

October 27, 2011

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and  
Forestry  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and  
Forestry  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts,

The undersigned include participants in the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC), as well as unaffiliated organizations, businesses and landowners. We share core interests in the long-term environmental health and economic productivity of America's ranches, farms and forestlands, and the well-being of our rural communities.

We represent the interests of the people and landscape of rural America in both policy and practice. **We seek secure funding for the conservation title, including adequate funding for technical assistance and "boots on the ground."** Farm bill conservation funds are not just about natural resource stewardship, but about securing economic viability for the farms, forests and ranches that are so often the backbone of rural economies. Furthermore, the farm bill provides essential resources to boost rural economic activity through rural development programs that strengthen small business, as well as incentives for community-scaled renewable energy production.

As we have requested in past communications through RVCC<sup>1</sup> or other channels, **we respectfully ask that the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry affirm the value of our nation's working lands by ensuring that the upcoming farm bill does not disproportionately reduce funding for conservation programs.** Short term cuts to the farm bill conservation title will have long-term effects on the viability of working forest, farm, and ranch businesses, thereby negatively impacting struggling rural economies nationwide for decades to come.

**We urge you to protect and maintain farm bill conservation funding to keep rural communities working.** Farm bill conservation programs directly contribute to rural job creation and economic development by supporting responsible natural resource use and innovative stewardship. They are not subsidies, but investments that pay economic dividends long after initial funding. These programs give private landowners the support they need to improve stewardship and continue to keep their lands working – providing food, fiber, energy and ecosystem values that generate short and long-term wealth. At the same time, farm bill conservation programs protect open space and support functioning ecosystems - including habitat for fish and wildlife. They enable landowners

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<sup>1</sup> 2011 RVCC Issue Papers. Available at <http://www.sustainablenorthwest.org/resources/rvcc-issue-papers>

to make voluntary stewardship investments that fit with their business plans and provide long-term benefits to society, such as clean water and healthy soil. Finally, this conservation activity is a significant economic driver in many rural communities, employing skilled working lands restoration professionals.

The farm bill conservation budget has already faced deep cuts due to Congressional deficit reduction actions. Since passage of the 2008 farm bill, over \$2 billion in mandatory conservation spending has been cut in the appropriations process. Additional deep or disproportionate cuts to the conservation title will have negative economic ramifications beyond the direct and immediate loss of conservation program funding. Private forests, farms and ranches will be less prepared to meet the conservation, innovation, climate change and energy challenges of this century in a way that keeps them producing to meet local and national economic needs.

**We strongly recommend full funding for technical assistance, including partnership building, landowner outreach and education, conservation planning and direct technical services – recognizing the role of intermediary organizations.** The economic and environmental benefits of the conservation programs are achieved through landowner and community engagement. At a time when there are more landowners applying for conservation programs than are able to be helped, we need more “boots on the ground” – whether federal or private, according to local circumstances – to help landowners and communities access and use these conservation programs. We ask that your Committee prioritize full funding for technical assistance, for federal or non-federal staffing, and that resources be broadly available to carry out these key activities: building voluntary partnerships that leverage resources, conducting landowner outreach and education, carrying out on-property and watershed-scale planning, and supporting technical project design and implementation.

We note that while federal partners must be adequately staffed, intermediary, non-federal organizations – especially community-based organizations (CBOs) - are often carrying out the above-listed activities in effective partnership with their federal counterparts (NRCS, Rural Development, etc.). Technical assistance must be designed so as to flexibly recognize both roles.

While we realize that we face an unprecedented and difficult political and financial climate, we urge you and your Committee to protect conservation programs, as well as programs that support small businesses and community-scaled energy production. These are investments that will strengthen our rural communities while yielding decades of returns from resilient forest, farm and ranch-based businesses and from public values such as clean air, clean water, thriving ecosystems and abundant fish and wildlife.

Sincerely,

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