



March 30, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary Designee
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-3700

Dear Secretary Designee Perdue:

The undersigned members of the Choose Clean Water Coalition are concerned about federal support for programs that are essential to maintaining and restoring clean water in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. For that reason, we are concerned about the funding cuts to the Chesapeake under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

There are 87,000 farms in the six-state Chesapeake region. Those that are well run protect their water resources and add much to our landscape, environment, and economy. We want to ensure that these responsible farms and farmers remain economically viable. Nutrient and sediment pollution from farms is by far the largest source of contamination in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Recognizing this, the 2008 Farm Bill established the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative that provided \$238 million over five years to producers in the region to apply conservation practices on their farms that would help to restore and/or protect water quality.

All of the conservation programs under the Farm Bill, including the RCPP, are critical for both farmers and clean water throughout the Chesapeake Bay region and we support full funding for them. These programs are essential for agricultural operations to meet state and federal goals that address both farm health and water quality.

The Agriculture Act of 2014 (the 2014 Farm Bill) replaced several regional programs, including the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative with the RCPP. The RCPP was designed to focus resources on assisting producers to voluntarily apply conservation practices on agricultural working lands to improve water quality in high priority watersheds, such as the Chesapeake watershed. The Choose Clean Water Coalition supported this approach. The entire Chesapeake Bay watershed was designated as one of eight national priority Critical Conservation Areas, and we applauded that decision. However, the amount of RCPP funds that were eventually provided for this effort fell well short of what anyone expected a "priority" area to receive.

The five years of funding for the Chesapeake region under the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative of the 2008 Farm Bill provided an average of \$47.6 million every year for conservation practices that benefit water quality. During the first four years of the RCPP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service allocated a total of only \$43.18 million to projects all, or partially, in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. In addition, NRCS has taken 25% of each project allocation for "technical assistance and administration", further reducing the amounts actually available to farmers. While we support using these funds for technical assistance, we do not support taking dollars which Congress intended for conservation and using them instead for

“administration” or overhead. Recipients also have to provide a dollar for dollar match for the entire amount prior to the deduction of the 25% administrative fee.

This significantly reduced level of support for conservation has undercut the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) commitment to the Chesapeake. The \$43.18 million over the first four years of the RCPP has provided 22% of the funds that were previously allocated to conservation in the Chesapeake region under the 2008 Farm Bill – an average of \$10.8 million annually. Calculating the 25% for “administration” reduces the annual allocation actually available for conservation in the Chesapeake from the RCPP to \$8.1 million annually. This is a much more dramatic cut to efforts by farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to improve water quality and habitat – and is only 17% of the funds delivered to the watershed for conservation under the 2008 Farm Bill.

These large funding reductions under the RCPP, as it has been administered, have resulted in a steep cut to conservation that is critical to maintain and restore clean water to the rivers and streams throughout the Chesapeake Bay region, and for the Bay itself. These programs are essential for the agricultural sector to implement the voluntary projects needed for clean water in our rural areas.

We are deeply disappointed that the RCPP has so shortchanged the Chesapeake region. There had been no shortage of applications by farmers in the six-state Chesapeake Bay watershed to apply for funds under the 2008 Farm Bill, and there is still no shortage of producers and others willing to act under the 2014 Farm Bill.

We strongly urge you to treat the Chesapeake as a true Critical Conservation Area under the 2014 Farm Bill, and to better allocate future funds to reflect that. USDA has an obligation under the voluntary 2014 Chesapeake Watershed Agreement, which USDA signed as a member of the Federal Leadership Committee for the Chesapeake Bay to help meet the goals of the Agreement and the RCPP should be its primary tool to obtain success.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request that is critical to clean water throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. Please contact Peter J. Marx at 410-905-2515 or peter@choosecleanwater.org with any questions or concerns. Thank you.

Sincerely,

1000 Friends of Maryland
Alice Ferguson Foundation
Alliance for Sustainable Communities
Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
Anacostia Watershed Society
Audubon Naturalist Society
Back Creek Conservancy
Blue Water Baltimore
Cacapon Institute
Capital Region Land Conservancy
Catskill Mountainkeeper
Cecil Land Use Association
Center for Progressive Reform
Chapman Forest Foundation

Chesapeake Legal Alliance
Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage
Chester River Association
Clean Water Action
Coalition for Smarter Growth
Conservation Montgomery
Conservation Voters of Pennsylvania
Delaware Nature Society
Ducks Unlimited
Earth Force
Earth Forum of Howard County
Eastern Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation
Eastern Shore Land Conservancy
EcoLatinos
Elizabeth River Project
Elk Creeks Watershed Association
Environment America
Environment Maryland
Environment New York
Environment Virginia
Environmental Working Group
Envision Frederick County
Friends of Accotink Creek
Friends of Dyke Marsh
Friends of Lower Beaverdam Creek
Friends of Quincy Run
Friends of the Middle River
Friends of the Nanticoke River
Friends of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River
Friends of the Rappahannock
Goose Creek Association
Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake
Izaak Walton League of America
James River Association
Lackawanna River Conservation Association
Lancaster Farmland Trust
Little Falls Watershed Alliance
Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper
Lynnhaven River NOW
Maryland Conservation Council
Maryland League of Conservation Voters
Mattawoman Watershed Society
Mehoopany Creek Watershed Association
Mid-Atlantic Council Trout Unlimited
Middle Susquehanna Riverkeeper
Montgomery Countryside Alliance
National Aquarium
National Parks Conservation Association
National Wildlife Federation
Nature Abounds
New York League of Conservation Voters

New York State Council of Trout Unlimited
Natural Resources Defense Council
Neighbors of the Northwest Branch
Otsego County Conservation Association
Otsego Land Trust
PennEnvironment
PennFuture
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Piedmont Environmental Council
Potomac Conservancy
Potomac Riverkeeper
Potomac Riverkeeper Network
Queen Anne's Conservation Association
Rivanna Conservation Alliance
Rock Creek Conservancy
St. Mary's River Watershed Association
Sassafras River Association
Savage River Watershed Association
Severn River Association
Shenandoah Riverkeeper
Shenandoah Valley Network
Sidney Center Improvement Group
Sleepy Creek Watershed Association
South River Federation
SouthWings
Sparks-Glencoe Community Planning Council
Susquehanna Heritage
Trout Unlimited
Upper Potomac Riverkeeper
Upper Susquehanna Coalition
Virginia Conservation Network
Virginia League of Conservation Voters
Waterkeepers Chesapeake
West/Rhode Riverkeeper
West Virginia Citizen Action Group
West Virginia Environmental Council
West Virginia Rivers Coalition
Wetlands Watch
Wicomico Environmental Trust