

GOVERNOR LAWRENCE J. HOGAN, JR. · CHAIRMAN FRANK WAGNER ·
GOVERNOR JOHN CARNEY · MAYOR MURIEL BOWSER ·
GOVERNOR ANDREW M. CUOMO · GOVERNOR THOMAS W. WOLF ·
GOVERNOR RALPH S. NORTHAM · GOVERNOR JAMES C. JUSTICE II

August 7, 2018

[to be individually addressed to each member
of the House-Senate Conference Committee
on the 2018 Farm Bill]

Dear [as above]:

Due in large part to the contribution – in both dollars and policy – contained in the Conservation Title of the Federal Farm Bill, real progress is being seen in the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Farmers, working with conservation professionals, have implemented voluntarily practices such as cover crops, no-till crop management and streamside buffers at an unprecedented scale. The result is not just improving water quality trends in the mainstem of the Bay, but equally important, cleaner water in upstream freshwater tributaries.

The federal, state and local partnership to restore the Bay watershed is working. And continued investment in agricultural conservation – as provided for in the Farm Bill - will ensure we have productive, financially robust and sustainable farms, for the benefit of both our economic and environmental health.

As we approach the final phase of achieving our nutrient reduction goals by 2025, the provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill will be even more important. Farmland covers 30 percent of our watershed and the Farm Bill is the single most important piece of legislation delivering financial and technical assistance for conservation on private lands, while also promoting farm viability. By setting policy for the next five years, the 2018 Farm Bill will greatly influence the ability of our farmers to help us meet our shared goals.

Each version of the Conservation Title passed by the House and Senate contains separate provisions that would greatly assist our efforts.

These provisions fall under three main categories:

1. ***Funding: The dollars available for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) should be maximized. Contract length should also be maximized, especially for priority practices.***
 - The House version ramps up EQIP to \$3B annually by 2023 and would allow “stewardship contracts” to last from 5-10 years.

- The Senate version of RCPP would increase funding to \$200M/year plus 7% of EQIP, CSP and ACEP, and would merge three funding pools into two, thus increasing the potential share for the Chesapeake Bay Critical Conservation Area.
 - The House version would authorize \$500M annually for ACEP.
2. ***Flexibility: The ability of federal programs to address state-specific needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach should be enhanced. This can be achieved through grant agreements with state and local partners and specific language that authorizes set-asides and/or higher payment rates for local priority practices. In particular, RCPP could be improved through direct contracts with partners and a requirement that projects align with “critical conservation conditions.”***
- Both the House and Senate versions contain special EQIP provisions for state-prioritized practices.
 - The Senate version of RCPP would require that contracts address “critical conservation conditions.”
 - Both the House and Senate version of ACEP would allow the adjustment of evaluation and ranking criteria based on geographic differences.
3. ***Capacity: Riparian Forest Buffers (RFBs) are a critical component of our clean water plans and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the leading driver in getting RFBs on the ground. The national acreage cap for CRP should be maximized to facilitate additional enrollment and CREP should allow for the pooling of applications by and assignment of payments to third parties to streamline buffer implementation and maintenance. Across all programs, especially RCPP, delivery could be enhanced through partnerships with state, local, and private technical assistance providers.***
- The House version of CRP would increase the national cap to 29M acres.
 - The Senate version would require at least 20% of CRP acres to be enrolled in CREP.
 - The Senate version would allow for pooling of CREP applications and maintenance payments and assignment of payments to a third party assisting with implementation or maintenance, and would require technical assistance payments for RFBs to go directly to a state forestry agency.
 - The Senate version of RCPP would allow up to 30% of funding to be used for grant agreements with eligible partners, and would authorize the advancement of technical assistance payments to eligible partners.

As the Conference Committee weighs the differences among the House and Senate versions, and the final bill comes to the floor, we urge you to support language, as highlighted above, that promotes the funding, flexibility and capacity necessary to accelerate water quality improvements in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Additionally, annual appropriations should provide increased support for the critical Conservation Technical Assistance that USDA’s

Natural Resources Conservation Service as well as the support other public, private and not-for-profit technical service providers offer to our farmers.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have questions or require additional information, please reach out to our Secretaries of Agriculture or the Chesapeake Bay Commission for assistance.

Sincerely,

Lawrence J. Hogan Jr.
Governor, State of Maryland (EC Chair)

Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor, State of New York

Frank Wagner
Chairman, Chesapeake Bay Commission

Thomas W. Wolf
Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

John Carney
Governor, State of Delaware

Ralph S. Northam
Governor, Commonwealth of Virginia

Muriel Bowser
Mayor, District of Columbia

James C. Justice II
Governor, State of West Virginia

cc: Members of the Chesapeake Bay Congressional Delegation