

WASHINGTON, July 9, 2008 /PRNewswire-USNewswire via COMTEX/ -- 15 Groups say move would be 'devastating blow' to nation's soil, water, wildlife habitat, increase global warming. Fifteen conservation groups today sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer strongly urging him to reject pressure from Congress and producer groups "to allow the penalty-free early release of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)." USDA has been urged to release up to 24 million acres from CRP - roughly three-fourths of the land currently enrolled in the program - and put it back into production. This move would result in a loss of billions of dollars of taxpayer investment in conservation on these lands.

"A penalty-free early release of the magnitude you are considering - millions of acres - would deliver a devastating blow to the nation's soil, water, and wildlife habitat, and significantly increase global warming," said the letter. "Because most CRP lands are marginal for cropping, even if all CRP acres were brought back into commodity production, the impact on aggregate commodity supplies and prices would be modest... We urge you to protect the taxpayers' investment in soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat and not allow landowners to leave CRP contracts early without fully reimbursing the Treasury for the taxpayer-funded investment in those lands."

CRP is a federal program designed to reward farmers who take fragile land out of production and plant grasses or trees or restore wetlands on the land in exchange for rental and federal cost-share payments. Currently, CRP enrollees who terminate their contract prior to the end of its 10- to 15-year term must reimburse the federal government for the rental and cost-share payments they have received, plus interest, and a penalty of 25 percent of the total rental payments received. The recent CRP proposals would waive all these costs for landowners.

The letter opposing these proposals is signed by Environmental Defense Fund, The Minnesota Project, Sierra Club, Center for Native Ecosystems, National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society, Partners for Sustainable Pollination, Environmental Working Group, Pollinator Partnership, Defenders of Wildlife, American Farmland Trust, World Wildlife Fund, American Rivers, Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and American Bee Keeping Federation.

The full letter text is below.

July 9, 2008

The Honorable Ed Schafer  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer:

We strongly urge you to reject proposals to allow the penalty-free early release of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Early release of even a modest number of acres from CRP would waste the money American taxpayers have invested in restoring those lands to grassland or other cover and would eliminate the benefits to soil, water, wildlife and the public that the lands provide. A penalty-free early release of the magnitude you are considering -

millions of acres - would deliver a devastating blow to the nation's soil, water, and wildlife habitat, and significantly increase global warming. The resulting damages could cost taxpayers substantially.

The oldest of the farm bill's voluntary conservation incentives programs, CRP is a federal program designed to reward farmers who take fragile land out of production and plant grasses or trees or restore wetlands on the land in exchange for rental payments and federal cost-share payments. Since its creation in 1985, CRP has been responsible for reducing hundreds of millions of tons of erosion each year, reducing pollution in our nation's waterways. CRP is also an important reservoir for wildlife, and has had significant benefits for populations of ducks, grassland birds, and other species. Keeping land in CRP is also critical in the fight against global warming. Allowing millions of acres out of CRP prior to the end of the contract period would quickly erase many of the gains that have been made with CRP and will likely create new problems.

Because most CRP lands are marginal for cropping, even if all CRP acres were brought back into commodity production, the impact on aggregate commodity supplies and prices would be modest. On the other hand, the impacts to soil, water, wildlife, the public, and the recreational industry that has developed around wildlife such as pheasants and waterfowl produced on these lands would be substantial. We urge you to protect the taxpayers' investment in soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat and not allow landowners to leave CRP contracts early without fully reimbursing the Treasury for the taxpayer-funded investment in those lands.

Sincerely,

Environmental Defense Fund  
The Minnesota Project  
Sierra Club  
Center for Native Ecosystems  
National Wildlife Federation  
National Audubon Society  
Partners for Sustainable Pollination  
Environmental Working Group  
Pollinator Partnership  
Defenders of Wildlife  
American Farmland Trust  
World Wildlife Fund  
American Rivers  
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition  
American Bee Keeping Federation