HEALTHY WATERS COALITION URGES ACTION ON NUTRIENT RUN-OFF

Since passage of the Clean Water Act (CWA) in 1972, America's clean water resources have seen dramatic improvement in overall water quality, however over the past two decades these gains have been threatened by nutrient contamination that the CWA was not originally designed to address. Over this next decade, the critical challenge facing efforts to restore and maintain clean and safe water is whether excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus (nutrients) in our waters can be reduced.

According to State water quality reports, 80,000 miles of rivers and streams, 2.5 million acres of lakes, reservoirs and ponds, 78% of the assessed continental U.S. coastal areas and more than 30% of estuaries are impaired due to excessive levels of nitrogen and phosphorus. In all, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency attributes excess nutrients as the direct or indirect cause of impairments in over 50% of impaired river and stream miles; over 50% of impaired lake acres; and nearly 60% of impaired bay and estuarine square miles. For the majority of these waters, nutrient run-off from agricultural lands is the dominant source of the nutrient impairments according to studies by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). In fact, recent USGS data indicate that despite efforts to reduce nitrate levels in the Mississippi River Basin, concentrations at eight major USGS study sites did not consistently decline from 1980-2008.

America's clean water resources and agricultural practices are inextricably linked. In fact, over the next five years agricultural policies and practices will have the single greatest impact on our lakes, rivers and estuaries. Congress has an opportunity in this next Farm Bill to establish policies to more effectively reduce agricultural nutrient run-off and improve water quality throughout the United States.

Best management practices designed to reduce agricultural nutrient run-off support multiple agricultural, water quality and ecological goals, many of which are already established policy goals for agricultural investments under the Farm Bill. For example, many practices that control for nitrogen and phosphorus loss also control for erosion and sediment loss thereby avoiding unnecessary loss of fertile farmland and supporting the Highly Erodible Lands policy Congress established in the 1985 Farm Bill. In addition, many effective nutrient-control practices, such as wetlands and other riparian restoration activities, also have significant habitat and wildlife preservation benefits, thereby supporting goals of the Wetlands policy established by the 1985 Farm Bill and the Wetlands Reserve Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Thus, many effective strategies for controlling nutrients not only improve water quality, but also can contribute to important benefits related to food security, biodiversity, and habitat and wildlife preservation. The following recommendations are designed to better leverage our agricultural resources to achieve real reductions of nutrient run-off.

1. Conservation programs: The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetlands Reserve Program provide funding and direct support for a variety of conservation activities on agricultural lands. While water quality improvement is a goal of these programs, program investments can more effectively achieve reductions of nutrient run-off by prioritizing nutrient control as the primary program goal in watersheds impaired by nutrients and tying these investments to performance standards. By doing so, Congress would ensure that if

conservation dollars are invested in impaired watersheds, those dollars will primarily be used to reduce nutrient run-off.

2. Commodity and Crop Insurance Programs: Ensure that federal payments to agricultural producers for commodity support and crop insurance link to the conservation goal of avoiding adverse water quality impacts from agricultural operations. Options to consider include expanding conservation compliance requirements to include nutrient reduction activities, particularly in watersheds impaired by nutrients, or providing increased payments, reduced premiums and/or other benefits to producers in such watersheds who opt to adopt an adaptive management approach to maximizing nutrient use efficiency and/or other effective and documentable practices and approaches to reduce losses. In addition Congress should examine commodity and crop insurance programs to identify where these programs may create disincentives for effective nutrient management and remove those disincentives.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation: Successful nutrient control programs demonstrate that effective implementation of nutrient management practices by agricultural operations is critically dependent upon monitoring systems which generate timely, precise and accurate data about the environmental pathways of agriculturally applied nutrients. Congress should provide monitoring and evaluation tools and incentives to help farmers gather and evaluate real-time data on the most efficient nutrient management practices for site-specific soil and crop conditions. Congress should also strengthen mechanisms for improved collaboration among on-going state and federal water quality monitoring programs to gather water quality data to determine the effectiveness of on-farm site-specific nutrient management practices and to identify opportunities for more effective practices.

These recommendations are supported by a diverse cross-section of municipal water and wastewater organizations, state clean water officials, conservation and sustainable agricultural organizations who call on Congress to strengthen the links between water quality and agricultural practices, including:

AMERICAN WATER WORKS ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION OF CLEAN WATER ADMINISTRATORS
ASSOCIATION OF METROPOLITAN WATER AGENCIES
ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC WORKS AGENCIES
CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY CENTER
ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP
IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CLEAN WATER AGENCIES
WATER ENVIRONMENT FEDERATION