \$21.3 billion in total spending for conservation assistance programs over the 6-year life of the bill. By the Administration's calculations, as much as \$19 billion of that total would be eliminated unless the crisis is solved.

The Senator's letter strongly rejects the Administration's proposal to create a new spending account for farm bill technical assistance, noting that "this technical assistance has already been paid for once in the budget score for the 2002 farm bill, inasmuch as it was written purposely to avoid the need for annual appropriations to cover technical assistance for mandatory conservation programs."

To fund its proposed new technical assistance line item, the Administration has proposed blocking funding for farm bill rural development, energy, and forestry programs and transferring funding from appropriated conservation funding and contingency funding for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) feeding program. This proposal was rejected in the Senate omnibus appropriations bill for FY 03. The omnibus, which heads to conference with the House on Monday, assumes continued reliance on farm bill mandatory spending from the Commodity Credit Corporation for all program-related conservation technical assistance.

"We continue to urge congressional appropriators to reject the Administration's proposal to re-open the farm bill and shift money out of important areas in order to remedy a conservation funding crisis manufactured by OMB," said Hoefner. "By the same token, we urge the President to align the Administration's actual funding proposals with his strong statements of support for record conservation assistance for U.S. farmers and ranchers."

The programs affected by the funding controversy are the Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Security Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Farmland Protection Program, Grasslands Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program.

The US GAO report on this issue may be found at: www.gao.gov/docdb/lite/details.php?accno=A05783.