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Clarence E. Anthony

March 14, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott,

On behalf of the nation's 19,000 cities, towns and villages, we applaud the efforts that are underway in the Senate and House to reauthorize the Farm Bill in a bipartisan and timely manner to meet the September 30 deadline. This wide-ranging and critical legislation establishes federal farm, food, environment and rural policy that will have a tremendous impact on both rural and urban communities, farming livelihoods and food economies, which in turn will greatly affect the environment, local and regional economic growth, and public health.

As Congress begins drafting the new Farm Bill, we ask for your continued support for programs and policies that are essential to the economic success and quality of life of both rural and urban communities through important titles such as the Rural Development Title, Nutrition Title, and the Conservation Title. These areas promote economic growth and stability by investing in our nation's rural infrastructure, incentivizing regional collaboration, ensuring the success of the next generation of food producers, protecting public health, ensuring access to healthy foods, and promoting workforce training and job creation.

We would like to specifically highlight some obstacles rural residents are facing today, including increasing health disparities, the opioid epidemic, a growing digital divide, the adverse effects of extreme weather events, and a need to fill infrastructure jobs to put the recent federal infrastructure investments to work. The Farm Bill reauthorization is crucial now more than ever to ensure both rural and urban communities have the resources and investments necessary to overcome these challenges.

As you negotiate the priorities to be included in each of your respective versions of the Farm Bill, we encourage you to include and support the following local priorities to support a robust, comprehensive Farm Bill to benefit communities of all sizes:

Title II: Conservation

NLC supports efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors of the economy, including agriculture. NLC urges Congress to encourage farmland conservation and regenerative agricultural practices, such as water conservation, organic fertilizers, crop rotation and the use of living covers by providing incentives to small, local farms in urban and rural areas. NLC supports at a minimum maintaining current funding levels for the following key programs:

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) provides grants for locally led conservation projects that address climate change, enhance water quality, and address other critical challenges on agricultural land.
- Conservation Reserve Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program incentivize farmers to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental quality.
- Emergency Conservation Program provides funding and technical assistance to restore farmland damaged by natural disasters and for emergency water conservation measures in severe droughts.
- Source Water Protection Program protects surface and ground water used as drinking water by rural residents.
- Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program provides funding and technical assistance for planning and implementation of projects that protect and restore watersheds.

Additional priorities:

- Allow projects under the RCPP to extend beyond the current five-year limit if approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. 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.

Title IV: Nutrition

NLC urges Congress to ensure that all people have access to food that is healthy, affordable and, where practicable, locally grown. NLC supports at a minimum maintaining current funding levels for the following key programs:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provides benefits to supplement the food budget of in-need families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program helping supplement the diets of low-income individuals by providing them emergency food assistance at no cost.
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program improves the health of low-income individuals at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods.
- Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, which provides low-income consumers with cash incentives that increase their purchasing power at farmers markets.
- Healthy Food Financing Initiative to meet the growing demand of healthy food access in underserved urban and rural communities.
- Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition program to provide low-income seniors with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey and herbs.
- Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grants to support planning and implementation of urban agriculture and innovative production projects.

Additional priorities:

- Continue to provide flexibility for SNAP, including the ability to streamline administration and application processes with other social service programs and waiving work requirements to meet the individual needs of residents and ensuring local flexibility to provide access to all residents, including returning citizens.
- 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.
- Streamline the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) operations to increase the ability of individuals to pre-register for benefits as soon as possible after a disaster strikes, support the streamlining of easy-to-administer SNAP waivers that would allow for automatic replacement of benefits for SNAP households, and expand funding to ensure application assistance for individuals to receive D-SNAP quickly.
- Increase access to SNAP for college students by removing SNAP work requirements for people attending post-secondary education at least half-time.

