

Attention: Agriculture LA

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Dear Farm Bill Conferees:

We the undersigned organizations strongly support the convening of the Farm Bill conference. The diverse farmers, ranchers, farmworkers and tribal, rural and urban communities we represent have been deeply affected by the delay in the renewal of the critical programs that sustain the work we do to enhance food systems across the nation, and by the weakening of farm programs over the years. These gaps, coupled with changes and reductions to the SNAP program, are on balance, a huge step backwards from current and previous law at a time when families are deeply affected by the economic downturn. We have partnered with more than 400 community-based groups in our work to support your efforts to complete a new five-year Farm Bill that seeks to be comprehensive and fair.

As you work to refine your approach to the issues to be discussed in the Farm Bill conference, we urge you to consider our key priorities:

Preserving Overall Integrity of Our Farm and Food Policy:

- **Retain Permanent Law** – Re-authorize a complete a full, fair and intact bill for five years, retaining existing permanent Farm Bill law. Without the periodic process of re-authorization made necessary by the reversion to permanent law, many critical changes and adaptations in food and agriculture policy would be rendered impossible, imperiling conservation, renewable energy, rural development, research, trade and other important newer provisions. In previous re-authorizations we have, for example, been able to work with you to secure policies that make programs more equitable and accessible to the diverse populations who reflect the future of agriculture in our nation. These policies have also helped to advance local food systems and support beginning, socially disadvantaged and now veteran farmers and ranchers.
- **Maintain an Intact Bill with all Programs Re-authorized for the Same Period including:**
 - **Full Nutrition Title (Title IV)** – Food and farm programs belong together in the Farm Bill, and we urge you to include a full Nutrition Title that is re-authorized on the same schedule as the rest of the bill. This linkage of food and agriculture has for a generation allowed Congress to negotiate rural-urban, bipartisan Farm Bills that cover a wide range of needs and interests in a large sector of our national economy.

- **Full Array of Disaster Programs** – Producers across the nation have been left stranded in the past year due to the earlier expiration of disaster programs in the previous Farm Bill. The conference committee should include a complete array of emergency programs for all producers, and accept the Senate version with a five-year re-authorization of disaster programs rather than the House passed stand-alone 4 year authorization. These programs need to be a part of the Bill and run concurrent with the term of the full Farm Bill.
- **Continued Authorization of Discretionary Programs** –We urge you to preserve the continuity of all discretionary programs with no sunset of program authority by rejecting **House Bill Section 12327**. The current process is a way to further develop successful programs to aid in their success, and remove or alter programs that are not working in an effective manner for all concerned. In every new Farm Bill, new programs are begun and programs are removed or otherwise altered. The same process should be continued into the future.
- **Full Support of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** –Most of the changes and cuts to the Nutrition Title appear inspired by misinformation describing how the SNAP program works or the families whom it assists. We oppose all cuts to Title IV, and we strongly support the continuation of the SNAP Education and Outreach Program. Furthermore, the House version contains numerous provisions that would make SNAP considerably more bureaucratic. The Senate version, which adheres to current law much more closely, is significantly better.
 - **SNAP Nutrition Education** – Accept the Senate language (Section 4017) that refines the program that assistance to educate people receiving SNAP on how to stretch their dollars and eat well. The **House version (Section 4028)** eliminates the program and should be rejected.
 - **Hunger-Free Communities Incentives Grant** – Accept the Senate provision in **Section 4204**, which updates a series of successful programs that incentivize people receiving SNAP to eat fruits and vegetables while building markets for local farmers with \$100 million in funding over the next five years.

Expand Equity and Inclusion – Farm and Food programs should be accessible for all of our nation’s diverse populations. We have outlined below some key new policies in one or both bills that we urge the conference to accept. These include a provision that provide a receipt for service for all farmers; which enhance the federal relationship with Indian Tribes, including statutory authority for the USDA Office of Tribal Relations; and which assist traditional community irrigation and acequia systems that have operated for hundreds of years. We also support the establishment of a USDA Military Veterans Agriculture Liaison (**Senate Section 12201 and House Section 12304**), and the continuation of authority to coordinate programs at USDA as well as a grant program to improve the agricultural labor force (**Senate Section 12203**

and House Section 12301). We also urge you to continue set asides, waivers and other policies that help USDA better serve underserved producers and communities.

We urge the conferees to accept provisions in either bill that promote equity, including the following provisions that we strongly support:

- **Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers (Senate Sec. 12001 and House Sec. 12201)** – The committees have expanded the Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged to include Veteran Farmers and Ranchers with a 50 percent reduction from previous funding levels. We strongly support this important program and urge restoration of full support.
- **The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (Senate Sec. 3108 and House Sec. 5301. See also House Sec. 5302)** should similarly be funded at the higher levels, with set-asides for socially disadvantaged, limited resource and veteran producers maintained.
- **Loans to Purchasers of Highly Fractionated Land (Senate Sec. 5102 and House Sec. 5501)** – Conferees should accept the language to remove barriers to participation for individual producers to resolve fractionated land issues on tribal lands, including the Senate version that provides for consultation with the tribes on the implementation of the program.

