

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 18, 2018

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Conaway:

We write in our capacity as leaders of the House Sustainable Energy and Environment Coalition (SEEC) to highlight our concerns with policies that weaken conservation programs and environmental protections in the 2018 Farm Bill. We also urge a turn to bipartisan drafting during committee markup and beyond. The Farm Bill's conservation programs help protect our soil, air, and water. A 2011 study by the USDA's Economic Research Service concluded that it costs \$1.7 billion a year to treat drinking water contaminated by nitrates from farm fields. Programs and policies that support sustainable farming are vital to protecting public health, saving local governments money, and helping our farmers ensure their soil can continue to produce our food supply.

Conservation and Working Lands Programs

The Farm Bill should do everything it can to help more farmers and ranchers adopt conservation practices that reduce the environmental and public health impacts of farm runoff. One of the biggest challenges the working lands programs face is the fact that demand for farm conservation programs far exceeds their current capacity. The programs are so popular that in FY15 the Natural Resource Conservation Service turned away as many as 75 percent of qualified applicants. We should not be turning away farmers that want to protect their land and the environment by improving their sustainability.

Given high demand by farmers and ranchers and the need to better protect our water, soil and other natural resources, we were disappointed to see that funding for conservation programs was cut in your bill and that the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a vital working lands program, was eliminated entirely. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), conservation takes a nearly \$1 billion overall cut over 10 years, which is on top of the \$4 billion hit that the conservation title took in the last farm bill. Working lands programs specifically are cut by roughly \$5 billion over 10 years. Eliminating CSP and cutting funding for working lands conservation will undermine the ability to address many of the critical drinking water and environmental challenges we face. We strongly support increasing our investments in working lands programs and would also encourage you to consider ways we might be able to further improve and target these programs.

Organics

American farmers are losing opportunities to foreign competitors in this space. According to trade data from the USDA, America's farmers lost out on over \$1.5 billion in sales of organic soybeans and corn between 2012 and 2017. As a result, we recommend increasing efforts to support this growing industry in the 2018 Farm Bill, such as by improving transition assistance for farmers looking to switch to organic agriculture and further increasing the funding for research in this space. These small steps could have big impacts in helping Americans get back lost sales to foreign competitors while also encouraging sustainable farming practices.

Public Health and Environmental Rollbacks

Finally, we were alarmed to see policies aimed at weakening public health and environmental safeguards in this bill. These partisan and ideological provisions not only harm public health and the environment,

they bring uninvited political baggage to this bill, risking delay and controversy. Examples include: federal preemption of local governments that want to adopt more protective pesticide laws, exempting the application of pesticides from Clean Water Act protections, and weakening protections for endangered species. We all recall that applying the pesticide DDT without fully understanding its impacts on the bald eagle led to that iconic bird's near extinction. And many of the chemicals used to kill pests can also endanger human health. Common insecticides have been linked to cancers, birth defects, and learning disabilities. We should not be rolling back bedrock environmental protections or preempting local communities that want to increase safeguards for their health. We have included a longer list of concerning environmental policies as an appendix to this letter.

The Farm Bill represents an incredible opportunity to support our farmers and rural communities while also better protecting our air, water and soil. Unfortunately, this bill is missing that opportunity by including damaging environmental policies and cutting vital conservation funding. We are concerned that the drafting process so far has left little room for robust discussion of these important policies, and hope you will work to address these deficits as the bill progresses.

Sincerely,

Doris Matsui

Paul D. Tonko

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Member of Congress
SEEC Co-Chair

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Gerald E. Connolly

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SEEC Vice-Chair

CC:

The Honorable Collin C. Peterson, Ranking Member, House Committee on Agriculture

The Honorable Pat Roberts, Chairman, Senate Committee on Agriculture Nutrition and Forestry

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Agriculture Nutrition and Forestry

Appendix

Some environmental provisions that SEEC leaders find concerning include:

Section 9101 – This section disallows local agencies to adopt pesticide laws that are more protective than federal ones.

Section 9111 - This section eliminates the Endangered Species Act requirement that EPA consult with the expert federal wildlife agencies, USFWS and NMFS when approving chemicals that can harm endangered species.

Section 9117 – This section would exempt pesticides applied to waterways from Clean Water Act protections.

Section 9121 – This section weakens restrictions on methyl bromide. Methyl bromide is a highly toxic substance and powerful contributor to ozone depletion.

Section 7105 – This section eliminates the renewable energy advisory board, which helped to guide the effective deployment of clean energy strategies in rural America.

Elimination of funding for the Renewable Energy for America Program (REAP): REAP provides grants and loan guarantees to farmers and rural business to adopt renewable energy and energy efficiency measures.

Categorical exclusions: The bill contains numerous categorical exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which we are concerned could lead to insufficient environmental review. We want to make sure Categorical Exclusions are being used appropriately and not simply to side-step needed environmental review.