

March 21, 2008

The Honorable Harry M. Reid  
Majority Leader

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Minority Leader

The Honorable Tom Harkin  
Chairman  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and  
Forestry

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and  
Forestry

The Honorable Max Baucus  
Chairman  
Committee on Finance

The Honorable Chuck Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Finance

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker

The Honorable John Boehner  
Minority Leader

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
Chairman  
Committee on Agriculture

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture

The Honorable Charles Rangel  
Chairman  
Committee on Ways and Means

The Honorable Jim McCrery  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Ways and Means

United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader Reid, Madame Speaker, Chairmen and Ranking Members:

The undersigned organizations respectfully and urgently request your strong support of the March 18, 2008, Farm Bill "Framework's" \$4.951 billion increase in new funds above baseline for the Bill's voluntary, incentives-based conservation programs. While substantially more is truly needed to address the country's conservation needs, this level of investment is essential. Any less risks irreparable damage to our agricultural lands and other natural resources.

The ethanol boom, propelled in large measure by energy bill mandates Congress enacted in 2005 and dramatically expanded last year, is one of many factors putting enormous pressure on America's land, water and wildlife resources. As a consequence, it is our expert judgment that a generation of conservation accomplishments could be severely diminished and, in some areas, may be erased altogether. The consequences for water quality, wildlife, wetlands, soil erosion control, flood prevention and management, and other vital natural systems and functions, could be profound, underscoring the need for substantial new funding of conservation programs.

Much of the conservation legacy now in jeopardy was made possible by American taxpayers, who invested billions of dollars through Farm Bill conservation programs that our organizations worked with Congress to invent, propose, and, over decades of effort, persuade Congress to enact and fund. We are enormously proud that Farm Bill conservation programs have forged literally thousands of partnerships nationwide between conservation and agriculture interests.

To a large degree, these programs are the only available tools to cope with the conservation pressures our organizations are observing around the country. In fact, the programs are so popular with farmers and ranchers that thousands of applicants are turned away every year for lack of funds. Over the 5 year term of the 2002 Farm Bill, \$13.5 billion in requests from more than 487,000 farmers and ranchers went unfunded. A major reason for this funding gap is that Congress routinely cuts funding for the conservation programs. For the current fiscal year, Congress eliminated nearly \$1 billion in mandatory conservation funding and, since passage of the 2002 Farm Bill, net cuts to mandatory conservation programs have totaled almost \$4.5 billion.

Thus we urge your support of the Framework's conservation funding level. A minimum increase of \$5 billion in new funds over baseline spending for conservation is needed to replace funding that has been slashed in recent years, and to cope with the conservation crisis that is looming in farm country. Any funds "saved" as a result of changes to conservation programs must be retained and reinvested in the Conservation Title.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, crop subsidy payments will decline by billions due to high prices over the course of the next farm bill. Net farm income, at a record level this year, is projected to remain robust. The farm economy's unprecedented prosperity makes this an ideal time for tens of thousands of farmers to invest in overdue conservation measures through federal programs that share the costs.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that the Framework's conservation level is the minimum included in the final Farm Bill. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this urgent matter with you further during this pivotal period in the Farm Bill debate.

Respectfully,

American Rivers  
American Society of Agronomy  
Center for Native Ecosystems  
Chesapeake Bay Commission  
Coevolution Institute  
Crop Science Society of America  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Environmental and Energy Study Institute  
Environmental Defense Fund  
Environmental Working Group  
Izaak Walton League of America  
Land Trust Alliance  
The Minnesota Project  
National Audubon Society  
National Wildlife Federation  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
Soil Science Society of America  
Soil and Water Conservation Society  
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
Union of Concerned Scientists  
Water Environment Federation  
World Wildlife Fund