

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 10, 2013

Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Ranking Member Thad Cochran
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

House Committee on Agriculture
Chairman Frank Lucas
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

House Committee on Agriculture
Ranking Member Collin Peterson
1305 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Cochran, Chairman Lucas, and Ranking Member Peterson:

As members of the House from the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes regions of the country, we write to thank you for your ongoing support of our watersheds and to urge you to include the Senate Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) language in the final Farm Bill.

As you know, both the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes have benefited greatly from USDA's conservation programs. Farmers in our States are contributing solutions to improve the health of these waters by undertaking conservation practices to keep nutrients out of rivers and streams. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Conservation Effects Assessment Project study showed that conservation practices in the Bay Watershed have reduced edge-of-field losses of sediment by 55 percent, nitrogen in surface runoff by 42 percent, nitrogen in subsurface flow by 31 percent, and phosphorus by 40 percent. A 2011 NRCS study 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. It also found 36 and 37 percent declines, respectively, in phosphorus and nitrogen loading.

The new, bipartisan RCPP provides targeted conservation funding for natural resource issues, leverages private resources, and gives particular attention to areas of critical need. It consolidates the Chesapeake Bay Program, the Great Lakes Basin Program for Soil, Erosion, and Sediment Control, the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative. While it streamlines program management, this efficiency should not come at a cost to on-the-ground conservation in areas with particularly difficult resource concerns.

By adopting the Senate version of this program, we can avoid this result. The Senate includes a greater reserve of funds and acreage from covered programs for the RCPP, reserving 8 percent instead of the 6 percent reserved by the House. While both chambers allocate funds to national and state competitions, they differ in the allocation they direct to Critical Conservation Areas – the Senate would direct 35% of funding to critical areas as compared to 25% in the House bill.

The Senate version also allows the Secretary to designate up to 6 Critical Conservation Areas while the House version allows for up to 8. In short, the Senate version provides a higher allocation to a more targeted number of critical areas.

The Chesapeake Bay and the Great Lakes are national treasures and economic engines in their respective regions, but they face significant water quality concerns. We believe that the Senate RCPP language detailed above would provide the best opportunity to support the farmers in our States and achieve important conservation gains, and urge you to include it in the final conference agreement.

Sincerely,


CHRIS VAN HOLLEN


ROB WITTMAN


ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT


ANDY HARRIS


LOUISE SLAUGHTER

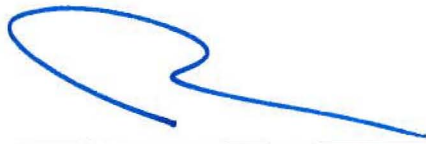

JOHN DINGELL


JOHN CARNEY


MATT CARTWRIGHT


GERRY CONNOLLY

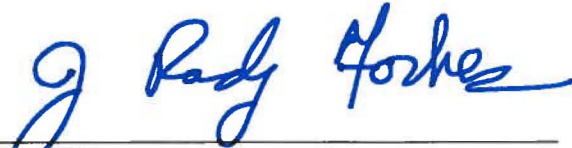

ELIJAH CUMMINGS



JOHN DELANEY



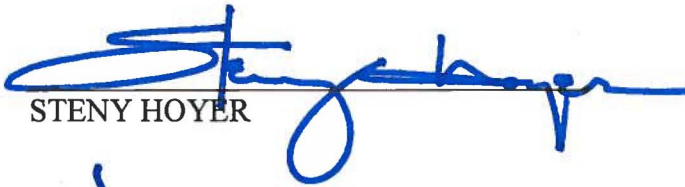
DONNA EDWARDS



J. RANDY FORBES



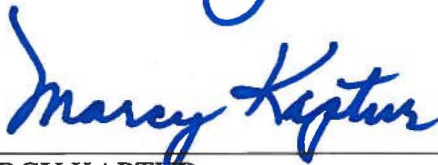
BRIAN HIGGINS



STENY HOYER



DAVE JOYCE



MARCY KAPTUR



SANDER LEVIN



JIM MORAN



ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON



BILL OWENS



SCOTT RIGELL



C.A. DUTCH RUPPERSBERGER



JOHN SARBANES