

May 11, 2007

The Honorable Collin Peterson, Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Peterson:

The productivity of the nation's working lands and the livelihoods of our communities depend on maintaining the health of our water resources. An individual farmer or even a group of farmers or ranchers cannot be responsible for maintaining the health of water resources. We must enable farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to work together toward a common goal with other partners in the watersheds where they work and live.

Many of the current Farm Bill conservation programs benefit water quality and improve water efficiency on an individual farm. But a more strategic approach that encourages and supports collaboration between agriculture and other members of the community is needed if we are to achieve broader conservation goals. By bringing multiple stakeholders together to address shared water quality and quantity concerns, we can bring about a spirit of cooperation that will help to address our growing water resource concerns.

Several proposals have been put forward to create partnership based watershed projects. We applaud the intent of these proposals. For example, the Administration included the Regional Water Enhancement Program (RWEP) in its 2007 Farm Bill proposal. This program would set aside \$175 million per year from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to provide funding to groups of farmers, ranchers, and a variety of other partners to carry out projects that address water quality or water conservation priorities in their watershed. Partnerships funded under RWEP would develop specific strategies for addressing these priorities and identify measurable outcomes to ensure the partnerships are meeting identified water quality or quantity goals. In addition, partnerships would be allowed flexibility to use the tools most appropriate to reach their desired outcomes.

Similarly, the 2002 Farm Bill created a Partnerships and Cooperation authority that allows the Secretary of Agriculture to set aside up to 5% of all conservation title funding to enter into stewardship agreements that address specific natural resource concerns. Unfortunately, this provision was never fully utilized by USDA. New legislation has been introduced that would amend this partnership authority by mandating a 20% set-aside from five Farm Bill conservation programs to fund cooperative conservation partnerships. Like RWEP, which is specific to watersheds, the Partnerships and Cooperation authority could provide funding for collaborative approaches to address water resource issues.

Recognizing there are various proposals that employ a partnership approach to addressing water resource concerns, we support inclusion of a program in the 2007 Farm Bill that is based on the following principals:

- The 2007 Farm Bill should reserve significant conservation funds to reward collaborative efforts that achieve water quality, quantity, and/or water conservation goals in agricultural watersheds. The program should use a competitive process to support partnership projects that involve multiple landowners/producers as well as stakeholders, including local community groups, water providers and wastewater utilities, non-profits, and state governments.
- Projects funded should identify performance targets (e.g. improved water quality, fish habitat, or in-stream flows) that must be achieved to be eligible to renew funding. Emphasis should be placed on funding projects where conservation results would be both measurable and achievable.
- Partners who could apply for partnership funding to carry out watershed projects should include cooperatives, conservation districts, state governments, local governments, federally-recognized Indian Tribes, non-governmental organizations, local units of governments, water providers, and wastewater utilities.
- Watershed partnerships must be allowed to use multiple conservation tools (including farmland and forest management practices, easement purchases, and ecosystem restoration assistance) and allowed the flexibility to choose the most appropriate tool to achieve stated water quality and quantity goals. In addition, to ensure that conservation practices benefit the water resource, any water saved as a result of a water conservation or irrigation efficiency project funded by this program must provide benefits for the watershed (e.g. increased instream or groundwater flow, consistent with state law).
- We recognize that the current budget situation has left the Agriculture Committees in a difficult position and that there are a number of activities funded under current conservation programs to address water resource concerns. For example, EQIP currently funds water conservation projects through the Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program and through irrigation efficiency project cost-share in regular EQIP. While these programs do not focus on cooperative watershed efforts, and in the case of regular EQIP, do not establish outcomes for improving water quality or quantity, the practices they fund would be similar to those used by landowners participating in cooperative watershed partnerships. Therefore, to improve efficiency and reduce duplication, existing funding for water conservation projects under these and other conservation programs could become part of a new outcome-based watershed program.

There have been multiple advances for conservation in previous Farm Bills, and we believe there is now an opportunity in this Farm Bill to make significant strides towards addressing some of our most pressing water resource challenges. Therefore, we urge you to reserve significant conservation funds in the 2007 Farm Bill based on the principles above that will improve the quality and quantity of water resources across the country.

Sincerely,

American Rivers
American Society of Agronomy
American Water Works Association
Association of California Water Agencies
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Colorado River Water Conservation District
Colorado Water Trust
Crop Science Society of America
Cucamonga Valley Water District
Empire Utilities Agency
Environmental Defense
Iowa Soybean Association
National Association of Clean Water Agencies
National Association of Water Companies
National Audubon Society
National Water Resources Association
Nebraska Land Trust
Restore America's Estuaries
Save San Francisco Bay Association
Soil Science Society of America
The Nature Conservancy
Trout Unlimited
Water Environment Federation
WateReuse Association

cc: Congressman Tim Holden, Chairman
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy and Research

May 11, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
Room 328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC. 20510-6000

Dear Chairman Harkin:

The productivity of the nation's working lands and the livelihoods of our communities depend on maintaining the health of our water resources. An individual farmer or even a group of farmers or ranchers cannot be responsible for maintaining the health of water resources. We must enable farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to work together toward a common goal with other partners in the watersheds where they work and live.

Many of the current Farm Bill conservation programs benefit water quality and improve water efficiency on an individual farm. But a more strategic approach that encourages and supports collaboration between agriculture and other members of the community is needed if we are to achieve broader conservation goals. By bringing multiple stakeholders together to address shared water quality and quantity concerns, we can bring about a spirit of cooperation that will help to address our growing water resource concerns.

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The Nature Conservancy
Trout Unlimited
Water Environment Federation
WateReuse Association

cc: Senator Debbie Stabenow, Chairperson
Subcommittee on Rural Revitalization, Conservation,
Forestry and Credit Jurisdiction

May 11, 2007

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte, Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
2240 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Goodlatte:

The productivity of the nation's working lands and the livelihoods of our communities depend on maintaining the health of our water resources. An individual farmer or even a group of farmers or ranchers cannot be responsible for maintaining the health of water resources. We must enable farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to work together toward a common goal with other partners in the watersheds where they work and live.

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Trout Unlimited
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cc: Congressman Frank D. Lucas, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy and Research

May 11, 2007

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
416 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Chambliss:

The productivity of the nation's working lands and the livelihoods of our communities depend on maintaining the health of our water resources. An individual farmer or even a group of farmers or ranchers cannot be responsible for maintaining the health of water resources. We must enable farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to work together toward a common goal with other partners in the watersheds where they work and live.

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cc: Senator Mike Crapo, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Rural Revitalization, Conservation, Forestry and Credit Jurisdiction