



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

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Groups Oppose Bush Cuts to Farm Bill Funding for Wetlands

Hundreds of Farmers Would No Longer Be Eligible for Wetlands Reserve Program

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The National Wildlife Federation and Sustainable Agriculture Coalition today condemned the Bush administration's proposed 29 percent cut in funding for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in its FY04 budget request as a "drastic cut in one of the most successful tools in history to help farmers conserve America's wetlands and wildlife," according to Mark Van Putten, President of the National Wildlife Federation. The WRP helps farmers restore and conserve wetlands on agricultural land through long-term and permanent easements and is a key component in the U.S. "no net loss of wetlands" commitment.

"In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress recognized that giving farmers who want to restore our nation's wetlands the funding to do so makes sense for taxpayers and the environment," continued Van Putten.

"Unfortunately, the administration's budget short-changes these farmers by cutting funding to restore and conserve wildlife habitat on their lands. Congress must protect the nation's wetlands and reject this proposal."

The 6-year farm bill approved by Congress and signed by the president last year included mandatory funding for the WRP to enroll 250,000 acres per year for the life of the bill. The FY 2004 budget released by the president today proposes to scale back the size of the WRP to 178,000 acres, a cut of 29 percent. In dollar terms, the proposed budget cut amounts to nearly \$100 million. The proposed 72,000 acre hold-back would keep approximately 450 farmers and ranchers out of the program in 2004 who could otherwise participate.

"Farmers have voted with their actions, signing up for the permanent wetland conservation program in droves" said Ferd Hoefner, Washington Representative of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. "The administration's proposal would keep waiting lists long and frustrations high, while reducing farm income and jeopardizing the long-term health and productivity of the land."

The WRP was created by the 1990 farm bill and to date has enrolled over one million acres of wetlands in long-term restoration and protection plans. The 2002 farm bill provision was designed to accelerate WRP enrollment.

The top 15 WRP states hardest hit by the Bush proposal are Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, California, Missouri, Florida, Iowa, Texas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, New York, Indiana, South Dakota, and Oregon.

The WRP has proven its worth over the past decade. It produces impressive results at a reasonable price and has the strong support of farmers and ranchers nationwide. Wetlands play a critical role in the landscape by controlling flood damage, filtering pollution, replenishing water supplies, improving water

quality, and providing important wildlife habitat. In fact, one-third of all bird species, 190 species of amphibians, and 5000 species of plants depend on wetlands for their survival, and about two-thirds of federally listed threatened or endangered wildlife species rely upon wetlands during some point of their life cycle.

The National Wildlife Federation and the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition joined forces in 1988 to help develop and introduce the WRP. The National Wildlife Federation is the nation's largest member-supported conservation group, uniting individuals, organizations, businesses and government to protect wildlife, wild places, and the environment. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition represents grassroots farmer, rural, and conservation organizations that advocate public policies supporting the long-term economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources and rural communities.