



March 2, 2020

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
SD-129
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
SD-190
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Hoeven and Ranking Member Merkley:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write to ask that you assure the Fiscal Year 2021 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill provides funding for Great Lakes restoration priorities. We are grateful for the much needed support the region has received. We are seeing on-the-ground results because of the investments in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. However, the Great Lakes still face many urgent problems, which is why we are concerned with the President's proposed budget. The problems we face will only get worse and the price we pay will be much higher if the federal partnership with the region is scaled back.

First, we ask that you support the critical broad-based programs that are the foundation upon which the success of Great Lakes restoration efforts are built. We are especially concerned by the Administration's requested cuts to the Farm Bill's conservation programs, efforts that in partnership with the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) have seen farmers receive technical and financial support to implement nutrient management actions on nearly 2 million acres of rural lands as of 2017. We urge you to reject this proposal.

Farm Bill conservation programs are critical to addressing the ongoing challenge of urban and agricultural runoff and its impact on water quality and public health. Experts say harmful new algal blooms are fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms and urban areas. Stronger storms driven by climate change contribute to the problem, as do invasive mussels. New harmful algal blooms close beaches, kill fish, impact local drinking water supplies (like Toledo, Ohio, in 2014), and when water supplies are contaminated, the most vulnerable members of the community are the first to be impacted. Toxic algae also harm local businesses, with fisheries and the outdoor recreation industry relying on clean water. With blooms spreading farther and faster and beginning earlier than ever before, we must act to protect communities from this growing threat.

To help the region respond to these algal blooms we ask you to maintain full funding for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm Bill conservation programs, providing at least \$300 million for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. This program is well placed to fund targeted conservation practices that will improve soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat in regions such as the Great Lakes. It sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers. As partners, these organizations and farmers work together to further the conservation and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife habitat, 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 GLRI, which has resulted in a doubling of farmland under conservation around Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay, and Green Bay, reducing projected phosphorus runoff by over 1.1 million pounds since 2010.

Support for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program will not be enough to reduce algae-feeding phosphorus in the region's waterways. If we are to achieve 40 percent nutrient reductions in Western Lake Erie (as agreed to by the region's governors and the U.S. and Canadian governments) we will need a much more coordinated response. Moreover, our region will fall short of our restoration goals if the federal agencies that are vital partners in our restoration efforts have their budgets cut. These departments and agencies are critical partners with Great Lakes states, cities, industries, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations. We ask that Congress provide all Farm Bill conservation programs with funding at authorized levels and provide robust discretionary funding in support of NRCS field staff, as technical assistance is essential for the delivery of conservation support for farmers across the region.

Second, we ask the Committee to support the efforts of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). The USDA is a critical partner to the GLRI, seeing its conservation and regional investment programs enhanced and supplemented by its participation. The initiative is improving the lives of millions of people and has seen efforts undertaken or completed on more than 5,300 restoration projects throughout the region. Projects that are benefiting communities by cleaning up waters that are the drinking source for millions of homes and thousands of industries. Results, include:

- Three Areas of Concern – Presque Isle, Pa.; Deer Lake, Mich.; and White Lake, Mich. – have been delisted since the GLRI began. The management actions necessary to delist 11 additional AOCs have also been completed. In the previous two decades before the GLRI, only one AOC had been cleaned up.
- 80 beneficial use impairments (BUIs) were addressed in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin under the GLRI, more than seven times the total number of BUIs removed in the preceding 22 years.
- Combined with other funding, farmers have implemented nutrient management actions on nearly 2 million acres of rural lands through 2017 to reduce erosion and farm runoff that feeds toxic algal outbreaks. GLRI's supplemental funding is helping increase farmland under conservation around Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay, and Green Bay, reducing projected phosphorus runoff by over 1.1 million pounds.
- Over 5,250 river miles have been cleared of dams and barriers resulting in fish swimming into stretches of river where they have been absent for decades.

However, there is still much work that needs to be done. Aging sewers, invasive species, and toxic pollutants are just a few of the pervasive threats that impact the region, endangering human and wildlife health, lowering property values, and hurting the region's economy. Moreover, emerging contaminants and a changing climate continue to exacerbate the challenges we face, many of which disproportionately impact people that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice. Cutting funding will slow restoration efforts, allowing problems to get worse and making them more

expensive to solve. Ultimately, cutting spending as proposed won't save money—it will cost the nation more. As the source of drinking water for over 30 million Americans, the nation cannot afford to stop protecting and restoring the Great Lakes.

Now is not the time to scale back our nation's commitment to restore the Great Lakes environment and economy. Progress is being made and the region stands ready to continue this important federal partnership, ensuring that all benefit from and enjoy these investments in restoration and protection. Please ensure that the fiscal year 2021 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill fully funds USDA farm bill conservation programs.

If you have questions regarding this request, please do not hesitate to have your staff contact our coalition's policy director, Chad Lord, at 202-454-3385 or clord@npca.org.

Sincerely,

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