We also strongly support the following equity provisions only in the House bill, and urge the conferees to:

- **Community Irrigation Associations** – Accept the **House provision (Sec. 2202 (k))** which adds authority to allow Acequia and Community Ditch Associations to directly access the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to help improve conservation practices in traditional shared irrigation systems. The new language would allow the Associations to deal directly with NRCS, on behalf of local irrigators would otherwise eligible for assistance to maintain infrastructure shared by all.
- **Receipt for Service** – Accept the **House provision (Sec. 12204)** that requires USDA agencies serving farmers and ranchers to routinely provide a time and date stamped receipt to each farmer and rancher requesting information or service from USDA. The automatic provision of a receipt for all service to all farmers and ranchers will assist both the producers and USDA by providing clarity and documentation of the timing and purpose of the service request, action taken, additional information and assistance provided, requests denied, reasons for inability to meet a request, and follow-up specified.
- **Increase of Opportunity for Minority and Women Businesses and Farmers** – Accept **House provision (Sec. 12318)** stating the sense of Congress that the Federal Government

should increase business opportunities for small businesses, and for minority and women farmers and businesses.

- **Crop Insurance and NAP** – Accept the directive to expand research authority and develop whole farm revenue insurance that would better work for diversified farming operations, including those operated by many socially disadvantaged, veteran and beginning farmers and ranchers. Also expand the language **Senate Sec. 11032 and House Sec. 11015** to provide premium waivers for limited resource and beginning farmers in the crop insurance title to also include socially disadvantaged producers as were added in the Noninsured Crop Assistance Program (**Senate Section 12204 and House Section 12306**).

Fairness to Farmers and Ranchers – Producers have suffered many losses in recent years and need a restoration of programs that enable them to receive coverage when natural disaster strikes. If adequate low cost supply and price based management programs cannot be restored then compensatory subsidies for market deficiencies should be counter cyclical, adequate, and firm, as opposed to the wastefulness of de-coupled programs like direct payments; and the revenue insurance programs expanded in this bill to replace them.

We urge you to immediately restore and strengthen livestock disaster programs, which were included in both the House and Senate bills. A truly effective farm policy would restore the ability of farmers and ranchers to receive a fair price from the market, not simply a subsidy payment to meet some of their losses. Given the current system included in both bills, we support the Senate provisions as a step towards a better investment of limited taxpayer funds.

In addition we urge the conferees to:

- **Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards** – Support fair and competitive markets for independent family farmers and ranchers and eliminate House language (**Sec. 12102**) that would undercut enforcement of the Packers and Stockyards Act and rescind the important regulations issued in early 2013 in response to the 2008 farm bill that relate to the fairness of contracts for poultry growers.
- **Country of Origin Labeling** - Oppose the House version's additional, unnecessary studies on the implementation of Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) (**House Sec. 12105**), which is already the law of the land, and resist any efforts to undermine the COOL law.
- **Dairy** - Support the Senate dairy provision (**Sec. 1462**) that calls on USDA to hold hearings on creating a new milk pricing system. Dairy farmers need a pricing system that enables them to price their milk at a level covering their cost of production.

Local Food Systems, Organic Agriculture and Food Access – Local food systems across the national are enhancing nutrition and health for our population, while advancing economic vitality in cities and rural areas alike. We thank you for your careful attention to these issues in both

bills. We urge you to retain and accept the strongest language to re-authorize for five years, and fund local food programs, including the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (**Senate Sec. 4205 and House Sec. 4052**), the Community Food Program (**Senate Sec. 4015 and House Sec. 4026**), the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (**Senate Section 4204 and House Section 4046**) and the Farmers Market Promotion Program (**Senate and House Sec. 10003**).

Specifically we urge the conferees to:

- **Organic Cost Share** – Continue to provide national organic certification cost share assistance to farmers and handlers for their annual certification costs by supporting the Senate language (**Sec. 10005**), which would maintain funding and merge the two current programs and maintain this cost-share in every state.
- **Specialty Crop Block Grants** – Re-authorize Specialty Crop Block Grants at the House bill's level (**House Sec. 10007**).
- **Tribal Administration** – Accept language in the **House bill Section 4041** that authorizes a feasibility study to identify which federal food programs tribes could administer independently.
- **Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations** – Accept the Senate language (Section 4002) which in addition to reauthorizing the program for 5 years, also includes authority for demonstration projects, tribal consultation and a set aside for locally and traditionally grown foods.
- **Farmers Market Promotion Program** – Re-authorize and fund the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program at the House level (**Sec. 10003**), which provides funding for programs that expand important food systems in one of the fastest growing areas in agriculture.
- **Coordination of Urban Agriculture** – Accept House language (**Sec. 12317**) to provide a directive to USDA to coordinate opportunities for urban agriculture.

