



The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
111 Market Place, Suite 840  
Baltimore, MD 21202

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*Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.*

Dear Farm Bill Conferees:

We are public health professionals at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF), an interdisciplinary academic center based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering. CLF engages in research, policy analysis, and education activities guided by an ecologic perspective that diet, food production, the environment, and public health are interwoven elements of a complex system. We recognize the important role that federal research, conservation, and farmer support programs play in advancing a healthy, sustainable agricultural system. We are writing to communicate our interest in these programs as the 2018 Farm Bill conference negotiations proceed and to share our perspective in order to help inform your efforts to reach agreement on a five-year, comprehensive, bipartisan, and reform-oriented farm bill.

The Farm Bill conference presents an important opportunity to reach agreement on a farm bill that can pass both the House and the Senate, and that broadens, diversifies and unites farm bill-oriented constituencies in a manner that advances the public's health and interests. We believe this includes adopting the best available farm program reform components, protecting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), maintaining and improving the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and enhancing policies and investments that advance local food systems, beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, organic farming, and agricultural research.

In particular, we encourage you to consider the following in deciding how to best support a healthy, sustainable food system:

- **Take important steps toward farm safety net reform.**

Regarding Title I payment limits and actively engaged in farming rules, the final bill should follow the Senate approach and adopt its commonsense reform, including:

- The payment limit and actively engaged in farming reforms contained in Title I of the Senate bill and the rejection of the House bill's new corporate, extended family, and marketing loan gain loopholes;
- The Senate bill's improvements to the Sodsaver grasslands protection provision, and expanding its reach;
- The Senate bill's language to make the Non-insured Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) work better for small and diversified operations as well as beginning and socially disadvantaged producers.

- **Enhance natural resources and improve agricultural productivity and environmental quality.**

We support the Senate’s approach to retaining and improving both the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), though we urge you to reverse the cuts made to both programs and eliminate the current livestock “set aside” that is presently part of EQIP.

These farm bill conservation programs help farmers adopt, expand, and continue conservation practices, often benefiting their farms’ short and long-term productivity and providing “ecosystem services” for all. These ecosystem services include conservation of water, improved air and soil quality, provision of food and habitat for pollinators, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, and biodiversity conservation. These services are vital to ecosystem and public health, and they represent real economic value. For more information on these ecosystem and public health services, please see our [“Working Lands Conservation Programs are Essential to Public Health”](#) briefing document.

While many farmers value the benefits of good stewardship of their lands, some conservation practices provide only minimal economic benefits to individual farmers. In addition, market pressures can induce adoption of production practices that may be detrimental to the conservation of land and resources. As a result, a farmer who wants to implement farming practices that employ greater conservation measures may face prohibitive costs. Farm bill conservation programs not only help farmers learn about opportunities and strategies to adopt better conservation practices, but they also help farmers defray costs associated with such practices.

By preserving and expanding farm bill conservation programs—such as CSP and EQIP—the farm bill can help address both ecosystem and public health concerns associated with agriculture and provide economic benefits to farmers.

Components of a farm bill supporting a healthy, sustainable food system include:

- Increased total funding for the Conservation Title in order to pay for funding increases for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP);
- The Senate bill’s continuation of and policy improvements to CSP, including improvements related to coordination, ranking, thresholds, soil health and cover crops, organic agriculture, payments, conservation planning, and beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers;
- The House provision authorizing USDA to measure, evaluate, and report on conservation program outcomes;
- Exempting partial-field, continuous enrollments from rental rate and cost-share reductions within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP);
- The House grasslands initiative provisions and the Senate provisions to reserve CRP acreage for continuous enrollments, establish a water quality initiative (CLEAR), make incentive payments counter cyclical, and authorize CRP easements for water quality and wildlife continuous enrollments;
- The Senate bill’s changes to the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), including funding and policy changes to improve outreach, expand eligibility, and strengthen the program;
- The Senate bill’s changes to EQIP related to beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, organic agriculture, coordination, wildlife habitat, and soil health;

