



For more information, please contact:

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April 09, 2024

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
Chair
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven
Ranking Member
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Andy Harris
Chair
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Jr.
Ranking Member
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements in FY25 Appropriations

Dear Senators Heinrich and Hoeven, and Representatives Harris and Bishop Jr.,

Thank you for your collective leadership in passing funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other agencies via H.R. 4366, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024. Providing certainty to USDA and their customers is vital to the United States agriculture sector, food supply chain, and everyone who depends on them. We appreciate that the bill supports Conservation Operations (CO) within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and encourage you to increase funding for CO in Fiscal Year 2025. However, we are concerned about language in the bill’s Joint Explanatory statement that requests NRCS not use CO funding for Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements.

The undersigned groups request that Fiscal Year 2025 appropriations bills or congressional directives do not include any language that restricts or excludes funding for conservation equity agreements. These agreements allow NRCS to partner with community-based organizations to reach producers and land stewards who are not historically served by NRCS. These agreements also ensure fair access to NRCS opportunities, providing significant benefits to local natural resource concerns, communities, and underserved farmers and ranchers.

NRCS programs are in high demand from farmers, ranchers, and private landowners across the country who value the voluntary, incentive-based conservation delivery system. However, conservation programs are not always accessible to those who want to participate due to limited funding and existing barriers for historically underserved individuals, including Veteran, Beginning, Socially Disadvantaged, and Limited Resource farmers and ranchers.¹ Through cooperative agreements, NRCS developed an innovative solution to address this problem by enabling locally led partnerships to reach underserved customers.

In 2023, 139 Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements benefited 75,000 farmers through 1,165 local events with over 25,000 attendees and 700 workshops. Through these agreements, partners provided Technical Assistance to 9,000 individuals, and brought 2,000 new customers into USDA, resulting in more than 1,000 new program signups, across every state and territory. Ensuring all farmers have access to NRCS' critical resources enhances their efforts to address water quality and quantity, soil health, and financial stability to improve operations and the environment.

USDA's ability to reach historically underserved farmers and ranchers is paramount to a successful agricultural economy that meets the conservation needs of the country. Ensuring the necessary funding for Conservation Operations and Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements would recognize their value and confirm the importance of locally led and culturally appropriate outreach to address on-farm natural resource needs.

Sincerely,

National Association of Conservation Districts, Washington, D.C.

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Washington, D.C.

National Wildlife Federation, Reston, VA

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts, OK

Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project Inc., OK

Rural Coalition, Washington, D.C.

Union of Concerned Scientists, Cambridge, MA

World Farmers, Lancaster, MA

Other National Groups

Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc, Oxnard, CA

¹ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers>

American Farmland Trust, Washington, D.C.
American Indian Mothers Inc, Red Springs, NC
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, Louisville, KY
Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment, Columbia, MO
Carbon180, Washington, D.C
Center for Food Safety, Washington, D.C.
Climate 911
Community Food and Justice Coalition, Piedmont, CA
Defenders of Wildlife, Washington, DC
Earthjustice, San Francisco, CA
Farm Action Fund
Farm Aid, Cambridge, MA
Food and Fiber Law, PR
Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT), Chicago, IL
HEAL (Health, Environment, Agriculture, Labor) Food Alliance, Oakland, CA
Health Care Without Harm, Reston, VA
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy , Minneapolis, MN
Latino Farmers & Ranchers International, Inc., Germantown, MD
League of Conservation Voters, Washington, D.C.
National Association of Conservation Districts, Washington, D.C.
National Co+op Grocers, Saint Paul, MN
National Organic Coalition, Arlington, MA
National Young Farmers Association, Hudson, NY
Natural Resources Defense Council, New York, NY
Pesticide Action Network, Oakland, CA
Resource Renewal Institute, Fairfax, CA
River Network, Boulder, CO
Rural Advancement Foundation International, Pittsboro, NC
Rural Advancement Fund of the National Sharecroppers Fund, Orangeburg, SC
Soil and Water Conservation Society, Ankeny, IA
The Nature Conservancy, Arlington County, VA

The Wave Foundation, Portland, Oregon
Waterkeeper Alliance, New York, NY
World Wildlife Fund, Washington, DC

Regional, State, & Local Groups:

Alabama State Association of Cooperatives, Gainesville, AL
Black Farmers and Ranchers New Mexico Global, Jarales, NM
Catskill Mountainkeeper, Hurleyville, NY
Clean Wisconsin, Madison, WI
Compañeras Campesinas, PR
Conuco Campesino, Hormigueros, PR
Delaware Association of Conservation Districts, DE
Dorchester Soil Conservation District, Cambridge MD
Farm to Table - New Mexico, Santa Fe, NM
Farmworker Association of Florida, Apopka, FL
Grupo Amor, Homestead, FL
Illinois Environmental Council, Springfield, IL
Illinois Stewardship Alliance, Springfield, IL
Kansas Black Farmers Association, Historic Nicodemus, KS
Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance, Red Wing, MN
Land Stewardship Project, Minneapolis, MN
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, Unity, ME
Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts, MD
Michigan Food and Farming Systems, Okemos, MI
Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Jackson, MS
Mississippi River Network
New Mexico Healthy Soil Working Group, NM
North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project, Durham, NC
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Hampshire, Concord, NH
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), Richmond, VT
Northeast Organic Farming Association-Interstate Council, Titusville, NJ

Northern Plains Resource Council, Billings, MT
Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides, Eugene, OR
Northwest Forest Worker Center , Ashland, OR
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, Columbus, OH
O‘ahu Resource Conservation and Development Council, Honolulu County, HI
Operation Spring Plant,Inc., Oxford, NC
Oregon Climate and Agriculture Network, Eugene, OR
Pasa Sustainable Agriculture, Harrisburg, PA
Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust Inc., Cranston, RI
Prince George's Soil Conservation District, Upper Marlboro MD
Springfield Food Policy Council, Springfield, MA
St. Louis Operation Grow Black Growers, St. Louis, MO
Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT), West Branch, IA
Texas Mexico Border Coalition Community Based Organization, Santa Elena, TX
The Nature Conservancy of Oklahoma, Tulsa, OK
Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, Madison, WI

ccs:

Undersecretary for Farm Production and Conservation Robert Bonnie,
Rep. Kay Granger, Rep. Rosa DeLauro, Sen. Patty Murray, and Sen Susan Collins. Leaders
Speaker Michael Johnson, House Minority Leaders Hakeem Jeffries, Majority Leader Charles Schumer,
and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell