

Conservation letter to the House and Senate Ag Committees

(Identical letter also sent to House Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Peterson and copied to the Members of the House Agriculture Committee)

April 12, 2005

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
The Honorable Tom Harkin
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Chambliss and Ranking Member Harkin:

With conference discussions underway on the FY 06 Budget Resolution, we realize the time is upon us when focus may soon turn to working to ensure that any agriculture cuts that may be required are as fair as possible. We are writing to you today to urge you to preserve funding for the 2002 Farm Bill's voluntary farm conservation programs. These programs have been subject to \$3.8 billion in cuts as a result of congressional or administrative actions over the past three years and should therefore as a matter of basic fairness be exempt from further contributions in the context of budget reconciliation.

The 2002 Farm Bill significantly increased conservation funding to meet pressing needs. Congress also 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 even though the programs are vastly oversubscribed. Since the farm bill passed, the combination of congressional and administrative actions has re-opened the farm bill to reduce promised conservation title funding for programs administered by NRCS by \$3.8 billion. This includes nearly \$900 million from the FY 03 through FY 05 funding cycles, plus an additional \$2.9 billion from the Conservation Security Program (CSP) alone in the out years. In addition, support for conservation research and for projects to support environmentally-friendly value-added enterprises has also been severely cut by a \$400 million reduction in mandatory funding for the Initiative for Future Agricultural and Food Systems and a \$50 million cut in the Value-Added Producer Grant program.

While the commodity title's mandatory funding has thus far escaped unharmed, the combination of administrative action and appropriations bill limitation provisions have repeatedly cut the mandatory funding we were promised in the 2002 Farm Bill. A majority of the mandatory funds for rural development, forestry, and research have been cut via limitation provisions, and very substantial cuts have also been made to the conservation and energy titles. The attached chart shows the funding limitations already applied to each of the NRCS conservation programs.

These severe cuts have occurred despite huge farmer demand for the programs. 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.

Despite the clear need and large backlog, the President's FY 06 budget request once again calls for major reductions in farm bill mandatory conservation spending in the staggering amount of \$710 million. The President's proposal would cut the Agricultural Management Assistance Program by 70 percent, the

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program by 29 percent, the Wetlands Reserve Program by 20 percent, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by 17 percent, and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program by 16 percent. For the CSP, the President's proposal would cut the program by 58 percent relative to the CBO FY 06 baseline from March 2004 and by 17 percent relative to the drastically reduced CBO FY 06 baseline estimate this March. The huge baseline reduction for the CSP results from the CBO reflecting Administration actions in the interim rule and sign-up announcements to limit the geographical availability, curtail eligibility, and append additional multiple payment caps and constraints, all in dramatic contrast to the statute.

We urge you as leaders of the authorizing committee to champion the farm bill conservation and conservation-related programs and to work closely with your colleagues on the Appropriations Committee to defend your farm bill decisions and to limit the size and scope of any limitations. Recognizing that despite your best efforts and ours, it will more than likely not be possible to completely eliminate the unwarranted appropriations limitations on these mandatory programs and the unwarranted encroachment on the authorizing committee's jurisdiction, we believe fairness dictates that no additional conservation cuts be made in the context of budget reconciliation.

Ensuring adequate funding for USDA's voluntary conservation programs is critical to solving some 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 hope that as the budget process moves forward, you will support agricultural stewardship efforts by protecting funding for the 2002 Farm Bill's conservation programs and restoring the balance as originally envisioned in the 2002 law. As a matter of fundamental fairness, we urge you to reject limitations on farm bill conservation funding in budget reconciliation.

Thank you for considering our views.

Respectfully,

American Farmland Trust
American Rivers
California Coalition for Food and Farming
Certified Crop Advisors
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense
Gulf Restoration Network
Iowa Environmental Council
Minnesota Project
Mississippi River Basin Alliance
National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Sierra Club
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Union of Concerned Scientists