



Healing Our Waters[®]-Great Lakes Coalition

October 25, 2013

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chair
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chair
Senate Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. and Madame Chairmen and Ranking Members:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we urge you to pass a new Farm Bill this year. The USDA's voluntary, incentives-based conservation programs are helping address one of the biggest threats to the Great Lakes—run-off from farms. A 2011 study by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service found that conservation tillage and other conservation practices have resulted in a 50 percent decline in sediment entering rivers and streams that flow into the Great Lakes from the fields implementing those practices. It also found 36 and 37 percent declines, respectively, in phosphorus and nitrogen loading.

However, urban and agricultural runoff continues to contribute to the problems facing the Great Lakes. Experts say new algae blooms are being fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms, urban areas, and municipal sewage treatment facilities. Stronger storms driven by climate change and invasive mussels are exacerbating the problem. One only need to look at satellite images to see the enormous impact this is having on the Great Lakes environment and economy as these blooms close beaches, kill fish, and impact small, local businesses like charter boats.

In particular, we ask that you accept the Senate's provision for the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The new regional partnership program is an innovative approach to targeted conservation activities for watersheds in critical need, such as the Great Lakes. We also ask that you reconnect basic soil and wetlands conservation measures to eligibility for crop insurance like has been done in the Senate-passed bill. Lastly, we request that you oppose any additional funding cuts to conservation programs below the Senate's levels.

While agriculture runoff contributes to the problem, farmers are contributing to the solution by undertaking conservation practices on their land that keeps nutrients out of Great Lakes rivers and streams. As a report¹ our Coalition released last year illustrated, farmers across the region are embracing conservation practices that yield long-term results. However, our report also demonstrated that more must be done. The new Regional Conservation Partnership Program adds to the tools our region will have to tackle sediment and nutrient runoff issues.

This new program would select conservation projects through a competitive, merit-based process that would improve soil quality, water quality or quantity, or wildlife habitat in regions such as the Great

¹ At <http://healthylakes.org/news-events/press-release/new-report-strong-farm-bill-key-to-great-lakes-restoration/>

Lakes. It sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers to work together to further the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resources on a regional or watershed scale. It also provides for accountability by linking the projects to local efforts or other regional initiatives (like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative).

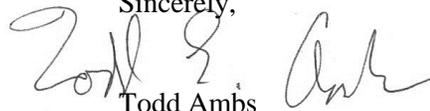
The RCPP is a new, innovative, and bipartisan proposal. We support the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program and you to include the Senate's version in the final Farm Bill.

We also urge you to renew the long-standing conservation compact with farmers by re-connecting basic soil and water conservation measures to crop insurance subsidies (conservation compliance). This will ensure that taxpayer funds are not rewarding agricultural producers who are draining wetlands or farming highly erodible land without conservation measures. These basic conservation measures are critical for protecting the many important values of wetlands on the agricultural landscape and for reducing nutrient pollution into rivers, lakes and streams. The Senate's bill included a provision that should be maintained in a final bill.

Lastly, we ask you to oppose any more cuts to conservation programs than what was agreed to in the Senate bill. We need to be investing more resources, not less, on conservation programs. Regardless of high crop prices, farmers still want to enroll in voluntary conservation programs. Applications for Farm Bill conservation programs continue to outpace available funding. You must hold the line against additional cuts to conservation program funding if we are to even come close in meeting farmer demand and be able to encourage farmers to continue taking meaningful steps that protect water quality, protect habitat, and provide innumerable other environmental and economic benefits.

Please do not hesitate to have your staff contact Chad Lord, our Coalition's policy director, at (202) 454-3385 or clord@npca.org or myself at (608) 692-9974 or ambs@nwf.org if you have questions about our Coalition's support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd Ambs". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T".

Todd Ambs
Campaign Director