



April 21, 2021

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Jr.
Chairman

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
2362A Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry
Ranking Member

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Fortenberry:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write to urge you support robust funding for Great Lakes restoration in the Fiscal Year 2022 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. 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 threats, that if unaddressed will only get worse and the price we pay will be much higher if Congress fails to strengthen its federal partnership with the region during this health and economic crisis.

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. Efforts through the Farm Bill's conservation programs 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.

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 1.5 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 fail to have their funding strengthened. 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. Prioritizing investments in our most vulnerable communities, consideration of environmental justice, and ensuring granting and match flexibility through this economic downturn.

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 5,400 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.

Still much work needs to be done. Aging sewers, invasive species, and toxic pollutants threaten 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. With the economic downturn hamstringing community investment and exposing the unaffordability of water for so many families, it is critical that Congress provide robust funding through grants in the year ahead. Allowing these problems to get worse will only put our communities at risk and make them more expensive to solve.

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 2022 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,

Marjorie Mulcahy
Treasurer
Advocates for a Clean Lake Erie

Molly M. Flanagan
COO and Vice President, Programs
Alliance for the Great Lakes

Marnie Urso
Policy Director
Audubon Great Lakes

Erin McGrath
Policy Manager
Audubon New York

Sandra C Morrissey
President
Bronx River - Sound Shore Audubon
Society

Brian Smith
Associate Executive Director
Citizens Campaign for the Environment

Barbara Warren, RN, MS
Executive Director
Citizens' Environmental Coalition

Steve Schultz
Water Program Coordinator
Clean Water Action

Mark Redsten
President/CEO
Clean Wisconsin

Bryan Stubbs
President & Executive Director
Cleveland Water Alliance

Rob Mrowka
President
Concerned Citizens of Cattaraugus County
(NY)

Ruth Battaglia CSA
Sister
Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes

Amy Beyer
Director
Conservation Resource Alliance

Joe Tomandl
Executive Director
Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship

William Schleizer
CEO
Delta Institute

James N Bull
Environmental Policy Coordinator
Detroit Audubon

Kyle Rorah
Regional Director of Public Policy
Ducks Unlimited

Rebecca Meuninck
Deputy Director
Ecology Center

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Deputy Director
Ecology Center

Rob Hayes
Director of Clean Water
Environmental Advocates NY

Howard Learner
Executive Director
Environmental Law & Policy Center

Rebecca Fedewa
Executive Director
Flint River Watershed Coalition

Liz Kirkwood
Executive Director
For Love of Water (FLOW)

Joyann Cirigliano
President
Four Harbors Audubon Society

Kristy Meyer
Associate Director
Freshwater Future

Margaret Frisbie
Executive Director
Friends of the Chicago River

Marie McCormick
Executive Director
Friends of the Rouge

Mike Carlson
Executive Director
Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for
Land Trusts

Stephanie Prellwitz
Executive Director
Green Lake Association

Ivan J hack jr
President
Headwaters Chapter Izaak Walton League

Sr. Rose Therese Nolta
Justice and Peace Coordinator
Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, USA-JPIC

Melissa Sinka
Recording Secretary
Huntington-Oyster Bay Audubon Society

Brad Jensen
Executive Director
Huron Pines

Rebecca Esselman
Executive Director
Huron River Watershed Council

Edward L Michael
Government Affairs Chair
Illinois Council of Trout Unlimited

Iyana Simba
Clean Water Policy Director
Illinois Environmental Council

Keith Halper
President
Indiana Division - Izaak Walton League of
America

Emily Wood
Executive Director
Indiana Wildlife Federation

Keith Halper
State President, Indiana Division
Izaak Walton League of America

Don E Robertson
Vice President
Izaak Walton League of America Penn.
State Division

Alicia Smith
Community Liaison
Junction Coalition

Paul Pacholski
President
Lake Erie Charter Boat Association

Tom Mlada
Executive Director
Lakeshore Natural Resource Partnership

Allyson Haut
President
League of Women Voters of Illinois

Barbara Schilling and Linda Hanson
Co-Presidents
League of Women Voters of Indiana

Terese Grant
President
League of Women Voters of Iowa

Christina Schlitt
President
League of Women Voters of Michigan

Louise Petering
President
League of Women Voters of Wisconsin

Elizabeth Joy Guscott-Mueller
President
League of Women Voters-Lake Michigan
Region

Bentley Johnson
Senior Partnerships Manager
Michigan League of Conservation Voters

Ian FitzGerald
Policy Coordinator
Michigan United Conservation Clubs

Maureen Taylor
State Chairperson
Michigan Welfare Rights Organization

Cheryl A Nenn
Riverkeeper
Milwaukee Riverkeeper

Brenda Coley
Co-Executive Director
Milwaukee Water Commons

Steve Morse
Executive Director
Minnesota Environmental Partnership

Caitlin Wall
Water Policy Manager
National Audubon Society

Lynn McClure
Senior Director
National Parks Conservation Association

Mike Shriberg
Great Lakes Regional Executive Director
National Wildlife Federation

Melinda Hughes
President
Nature Abounds

Elizabeth Moran
Environmental Policy Director
New York Public Interest Research Group
(NYPIRG)

Jennifer Wilson Pines
Conservation Chair
North Shore Audubon Society

Larry Federman
President
Northern Catskills Audubon Society

Matt Misicka
Executive Director
Ohio Conservation Federation

Pete Bucher
Managing Director Water Policy
Ohio Environmental Council

Maryanne Adams
Conservation Chair
Onondaga Audubon

Kristina Patterson
Executive Director
Partners for Clean Streams

Jacquelyn Bonomo
President & CEO
PennFuture

Kathy Slesar OP
Vice-President
Racine Dominicans

Irene Senn
Coordinator
Religious Coalition for the Great Lakes

Lori Andresen
President
Save Our Sky Blue Waters

Natalie Johnson
Executive Director
Save the Dunes Conservation Fund

John Peach
Executive Director
Save The River Upper St. Lawrence
Riverkeeper

Anne Swaim
Executive Director
Saw Mill River Audubon

Tim Dewane
JPIC Director
School Sisters of Notre Dame - CP JPIC
Office

Leigh Fabens
President
Shaker Lakes Garden Club

Kate Bartholomew
Chair
Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter

Erma Leaphart
Organizer
Sierra Club Michigan Chapter

Robert F. Shields
Steering Committee; Chair, Conservation
Committee
Sierra Club Ohio

Jill Haberman
Justice and Peace Animator
Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi (St. Francis,
WI)

Phyllis Tierney
Coordinator, Sisters of St. Joseph of
Rochester Justice & Peace Office
Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester Justice &
Care for Creation Committee

Brien Weiner
President
South Shore Audubon Society

Sarah Damron
Southeast, Texas, and Great Lakes Regional
Manager
Surfrider Foundation

Kelly Reed
Senior Vice President, Government
Relations
The Conservation Fund

Jennifer McKay
Policy Director
Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

Taylor Ridderbusch
Great Lakes Organizer
Trout Unlimited

Mary Ellen Miller
President-elect
Upper Mississippi River Region of the
League of Women Voters

Lisa Patrell
Co-founder
Washtenaw350

Monica LewisPatrick
CEO
We the People of Detroit

Bill Wood
Executive Director
West Michigan Environmental Action
Council

Steven Berk
Director of Public Policy
Western Reserve Land Conservancy

Diane Lembck
President
Wisconsin Metro Audubon Society

Mike Kuhr
State Council Chair
Wisconsin Trout Unlimited