- Modified language related to EQIP payments to irrigation districts that places a strict cap on payments to non-producers, exclude farmers and ranchers from any waiver of AGI and payment limits, and require non-consumptive use of net water savings;
- The Senate bill's ACEP and RCPP provisions, excluding the creation of a new grant program within RCPP, and including a requirement that any unused RCPP funds be returned to covered programs;
- The Senate bill's mandatory funding levels for the Rural Energy for America Program; and
- The Senate bill's crop insurance provisions for good farming practices, conservation data, and conservation-based premium discounts.

• **Invest in the future of American agriculture.**

Policies that enable beginning and socially disadvantaged producers to access land, credit, and crop insurance, to launch and strengthen new farm businesses, and to receive appropriate training and mentoring will ensure the success of the next generation of farmers, as well as our country's future food security.

Components of a healthy, sustainable food system include:

- The Senate bill's Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) Program, which consolidates and streamlines the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program, and add to the \$50 million in permanent mandatory spending per year provided in the Senate bill;
- The House bill's position (no increase) on the cap for direct operating loans, and the Senate bill's position on the cap for direct farm ownership loans, and include a provision that indexes the latter cap to farmland inflation rates;
- The Senate bill's provision requiring USDA to report annual lending trends for Farm Service Agency (FSA) loans, including progress in meeting target participation rates for both beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers within both guaranteed and direct loans;
- The House bill's provision modifying the total loan cap for microloans to allow farmers to secure both operating and ownership microloans;
- The Senate bill's EQIP and CSP provisions related to set-asides and advance payments for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers;
- The House bill's expansion of beginning farmer crop insurance incentives for whole-farm revenue insurance, the Senate bill's reporting requirement on whether crop insurance is effectively serving underserved producers, and the Senate bill's position retaining the Risk Management Education Program;
- The Senate bill's provisions addressing heirs' property issues for farmers of color, including a new data initiative on farmland, and the Senate Farm Credit provision related to loans to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

• **Create jobs and spur economic growth through food, agricultural, and rural development.**

Local and regional agriculture is a major driver in the farm economy. It is crucial that the next farm bill fosters policies that create economic opportunities for farmers by opening new local and regional markets, improving processing and distribution infrastructure to better connect farmers with consumers and markets, and expand access to healthy food for consumers, including underserved communities. Public investments in training, technical assistance, and microcredit for rural entrepreneurs will help enable small business development and revitalize rural America.

The farm bill is a valuable resource for communities to develop and strengthen the infrastructure that drives their local and regional agricultural economy. In the United States, in 2016, 15.6 million people were food insecure, meaning that at some point during the year, they were unable to meet their food needs due to financial or other access barriers. The farm bill helps to mitigate food insecurity by investing in local and regional agricultural producers, developing community, school and commercial farms and gardens, and supporting healthier food purchases.

CLF serves as a hub for a growing network of local, regional and state food policy councils and similar groups seeking to improve the food system through public policy. The current farm bill provides funding that enables these food policy groups to develop programs that reduce the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables for households with low incomes and provides an additional revenue source for small to mid-sized farmers. For instance, in 2017, the Healthy Adams County Food Policy Council in Pennsylvania used funding from the USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program to implement a Veggie Bucks program that provided SNAP participants a 50 percent discount at a local grocery store on the five most expensive fresh fruits and vegetables in their grocery carts. This program helped families to increase their consumption of fruits and vegetable and supported a local grocery store.

In Montana, the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition received funding from the USDA to support beginning farmers and ranchers and to grow direct to consumer markets for local and regional farmers. With this funding, the coalition expanded educational opportunities and resources for beginning farmers, teaching over 700 farmers thru webinars, on-farm field days and Train the Trainer courses. It developed a resource website to help new and beginning farmers access land. It also implemented a program to double the value of SNAP benefits used on fresh fruits and vegetable, which led to an 11% increase in local farm sales in just 2 years.

