



Healthy Land
Clean Water
For Life

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The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Standing Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Standing Committee of
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member,

The Soil and Water Conservation Society, the professional society for those who practice and advance the science and art of our country's natural resource conservation, thanks you for your leadership as the U.S. navigates the COVID-19 pandemic. During this difficult time, we urge you to consider the crucial role that agricultural conservation plays as a source of American jobs and living infrastructure.

Conservation Technical Assistance

In April the U.S. unemployment rate reached 14.7%, a level not seen since the Great Depression. As many Americans search for the security of a job, there are hundreds of open and unfilled positions at the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). As Chief Matt Lohr has noted, "[w]e need about another 1,200 employees across the board to actually maintain peak performance across the country..." (Agri-Pulse's "Open Mic" podcast on April 19). In FY2020, the USDA was directed to fill a 1,700 open positions at the NRCS, to date only 331 employees have been hired.

Secretary Perdue has received limited direct-hire authority from the Office of Personal Management, yet the staffing shortfall continues. **The Soil and Water Conservation Society calls for *expanded* direct-hire flexibility for the USDA to quickly fill these crucial positions.**

Within the NRCS, 98% of staff work outside of Washington, D.C. These conservation professionals work hand-in-hand with farmers, ranchers and landowners to create resilient working lands. These relationships are critically important, particularly in rural America, and the USDA now has the opportunity to make a long-term invest in this human capital by hiring its workforce.

Conservation is a source of employment across the nation. Conservation practices like saturated buffers (NRCS Practice Standard 604) require engineers, construction crews and technicians to plan, construct and manage these projects. Just as thousands were hired and trained to restore farmland through the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, conservation, again is ready to put Americans to work. And the Soil and Water Conservation Society, as the professional society for those who practices and advance the science and art of natural resource conservation, is ready to provide training and technical resources in this new virtual era.

Conservation is infrastructure

Conservation practices protect our land and water resources and, in turn, the stewards who care for the land by ensuring its continued ability to produce the food, fiber and fuel that is critical for our country's national security. Conservation practices and the infrastructure they provide are a proactive and low-cost method to address climate extremes, filter water supplies and buffer market fluctuations. Wetlands, for example, provide flood water storage, decrease peak flows and can recharge groundwater supplies. **The Soil and Water Conservation Society calls for future infrastructure packages to include construction and maintenance funds for the Watershed Operations and Flood Prevention and Watershed Rehabilitation programs, which provides on-the-ground infrastructure that protects downstream communities.**

In order to support farmers during this difficult time we urge lawmakers to fully-fund the programs that allow producers to make long-term investments in their land. Farm Bill conservation programs like the Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMAP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are consistently underfunded and on average only able to assist half of its applicants. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), in particular, allows for living infrastructure on the landscape and provides a steady and reliable source of income for producers. The EPA Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program provides an important avenue of funding to states to leverage local resources to protect land and water resources. Through conservation and watershed planning processed in action, these programs provide for shovel ready projects, but are critically underfunded.

As Congress considers additional funding packages to boost the economy, these conservation programs provide a fully-formed structure to add critical infrastructure to the landscape and financially support producers who are responsibly managing their land for societal benefits. **The Soil and Water Conservation Society calls for these programs to be fully funded and valued for the crucial infrastructure they provide.**

Sincerely,
The Soil and Water Conservation Society