



August 2, 2018

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture  
109 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Conaway  
Chairman  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture  
2430 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture  
731 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture  
2204 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

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

The National Association of Counties (NACo), which represents all of America's 3,069 county governments, commends your leadership in developing a substantive farm bill aimed at strengthening federal resources that allow counties to make critical investments in our nation's most underserved populations.

As the governing authority over the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the farm bill is critical for counties who are responsible for delivering and administering vital services to many of our nation's vulnerable families. From clean water and broadband infrastructure to nutrition assistance and energy conservation – the farm bill helps all of America's counties provide a strong foundation for a better tomorrow.

As a key intergovernmental partner, county officials understand the importance of bipartisanship and encourage members of the farm bill conference committee to work in partnership towards passing a comprehensive and long-term farm bill.

**The section below highlights specific provisions that underscore key county priorities, and we encourage their consideration as you work to resolve the differences between the two packages.**

**Rural Development Title**

- The Senate bill would reinstate the Undersecretary of Rural Development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to oversee the \$216 billion USDA Rural Development portfolio.
- The Senate bill would create the Interagency Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development to help leverage federal resources aimed at rural communities.
- The Senate bill would create the Rural Investment Stronger Economy (RISE) Grant Program, helping localities strengthen the local economy through job accelerator partnerships with the private sector and institutions of higher education.
- The House bill would give the USDA Secretary the authority to prioritize projects that help counties address rural health crises while the Senate bill would create a Rural Health Liaison to help promote programs across all agencies aimed at addressing rural health issues.
- The House bill would expand broadband loan program eligibility to include "middle mile" broadband infrastructure projects. Additionally, any localities that are the recipient of a USDA Rural Development grant,

loan, or loan guarantee would have the flexibility to use up to 10 percent of the funds towards broadband facilities, services, and rural infrastructure.

- The House bill would exclude incarcerated jail populations from USDA Rural Development population limits to help prevent rural counties from being penalized for supporting our nation's crowded prison system.
- Both bills would expand the language of the Strategic Economic and Community Development Program to cover all programs under USDA Rural Development and require the Secretary to provide technical assistance to communities in developing strategic community investment plans.

### **Nutrition Title**

- The Senate bill protects Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit levels and eligibility criteria put forth under the current 2014 Farm Bill.
- The Senate bill aims to reduce SNAP participation barriers for older adults and persons with disabilities by allowing states and counties to have certification periods of up to 36 months for elderly persons and persons with disabilities without earned income.
- The Senate bill enhances SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) operations by strengthening partnerships with local workforce boards, requiring state agencies to have an additional E&T component beyond job search, increasing SNAP E&T opportunities that count toward work requirements, allowing states to use effective employment and training components put forth by SNAP E&T pilot programs implemented under the 2014 Farm Bill and providing an additional \$185 million for SNAP E&T pilot programs to better serve individuals with barriers to employment.

### **Conservation Title**

- Both the House and Senate bills contain provisions to reauthorize the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) which helps counties implement conservation measures to protect natural resources and the environment.
- Both the House and Senate bills increase the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) which provides important financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers on natural resources conservation practices.
- Both the House and Senate bills extend the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program which helps federal, state and local governments protect and restore watersheds. NACo supports this program and expanded funding options.
- However, the House bill also contains a provision to eliminate the Conservative Stewardship Program (CSP), which is the largest conservation program in the nation. CSP helps many counties implement needed conservation programs at the local level.

### **Forestry Title**

- Both the House and Senate bills would establish new categorical exclusions (CE) to expedite the U.S. Forest Service's NEPA process for critical forest management activities. Under the House bill, CEs would be limited to 6,000 acres and available for timber salvage in response to a catastrophic event, like a natural disaster, to remove hazard trees that impact landscape or watershed health, to reduce the threat of wildfire and to decrease the potential for insect or disease infestation. The Senate bill would create a new CE of up to 3,000 acres for certain forest management activities for the purpose of protecting, restoring, or improving habitat for the greater sage-grouse or mule deer.
- The House bill would extend the authorization for Resource Advisory Committees (RAC) to fiscal year 2023 and reduce the minimum size of a RAC from 15 members to 9. The original authorizing language for RACs guarantees counties and other local governments a seat on a RAC. Additionally, the House bill would create a new program through which the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service will choose 10 RACs to propose projects on federal lands that accomplish forest management objectives or support community development and generate receipts to reinvest in forest health improvement activities.
- The House and Senate bills would create new grant programs to conduct hazardous fuel removal on landscapes that cross federal, state, county and private property. The Senate bill requires state foresters to consult with owners of state, county, tribal and private landowners to carry out cross-boundary hazardous fuels reduction projects under the grant program.

- The House bill would make county governments eligible to participate in forest management projects under Good Neighbor Authority (GNA). Counties support the expansion of GNA to improve forest health, while also ensuring county governments receive the traditional 25 percent share of timber harvest revenues from both GNA and stewardship contract projects based on the total merchantable value of the contract.

**Miscellaneous**

- The House bill contains a provision that would prevent states from implementing pesticides permit programs. While NACo supports using pesticides in accordance with the instructions on the label, and supports strong penalties for those who misuse pesticides, NACo also believes the federal government should adopt clear federal policies and regulations that allow states and local governments the flexibility to implement programs to protect public health and the environment.

Counties need a strong federal intergovernmental partner to help deliver these critical programs and services to both America's rural and urban communities alike. A bi-partisan bill would help counties make essential investments to strengthen both the local and national economy. Your support would not only ensure the vitality of our underserved counties, but also position rural America to compete in an ever-expanding global market.

Sincerely,



Matthew Chase  
Executive Director  
National Association of Counties

Cc: House and Senate Farm Bill Conference Committee Members