

April 8, 2021

The Honorable Sanford Bishop Jr., Chairman
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry, Ranking Member
House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin, Chairwoman
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

The Honorable John Hoeven, Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Dear Chairman Bishop, Chairwoman Baldwin, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and Ranking Member Hoeven:

The undersigned organizations urge you to provide robust discretionary funding and support for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field staff through the Conservation Operations and Conservation Technical Assistance programs. Technical assistance is essential for the delivery of conservation support for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners across the country by providing capacity and conservation planning to support conservation practice implementation.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress reaffirmed the importance of voluntary, incentive-based conservation by maintaining level funding overall for the conservation title. Demand for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) consistently exceeds available dollars by at least two to one; in some years, USDA has been forced to turn away as many as three-quarters of eligible applicants. We are pleased that, since fiscal year 2018, appropriations legislation included no cuts to these programs below authorized levels, and we urge you to ensure that Farm Bill conservation programs remain fully funded in the FY 2022 appropriations bill as well.

In addition to full funding for the mandatory farm bill conservation programs, we urge you to provide at least \$1.2 billion in FY 2022 discretionary funding for Conservation Operations, including \$1.1 billion in critical funding for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA). NRCS field staff provide direct technical assistance and planning support for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners across the country, and USDA's ability to deliver conservation programs depends heavily on on-the-ground technical assistance.

As Congress and USDA continue to increase focus on climate change and the opportunities that agriculture and forestry can provide to sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and build resilience, funding for conservation support is more important now than ever. Many landowners are ready to do their part but lack the technical expertise to know what conservation practices will work for their soils, forests, weather or cropping systems. CTA provides landowners with the site-specific solutions needed to implement conservation practices on their lands, while providing accountability to ensure maximum return on the public investment.

On-the-ground capacity at NRCS continues to be a limiting factor for conservation implementation, and an increased investment in CTA will give NRCS the ability to truly build local capacity. While partially rebounding recently, staffing levels at NRCS declined 19%, or over 2,000 employees, from FY 2004 to FY 2018 and with 98% of all NRCS staff located outside Washington, D.C. in state, county and technical offices, this decrease has taken a toll on customer service and the ability to provide technical assistance.¹ This has all taken place as producer demand, as well as consumer expectations, has increased for a

¹ https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2020-03-11_IF11452_bf1eaa6064a214b26bd80b3a56ece56e1a521990.pdf

sustainable and reliant agriculture industry. We must not hamstring our investment in conservation and climate efforts by under-funding technical assistance and local staffing capacity.

Technical assistance provided through CTA will be critical to ensuring that any future proposal or program developed by Congress or USDA to support agriculture and forestry climate efforts will be successful. Technical assistance is the foundation upon which all future conservation and climate successes can be built and a robust investment in the CTA program will help fulfill these goals and set up our nation's producers for success.

As the Subcommittees develops FY 2022 appropriations bills, we urge you to reject any changes in mandatory spending for farm bill conservation programs, and to provide at least \$1.2 billion in discretionary funding for Conservation Operations, including \$1.1 billion for Conservation Technical Assistance.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
American Forest Foundation
American Honey Producers Association
American Society of Agronomy
American Water Works Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Association of State Floodplain Managers
California Climate and Agriculture Network
Center for Rural Affairs
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Church Women United in New York State
Climate Land Leaders
Coastal Enterprises, Inc.
Corazon Latino
Crop Science Society of America
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited
Environmental Working Group
Food Animal Concerns Trust
GMO Free USA
Grassworks
Houston Wilderness
Illinois Stewardship Alliance
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Izaak Walton League of America
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Kiss the Ground
Land Core
Land Improvement Contractors of America
Maine Farmland Trust
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Montana Organic Association
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Foresters
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Farmers Union
National Organic Coalition
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Young Farmers Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
New England Farmers Union
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association
Oregon Climate and Agriculture Network
Oregon Tilth
Organic Farmers Association
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Pesticide Action Network
Potomac Riverkeeper Network
Resilience Project
Rural & Agriculture Council of America
Rural Coalition
Society for Range Management
Society of American Foresters
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Union of Concerned Scientists
United States Cattlemen's Association
Water Environment Foundation
Western Landowners Alliance
Wild Farm Alliance
World Wildlife Fund