

Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow  
Chairman Frank Lucas  
Ranking Member Pat Roberts  
Ranking Member Collin Peterson

With increasing budget pressures and the current farm bill expiring, we thank you as the leadership of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees for both your stated and demonstrated support for agriculture and wildlife conservation in your recent letter to the Joint Committee for Deficit Reduction. Farm Bill Conservation Programs fill an essential niche in maintaining a strong quality of life for rural America.

As you are aware, farm bill conservation programs are essential in supporting a vibrant, productive rural America. Every year, over 87.5 million Americans participate in hunting and angling; part of an outdoor recreation industry that supports 9.4 million non-exportable jobs, returns over \$107 billion in federal, state, and local taxes and provides a total economic activity of \$1.06 trillion. On private lands, farm bill programs are key to sustaining this economic activity.

For more than 75 years, agricultural conservation programs have provided fish and wildlife habitat, improved air and water quality, reduced soil erosion, increased opportunities for outdoor recreation, reduced regulatory burdens on farmers and ranchers, enhanced agricultural productivity and increased financial returns to rural communities. While many of the undersigned organizations have additional priorities for the 2012 Farm Bill, the following recommendations represent some of the priorities on which we have reached consensus:

1. **Maintain or establish sufficient and responsible permanent baseline funding levels to ensure continued program effectiveness.** Provisions conserving wetlands, native grasslands, and forests such as CRP, WRP, GRP, and EQIP provide benefits both for wildlife through providing vital habitat and for people by preventing erosion and providing clean water, and should be maintained within the farm bill.
2. **Throughout the conservation title, ensure that priority be given to projects that address issues raised by state, regional, and national conservation initiatives.** Programs such as WHIP help landowners reduce threats and risks to their operations by creating and restoring habitat conditions that best address needs of priority wildlife populations. Such efforts have resulted in successful agricultural-based initiatives such as the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative, the Sage Grouse Initiative, the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, and the Great Lakes Initiative.
3. **Ensure that native prairies, rangelands and grasslands are protected and their potential agricultural use is compatible with wildlife priorities.** Landowners must be given options so that crop production should be targeted at the lands most suitable for production, allowing less productive, marginal, and poorer quality lands to be maintained in grass-based agricultural systems. This protects

vital wildlife habitat, keeps agricultural production on the landscape, and reduces tax dollars spent on crop failures caused by poor conditions, natural disasters and other factors.

4. **Ensure that the long tradition of partnerships among USDA, private landowners, and conservation partners is continued.** Partnerships help improve the delivery of programs while reducing the cost to the taxpayer.
5. **Consolidation should enhance conservation outcomes; not be used as a vehicle to impose additional cuts on the Conservation Title.** If the original intent of each of the programs is honored, consolidation has the potential to both improve program delivery and simplify the process for landowners.
6. **Enhance access to quality habitat for participation in hunting, angling and wildlife dependent recreation.** The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program helps stimulate rural economies and ensures Americans have access to affordable places for outdoor recreation.

The Agriculture Committees have the opportunity to continue this legacy of conservation while working within budgetary constraints. As hunting and angling conservation organizations, we appreciate your leadership to ensure that wildlife remains a co-equal conservation priority with soil and water throughout the Conservation Title.

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Pheasants Forever

Quail Forever

The Nature Conservancy

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

The Wildlife Society

Trout Unlimited