Title VI: Rural Development

Rural infrastructure funding to maintain and improve rural broadband, water, and energy networks is vital to ensure that rural economies can survive and thrive into the future. NLC supports reinstating mandatory funding for programs within the Rural Development Title and at minimum maintaining current funding levels for the following key programs:

Broadband

- ReConnect Program to provide flexible grants and loans for the development of residential and business broadband service in rural areas.
- Community Connect Program for grants to rural broadband providers to provide broadband service in economically-challenged communities.
- Distance Learning and Telemedicine grants for rural health care providers to ensure that hardware, broadband access, and technical skills limitations don't prevent rural residents from accessing needed healthcare.

Water and Environmental Programs

- Circuit Rider Program for technical assistance to rural water systems that are experiencing day-to-day operational, financial or managerial issues.
- Emergency Community Waster Assistance Grants help communities prepare for or recover from an emergency that threatens the availability of safe, reliable drinking water.
- Water and Waste Disposal grant, loan and loan guarantee programs support access to clean and reliable drinking water systems and to improve sanitary sewer and stormwater drainage systems. These programs also support communities with predevelopment planning and design for water and waste disposal projects.
- Rural Utilities Service Technical Assistance and Training Program to enhance the ability of small communities to invest in water infrastructure projects.
- Solid Waste Management Grants provide funding for organizations that provide technical assistance or training to improve the planning and management of solid waste sites.

Energy

- Rural Energy Pilot Program grant offers financial assistance to rural communities to develop and deploy renewable energy.
- Rural Energy for America Program offers grants and loan guarantees to improve energy efficiency and promote renewable energy.

Business

- Rural Innovation Stronger Economy grant program assists rural communities in creating and augmenting high-wage jobs, accelerating the formation of new businesses, supporting industry clusters and maximizing the use of local productive assets in eligible low-income rural areas.
- Community Facilities grant, loans and loan guarantee programs help rural communities develop or improve essential public services and facilities such as for health care, education, public safety and public services.

Additional priorities:

- Preserve the mandatory 20 percent set aside for all Distance Learning and Telemedicine fundings to go towards opioids and substance use programs.
- 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. Allow broadband-related funds to be used for digital literacy, broadband adoption, and skills training activities, which improve the economic viability of funded broadband infrastructure.
- Create additional flexibility under the Solid Waste Management Grant program by removing caps on funding.
- Set aside no less than 10 percent of funding under the Water and Waste Disposal Technical Assistance and Training Grant program for expanded technical assistance and capacity building. Provide additional matching flexibility under the Water and Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grant Program to include in-kind waivers in cases of extreme need.
- Provide additional program eligibility and flexibility under the Rural Decentralized Water Systems Grant Program by raising the income eligibility requirements from 60 percent of statewide median household income up to 100 percent in cases of extreme need.
- Set aside no less than 10 percent of funding under the Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program for expanded technical assistance and capacity building and create additional flexibility by removing caps on funding.

Title X: Horticulture

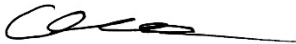
- Maintain current funding levels for the Local Agriculture Market Program, which includes the Farmers Market Promotion Program, Local Food Promotion Program, Regional Food System Partnerships Program, and Value-Added Producer Grants program. These programs strengthen communities with farm-to-table investments, bolster regional food system planning and development, and increase access to healthy local food.
- Adopt clear federal policies and regulations that allow states and local governments the flexibility to implement programs to protect public health and the environment.
- Reject any provisions that would prevent states and local governments from implementing pesticide permit programs.

Additional Considerations

Like many sectors across the country, labor shortages exist in the agricultural jobs that are supported through the Farm Bill. To ensure the strength of our nation's food and agricultural supply chain, ensuring a stable workforce is essential. As such, NLC supports provisions in line with the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which would reform the H-2A program, or the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Grant program operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Thank you for your continued leadership in ensuring the next Farm Bill will support and strength local communities. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact NLC staff: Carolyn Berndt, Legislative Director, Sustainability at berndt@nlc.org; Stephanie Martinez-Ruckman, Legislative Director, Human Development at martinez-ruckman@nlc.org; and Angelina Panettieri, Legislative Director, Information Technology and Communications at panettieri@nlc.org. NLC is prepared to uplift local leaders with invested interest in Farm Bill programs and policies and to support you throughout the reauthorization process.

Sincerely,



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

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
Members of the House Agriculture Committee