

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
BUDGET
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS
RULES AND ADMINISTRATION
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

May 2, 2013

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairman
Senate Agriculture Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Stabenow and Ranking Member Cochran,

I am writing in support of your efforts to put together a new Farm Bill, and to relay my priorities. I commend your efforts to once again undertake writing a Farm Bill. As you know, it is critical to our nation's farmers and producers to have the certainty a five-year reauthorization brings.

The Farm Bill provides support and a safety net for covered commodity growers. The 2012 Senate Farm Bill would have made significant reforms to farm programs, including the elimination of direct payments, while refocusing support on helping farmers manage risk. I support that approach and ask that you continue to support coverage at the individual farm level to ensure appropriate access to any new program by commodity growers.

As you know, the 2008 Farm Bill included specialty crops in a meaningful way for the first time. Although we face budget limitations, it is critical to our nation's specialty crop growers to continue these investments. The National Clean Plant Network, for example, provides safe, virus-free plant materials to orchards, vineyards, and other growers. Studies have shown that the cost of continued research to improve detection and eradication of viruses is significantly less than the potential millions of dollars it would cost to eradicate a virus in an established vineyard.

The Horticulture and Organics Title of the 2008 Farm Bill included other important programs to invest in research to make our growers more competitive in a global marketplace, and improve pest and disease resistance in these especially vulnerable crops. I believe we must continue mandatory funding for these and other programs, such as ensuring access to local foods, Specialty Crop Block Grants and organic agriculture research and development.

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As you know, providing a hand up to the most vulnerable in our country is one of my highest priorities. Far too many Americans are struggling to make ends meet as a result of the largest recession since the Great Depression. I strongly believe that the Farm Bill should not include cuts to nutrition programs that help these families put food on the table for their children. In particular, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is America's most important program for preventing hunger among extremely vulnerable families. It is an effective and efficient program that has provided vital assistance to tens of millions of American families in crisis.

During the current economic downturn, SNAP responded as designed to help the millions of additional families who need help. The Congressional Budget Office has said that increases in SNAP spending were temporary and estimates that SNAP spending will decrease automatically as the economy improves. Furthermore, we have already seen SNAP monthly participation numbers level off and begin to decrease as the economy has started to recover. Despite arguments to the contrary, the integrity of the SNAP program is strong, and SNAP error rates even reached an all-time low in fiscal year 2011. I encourage you to protect nutrition programs from cuts in the new Farm Bill.

Keeping our rural communities strong also means creating new economic opportunities. From growing feedstocks to bio-based refineries that will produce alternative fuels, the potential for rural America to contribute to a home-grown, clean energy economy is nearly boundless. That is why we must continue to provide mandatory funding for the energy programs included in the 2008 Farm Bill, such as the Rural Energy for America Program and the Biorefinery Assistance Program.

Farmers, ranchers, and rural communities are stewards of our working lands and lands that we seek to protect. I support your efforts to streamline conservation programs to make them work better for farmers and for administrators. Of particular interest are programs that help our farmers proactively and positively address endangered species issues, and programs that will help keep working lands in agriculture. We must ensure that efforts to address water quality and quantity are coordinated across regions and programs at all levels of government and with all stakeholders, which will allow farmers to achieve conservation priorities while meeting regulatory requirements.

Given the cyclical nature of farming and the constant threat of disaster – natural or economic – we must ensure that growers continue to have access to a strong safety net, including a robust crop insurance program. As you consider the crop insurance program, I request that you continue efforts to extend crop insurance coverage to all specialty crops. The 2012 Senate Farm Bill included provisions to require the Risk Management Agency to offer price elections for all organic crops by 2015, and to fund a pilot program for weather-based crop insurance focused on underserved crops and livestock. Further, I ask that you continue important disaster assistance programs for livestock and specialty crops.

I support the elimination of a wasteful and duplicative program, the US Department of Agriculture

(USDA) catfish inspection program. As you know, this program was authorized during the 2008 Farm Bill, despite an existing Food and Drug Administration seafood inspection program which also inspects catfish. The USDA's catfish inspection program has been identified by the Government Accountability Office – multiple times – as a duplicitous program, which if eliminated would save taxpayers millions of dollars each year without impacting food safety. I strongly urge you to eliminate the USDA catfish inspection program, as a bipartisan majority of the Senate called for last year.

Many of America's rural priorities depend on enacting a strong five-year Farm Bill reauthorization. From preserving a safety net for producers, to expanding economic opportunities in a clean energy economy, to utilizing programs like the Market Assistance Program to access new markets for our domestically produced products, to ensuring the success of beginning farmers and ranchers, a Farm Bill authorizes and provides funding for the programs necessary to keep rural America thriving.

I urge you to take a balanced approach to writing a new Farm Bill once again. I look forward to working with you to ensure passage of a five-year Farm Bill, in order to avoid short term extensions that will leave programs critical to rural America on the cutting room floor. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Patty Murray
United States Senator