The West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition recently received funding from the USDA to overcome food access issues in rural communities particularly by engaging youth. The program will double the value of SNAP benefits spent on fresh fruits and vegetable by youth because youth will consume fresh fruits and vegetables given the autonomy to select the produce and parents are more likely to shop at farmers markets if it is an activity with and for their children.

These investments help to reduce food insecurity by supporting healthier food purchases and help to revitalize rural America by investing in local and regional agriculture.

Components of a healthy, sustainable food system include:

- The Senate bill's provision creating a new Local Agriculture Market Program with at least \$60 million in permanent mandatory spending per year;
- The Senate bill's funding level for the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program;
- \$5 million per year in mandatory funding for the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program;
- The House bill's funding levels for the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives Program;

- The Senate bill's provision creating a Harvesting Health Produce Prescription Pilot Program to demonstrate and evaluate the impact of produce prescription programs;
- The House bill's funding level of \$9 million per year for the Community Food Projects program;
- The Senate bill's language aiming to improve access to crop insurance for diversified operations and farmers producing food for local markets;
- The Senate bill's language directing USDA to allow non-profits that are running multiple farmers markets to utilize a single electronic benefit technology machine for all markets;
- The Senate bill's language directing USDA to appoint a Senate-confirmed Under Secretary for Rural Development.

• **Drive innovation for tomorrow's farmers and food entrepreneurs.**

A national research agenda that funds and strengthens successful programs for sustainable agriculture and organic farming systems, addresses new research and data collection needs, and improves coordination on essential public plant breeding efforts will foster the innovations that farmers and food businesses need to be successful.

A robust research agenda includes:

- The Senate bill's funding level for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative;
- The House bill's language establishing new priorities related to farm transition, beginning farmers and ranchers, and soil health for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative;
- The Senate bill's improvements to staffing for the Office of the Chief Scientist, and also the creation of a Strategic Investment Fund to provide the Office with a modest, but immediate research budget;
- The Senate bill's provision eliminating the universal match requirement for competitive research grant programs;
- The Senate bill's language requiring the National Genetics Resource Advisory Board to establish and report on targets for public cultivar development, and gaps and priorities for future plant breeding research; and the Senate provision to conduct a national strategic germplasm collection assessment;
- The House bill's funding authorization level for the Food Safety Outreach Program.

The final version of the next farm bill must protect CSP, include real and defensible limitations and eligibility rules for commodity title subsidies, and substantially increase mandatory funding for programs that advance local food systems, beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and organic agricultural research.

In addition to the issues addressed above, we encourage you to reject non-germane riders in the final bill, including those dealing with the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, Pesticide Registration Improvement Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, and Commerce Clause.

We thank you for considering our comments and welcome the opportunity serve as a resource to the farm bill conference committee. We would be happy to work with you to craft a final farm bill that expands

opportunities for family farmers to produce good food, sustain the environment, and contribute to vibrant communities.

Sincerely,

**Martin Bloem, MD, PhD**

Professor, Department of Environmental Health & Engineering  
Director, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Johns Hopkins University

**Shawn McKenzie**

Research Associate, Department of Environmental Health & Engineering  
Deputy Director, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Johns Hopkins University

**Robert Martin**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Environmental Health & Engineering  
Program Director, Food System Policy  
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Johns Hopkins University

**Carolyn Hricko, MPH**

Research Program Manager, Food System Policy  
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Department of Environmental Health & Engineering  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Johns Hopkins University

**Anne Palmer, MAIA**

Senior Research Associate, Department of Health Behavior & Society  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Program Director, Food Communities and Public Health  
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Johns Hopkins University

**Karen Bassarab, MSCRP**

Senior Research Program Manager, Food Communities and Public Health  
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future  
Department of Environmental Health & Engineering  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health  
Johns Hopkins University