Protect and Expand Credit Access and Rural Development - Producers need access to credit in order to farm. We strongly support funding for credit programs, as well as the new authority to continue the innovative and important microloan program already demonstrating great success in the version set in place this year by USDA, which has already funded more than 3,000 microloans. We also urge you to reauthorize and support all critical rural development programs at the highest levels possible.

Specifically, we would urge the conferees to:

- **Rural Residency Requirement for Operating Loans to Youth** – Accept language in the House bill (**Sec. 5102**) that opens the youth loan program to all youth seeking to enter

agriculture by removing the rural residency requirement. The House language would allow skills to be developed which could be very instrumental in developing the next generation of agriculture professionals.

- **Personal Liability for Youth Loans** – Accept the language in the House bill (**Sec. 5103**) to provide the Secretary authority to waive personal liability for youth loans due to circumstances beyond borrower control on a case-by-case basis if any default on the loan was due to circumstances beyond the control of the borrower.
- **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Accounts Pilot Program (Senate Sec. 3108 and House Sec. 5301. See also House Sec. 5302)** – Include direct funding for this important program, which establishes a pilot program to provide incentives to beginning producers to develop funds they need for their operation, for the full five years of the new bill
- **Loans to Purchasers of Highly Fractionated Land** (*See equity section above*).

Conservation, Forestry and Energy – We strongly support a Farm Bill with full funding and continuation of programs that help producers protect soil, land, forests, water and other resources, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Programs, the Conservation Innovation Grants Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, the Conservation Reserve Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program; as well as the full range of forestry stewardship and other programs to restore the health of our forests. We also favor a national sodsaver provision, as in the Senate bill and all provisions that advance the inclusion of all producers in these policies and programs.

Specifically we urge the conferees to:

- **Conservation Compliance** – Accept the Senate provisions (**Sec. 2609**) that link crop insurance premium subsidy eligibility with conservation compliance requirements, as included in the Senate bill.
- **Protection of Honey Bees and other Pollinators** – Accept the House provision (**Section 12315**) to improve federal coordination in addressing the documented decline of managed and native pollinators and promote the long-term viability of honey bees, wild bees, and other beneficial insects in agriculture.
- **Energy Programs** – Continue mandatory funding for energy title programs, as in the Senate bill, including the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP).

We support equity, justice, opportunity, and access across all titles of the Farm Bill.

We therefore also urge you to **reject** elements that weaken protections for consumers (including those in need of food assistance), and for producers, labor and the environment. These include provisions restricting SNAP eligibility as well as those related to the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Act (GIPSA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Commerce Clause, and the Fair Labor Standards Act (**House Bill Section 10008**).

We appreciate your attention to our conference recommendations, which have emerged from our grassroots member organizations and allies across the nation. We look forward to continuing our support for your work to get a full, fair and comprehensive five-year farm bill passed and signed into law as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural, *Washington, DC*
National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, *Washington, DC*
National Family Farm Coalition, *Washington, DC*
Community Food and Justice Coalition, *Oakland, CA*
Intertribal Agriculture Council, *Billings, MT*
San Diego Hunger Coalition, *San Diego, CA*

21st Century Youth Leadership Movement, *Eutaw, AL*
Alabama State Association of Cooperatives, *Forkland, AL*
American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 3354, *St. Louis, MO*
Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation, *Brinkley, AR*
Farmworker Association of Florida, *Apopka, FL*
Federation of Southern Cooperatives Rural Training and Research Center, *Epes, AL*
Food and Water Watch, *Washington, DC*
Greene County Democrat (weekly newspaper), *Eutaw, AL*
Hunger Action Network of New York State, *New York, NY*
Indian Country Agriculture and Resource Development Corporation, *Anadarko, OK*
Indian Nations Conservation Alliance, *Twin Bridges, MT*
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, *Minneapolis, MN*
KC Food Justice, *Kansas City, KS*
Lideres Campesinas, *Oxnard, CA*
Local to Global Advocates for Justice, *Kansas City, KS*
Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, *Jackson, MS*
Missouri Rural Crisis Center, *Columbia, MO*
National Hmong American Farmers, Inc., *Fresno, CA*
New Mexico Acequia Association, *Santa Fe, NM*
North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project, *Durham, NC*
Northern New Mexico Stockmans Association, *Espanola, NM*
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Oklahoma Historical Research Project, *Oklahoma City, OK*
Operation Spring Plant, *Oxford, NC*
PLBA Housing Development Corporation, *Gainesville, AL*

Rural Advancement Fund, *Orangeburg, SC*
School Food FOCUS National Office, *New York, NY*
Taos County Economic Development Corporation, *Taos, NM*
WhyHunger, *New York, NY*
World Farmers, *Lancaster, MA*