

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 23, 2015

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We thank you and your team at the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for your efforts to implement critical provisions of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill). As you continue to make implementation decisions pursuant to the intent of Congress, please keep in mind that decisions regarding Conservation Title programs have lasting and significant impacts on the agricultural landscape. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is one of the most critical Conservation Title programs, and the undersigned members of the U.S. Senate write to clarify the intent of the language passed into law.

CRP was originally established under the Food Security Act of 1985 and over the past 30 years has evolved into one of the most important and versatile federal programs for both agricultural producers and conservationists. Annually, CRP reduces soil erosion by millions of tons, improves water quality for millions of people, and provides millions of acres of wildlife habitat. CRP also serves as an effective component of the “farm safety net” by helping producers mitigate risks associated with price and production by providing an alternative to raising crops on less productive, environmentally sensitive lands.

Nearly 37 million acres were enrolled in CRP at its peak in 2007; however, as authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, the CRP acreage cap will be reduced to 26 million acres in fiscal year 2015, 25 million acres in fiscal year 2016, and 24 million acres in fiscal years 2017 and 2018.

Although the 2014 Farm Bill lowered the CRP acreage cap, this reduction does not signal waning congressional support for CRP. It is our intent that USDA provide adequate enrollment periods, including general CRP signups, in order to ensure eligible landowners are not denied sufficient opportunity to enroll their land and to ensure CRP does not remain undersubscribed.

The combination of larger tracts enrolled through the more cost-effective general CRP signups in close proximity to Continuous CRP (CCRP) or Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) enrolled acres maximizes the wildlife and recreational benefits of CRP, CCRP, and CREP and provides the most cost-effective use of CRP expenditures. CRP must be allowed to continue as one of USDA’s key conservation programs in concert with working lands conservation efforts.

Though the authorized CRP acreage cap for fiscal year 2015 is 26 million acres, as of February 2015 only 24.29 million acres were enrolled. With 1.9 million acres enrolled in contracts that expire on September 30, CRP may have a total enrollment of only 22.39 million acres at the end of this fiscal year, nearly 3.6 million acres under the allowed acreage cap.

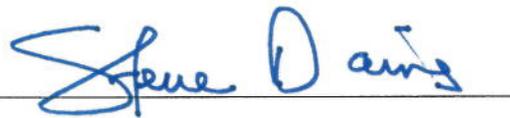
Accordingly, we strongly encourage you to take whatever steps necessary to keep CRP enrollment near the annual acreage caps authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, including conducting a general CRP signup during fiscal year 2015 and in future years as needed. In addition, please let us know specifically how you plan to keep CRP enrollment at or near its authorized acreage caps for the duration of 2014 Farm Bill.

Thank you for your consideration of our request. We stand ready to work with you to ensure CRP enrollment does not fall below the levels Congress intended.

Sincerely,

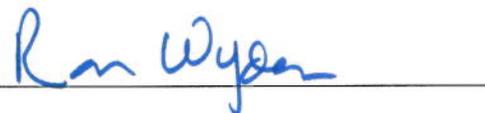
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
JOHN THUNE  
United States Senator

  
\_\_\_\_\_

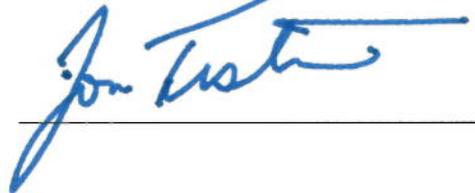
  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

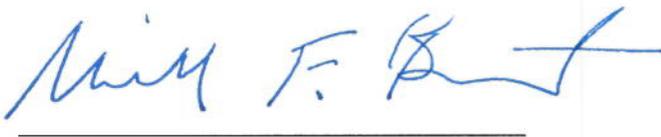
  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
JOE DONNELLY  
United States Senator

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_