

Conservation letter to the Senate Agricultural Appropriations

June 7, 2005

The Honorable Robert Bennett
The Honorable Herb Kohl
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Bennett and Ranking Member Kohl:

We the undersigned organizations urge you to maintain the carefully crafted mandatory spending levels for the 2002 Farm Bill conservation programs as you consider the agricultural appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2006. Although it may be difficult to craft the bill with no limitations to farm bill mandatory funding, we are confident you can diminish the severe limitations in the House Committee bill.

As you know, the 2002 Farm Bill significantly increased conservation funding to meet pressing needs. Congress recognized it was critical to the bill's passage to balance spending on commodity programs with investments in conservation incentives programs which provide assistance to farmers and ranchers involved in all types of agriculture, in all regions of the country, and in a manner that is compliant with world trade rules.

Despite this integrated approach to agricultural funding in the last farm bill, conservation programs have been repeatedly subjected to funding limitations despite being vastly oversubscribed. Since the farm bill passed, the combination of congressional and administrative actions has reduced promised conservation title funding for programs administered by NRCS by \$3.8 billion. This includes cuts of nearly \$900 million from the FY 03 through FY 05 funding cycles, plus an additional \$2.9 billion from the Conservation Security Program (CSP) as a result of the inappropriate use of the CSP as an offset for disaster assistance. The House bill proposes to add a new round of FY 06 cutbacks at the staggering amount of \$478.5 million, equivalent to a 22 percent reduction.

These severe cuts have occurred despite huge program popularity among farmers. In FY 04, three out of every four farmers and ranchers applying to participate in farm bill NRCS conservation programs were rejected due to lack of funds. In dollar terms, eight and a half out of every ten dollars requested were denied due to the funding shortfall. In fact, the FY 04 backlog for conservation dollars exceeds the total funding available in FY 05 by a three to one margin. These figures exclude the CSP since the program has been administratively delayed and data is not yet available, but would be even more extreme with its inclusion. Clearly, the needs of the producers across the country are not being met and the environmental promise of the conservation title has been compromised.

We are united in opposition to any limitation provision in the FY 06 bill on the landmark Conservation Security Program. Caps on the CSP fundamentally alter the character of the program as approved by Congress and result in implementation decisions that compromise the integrity and promise of the program. We also urge you to meet or preferably exceed the President's proposed 200,000 acre level for the Wetlands Reserve Program, the centerpiece of the Administration's Wetland Initiative. Failure to adequately fund the program will setback the Initiative while adding more frustrated landowners to the ranks of those holding the 536,000 acres already waiting to get into the program. We urge you to improve funding levels for the dollar-denominated programs (WHIP, FRPP, EQIP, and GSWCP) relative to the House, remembering that the backlogs are high and these programs were already penalized \$198 million for the two years the Administration forced them to pay for land retirement technical assistance costs. Finally, we urge you to reject the House and President's proposal to zero out the conservation portion of the Agricultural Management Assistance program.

Beyond the farm bill programs, the House bill reported from Committee would scale back Conservation Operations funding by 5% to \$793 million. We urge you to retain at least level funding. The House rejected the proposal to cut the Resource Conservation and Development Program in half and we encourage you to do likewise.

Ensuring adequate funding for USDA's voluntary conservation programs is critical to solving many of the nation's most pressing environmental problems. Half the land in the contiguous United States is cropland, rangeland or pastureland, so how this land is managed has a significant impact on the quality of our water and air and the fate of threatened and endangered species. Many farmers and ranchers are already utilizing sustainable production systems and good stewardship practices, and most are willing to produce additional environmental benefits if they are provided the right tools and incentives through voluntary conservation programs.

We urge you to support agricultural stewardship efforts by protecting funding for the 2002 Farm Bill's conservation programs to the maximum extent possible. Thank you for considering our views.

Respectfully,

American Farmland Trust
American Rivers
American Society of Agronomy
California Coalition for Food and Farming
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense
Gulf Restoration Network
Izaak Walton League of America
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Conservation Agencies
National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Conservation District Employees Association
National Environmental Trust
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Organic Trade Association
Sierra Club
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Trout Unlimited
Union of Concerned Scientists