



August 3, 2018

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin C. Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, Chairman Roberts, and Ranking Member Stabenow,

On behalf of the nation's cities and regional councils, we applaud your hard work in drafting the House's *Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018* and the Senate's *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018* – each chamber's version of the 2018 Farm Bill reauthorization. We also appreciate your dedication to passing the final Farm Bill in a timely manner, working with your respective chambers and with one another to meet the September 30 deadline. This wide-ranging and critical legislation establishes federal farm, food, and rural policy that will have a tremendous impact on both rural and urban communities, farming livelihoods, and food economies, which in turn will affect the environment, local and regional economic growth, and public health.

Today, our rural residents are facing many obstacles, including increasing health disparities, the opioid epidemic, a growing digital divide, an agriculture recession, the adverse effects of extreme weather events, and a nationwide shift of focus away from the manufacturing and coal mining jobs they once relied on. The Farm Bill reauthorization is crucial now more than ever to ensure our rural communities have the resources and investments necessary to overcome these challenges, while bridging the urban-rural divide.

As you work to resolve the differences between your respective versions of the Farm Bill in conference, we encourage you to include the following local and regional priorities to support a robust, comprehensive Farm Bill:

Rural Development Title

- Reinststate mandatory funding for programs within the Rural Development Title and maintain the title's current funding levels.
- Reestablish the Undersecretary of Rural Development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to oversee the \$216 billion USDA Rural Development portfolio.

- Give the USDA Secretary the authority to prioritize projects that help rural communities meet the challenges of the opioid crisis.
- Maintain full, annual funding for the Rural Water, Waste Disposal, and Wastewater Facility Grants program. Increase the maximum amount allowable for revolving fund awards for financing water and wastewater projects to \$200,000. Support the reauthorization of the Rural Water and Wastewater Circuit Rider Program at \$25 million per year through 2023.
- Reauthorize all broadband deployment and infrastructure-related programs to at least current funding levels. Increase speed requirements for eligible broadband services and make “middle mile” broadband infrastructure eligible for subsidies. Provide localities that are the recipient of a USDA Rural Development grant, loan, or loan guarantee the flexibility to use up to 10 percent of the grant towards broadband facilities, services, and rural infrastructure. Support the creation of the Hard-To-Reach Broadband Grant to help deploy high-speed internet to unserved communities with low population density. Increase the population limit for funding eligibility under USDA’s rural broadband guaranteed loans program from 20,000 to 50,000.
- Create the Interagency Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development to help leverage federal resources aimed at rural communities.
- Expand the language of the Strategic Economic and Community Development Program to cover all programs under USDA Rural Development, and require the Secretary provide technical assistance to communities in developing strategic community investment plans.

Nutrition Title

- Maintain current funding levels for programs within the Nutrition Title.
- Reinforce current Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility and work requirements and funding structure, avoiding additional financial strain on both recipients and local governments.
- Provide additional funding to the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program, and further integrate E&T with existing workforce programs at the federal, state, regional, and local levels, including workforce development boards.
- Reauthorize healthy food nutrition programs, such as the Seniors Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, and the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives.

Conservation Title

- Maintain current funding levels for programs within the Conservation Title.
- Allow projects under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to extend beyond the current five-year limit if approved by the USDA. Allow organizations to receive funding for outreach and technical assistance, increase emphasis on conservation outcomes, and increase the funding allocation of projects selected at the state level to ensure local concerns are addressed. Expand the RCPP’s list of eligible activities to include resource-conserving crop rotations, protection of drinking water resources, soil health, and drought resilience.
- Include a requirement that at least 10 percent of all conservation program funding is used to promote water quality and quantity practices that protect drinking water.

Horticulture Title

- Support the creation and permanent baseline funding for a new USDA Local Agriculture Market Program, which includes streamlining the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program and the Value-Added Producers Grant Program into a single program, to strengthen communities with farm to table investments and increase access to healthy local food. Support

the inclusion of a new regional public-private partnership initiative within the program focused on leveraging outside investments and expertise to bolster regional food system planning and development.

- Adopt clear federal policies and regulations that allow states and local governments the flexibility to implement programs to protect public health and the environment and reject the House provision that would prevent states and local governments from implementing pesticides permit programs.

Miscellaneous

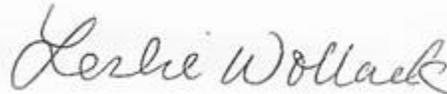
- Reject “Subtitle G – Protecting Interstate Commerce,” which was added as an amendment to the House version of the bill. The provision would preempt state and local ability to craft tailored regulations to meet the specific needs of their respective citizens and would threaten the sovereignty of state and local governments under the 10th Amendment.

We appreciate your continued leadership and support on ensuring the next Farm Bill will support the strength and stability of our communities. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact any of our staff: Carolyn Berndt (NLC) at berndt@nlc.org or 202-626-3101; Maci Morin (NARC) at maci.morin@narc.org or 202-618-5691.

Sincerely,



Clarence E. Anthony
CEO and Executive Director
National League of Cities



Leslie Wollack
Executive Director
National Association of Regional Councils

cc: Members of the House and Senate Farm Bill Conference Committee