

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 27, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As USDA moves forward with implementation of changes and policy modifications made to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the 2018 Farm Bill, we write to ask you to make several administrative changes to maximize the program's ability to protect and enhance water quality. Congress authorized several key modifications to Continuous CRP (CCRP) in order to incentivize the adoption of practices to protect and enhance water quality. Practices including riparian buffers, filterstrips and bioreactors play a critical role in achieving water quality benefits on working lands. These targeted activities allow farmers to keep land in production while targeting partial field enrollments to enhance adjacent and downstream water quality.

We are concerned that USDA's implementation of the program fails to capture the full potential of this program, and we urge you to utilize existing authorities under the 2018 Farm Bill to achieve enhanced water quality benefits. Specifically, we urge you to adopt the following changes as you move forward with implementation of CCRP:

1) Increase the payment rate for Practice Incentive Payments to 50 percent.

Section 2207(a)(4) of the 2018 Farm Bill authorized practice incentive payments (PIPs) for continuous practices in an amount not to exceed 50 percent of the actual cost of establishing the practices. Ensuring the maximum payment for these practices is especially important to support the adoption of critical CCRP practices that benefit water quality. In moving forward with CCRP sign-up last year, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) set PIPs at a payment rate of only 5 percent. Especially as farmers continue to struggle against pandemic related market disruptions and challenging economic conditions, we urge USDA to increase the PIP rate to the maximum authorized level of 50%. This is essential in order to encourage adoption of critical water quality practices.

2) Actively promote the Clean Lakes Estuaries and Rivers Initiative within CCRP.

To ensure an increased focus within CCRP on water quality, the 2018 Farm Bill established the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR Initiative). Section 2201(c)(3) directed USDA to establish the CLEAR Initiative in order to prioritize practices that improve water quality by reducing sediment loadings, nutrient loadings and harmful algal blooms. While CLEAR enrollment has met the target of 40 percent of all CCRP acres, we are concerned about USDA's

lack of outreach and promotion of this important water quality program. The CLEAR30 pilot is distinct from the CLEAR Initiative itself, and USDA's focus seems to be on only the pilot, rather than both the pilot and the underlying initiative. We urge you to expand promotion of the CLEAR Initiative by including a definition of the initiative on the main CRP page and provide targeted outreach and education to eligible producers about the specific practices available through CLEAR and their associated water quality benefits.

3) Allow changes to the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to be adopted without amending existing agreements.

The farm bill included several important changes to the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in order to expand the program's water quality benefits. However, USDA's current interpretation of the amendment of existing agreements has prevented states and partners from being able to take advantage of these important water quality opportunities. This is especially problematic in preventing the utilization of payments for riparian buffer maintenance payments, which the farm bill authorized in order to support increased adoption of these buffers. Riparian buffers provide enormous water quality benefits. USDA should exclude the incorporation of these new CREP provisions from the farm bill when considering whether an existing agreement needs to be renegotiated. Therefore the incorporation of these provisions should *not* trigger other CCRP provisions and the CREP agreements should retain their grandfathered status of other relevant provisions and payment rates. We urge USDA to allow for a streamlined modification process in order for agreements to incorporate CREP provisions in the farm bill

Thank you for considering these recommendations as you continue to implement CRP under the 2018 Farm Bill. CCRP, including both CLEAR and CREP, provides enormous opportunities to support farmers and landowners in their efforts to protect and enhance water quality. We urge you to quickly adopt the above recommendations to ensure these conservation objectives can be achieved.

Sincerely,



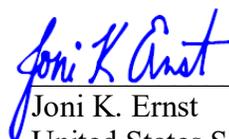
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator