



P.O. Box 216 Klamath Falls, Oregon 97601

April 13, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin:

The Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) Board of Directors earlier today took formal action, unanimously supporting the Regional Water Enhancement Program (RWEPP), an important component of the Administration's Farm Bill proposal. The RWEPP would invest mandatory funding of \$175 million to producers annually to address an important missing component in the federal government's conservation delivery system: large-scale, coordinated water conservation projects. On behalf of the Alliance Board, I ask that you support these provisions and include them in the Farm Bill package under development.

The Family Farm Alliance is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in 16 Western states. The Alliance is focused on one mission: To ensure the availability of reliable, affordable irrigation water supplies to Western farmers and ranchers.

The proposed RWEPP would focus on cooperative approaches to enhancing water quantity and/or quality on a regional scale. This new program - in tandem with multiple conservation tools (including farmland management practices, easement purchases, and ecosystem restoration assistance) - is intended to provide flexibility to cooperative conservation partners to achieve improved water quantity and quality goals.

I witnessed firsthand the types of challenges that RWEPP proponents are trying to address. The 2002 Farm Bill contained \$50 million of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to implement water conservation measures in the Klamath Basin of northern California and southern Oregon. These federal funds were matched by \$12.5 million of local money, put up by individual landowners. While the water conservation measures undertaken undoubtedly contributed to improved water use efficiency on individual farms, the EQIP program was intended for on-farm purposes. Irrigation districts and other, larger entities were not eligible to compete for these funds in the last Farm Bill.

RWEP, in part, is intended to address these types of challenges. There is a need to fund projects that provide water quality or water quantity benefits at a scale that benefits more than just one or two producers. RWEP would provide substantial grant money to irrigation districts or other water agencies, which would be placed in a lead position to work with multiple producers to achieve locally-generated water quality and quantity objectives. If consensus at a regional level can be reached on a common approach, there will be a better chance of positive community participation and ultimately, a better bang for the federal buck.

While we believe the RWEP initial proposal is solid from a conceptual standpoint, we all know the devil will be in the details. As this concept is further advanced, we will advocate for at least three key recommendations to further improve upon a great initial concept:

1. Administrative costs associated with any work performed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should be capped at a reasonable level;
2. The role of the Bureau of Reclamation and how that agency coordinates with NRCS in the implementation of this program in Western states must be well thought out, and should compliment the collaborative philosophy (between the Departments of Agriculture and Interior) embedded in the “Bridging the Headgates” initiative endorsed by the Administration;
3. Limitations should be established to ensure that these monies truly benefit agriculture, and not urban municipalities with relatively “token” amounts of agricultural lands or “hobby farms” within their boundaries; and
4. The program should provide assurances that the intent is not to reallocate water away from agriculture. It must also recognize the traditional deference of federal agencies to state water allocation systems.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input on this matter, which is very important to the family farmers and ranchers of our membership. Our comments and recommendations are intended to help the Farm Bill something that they will embrace.

If you have any questions about this letter, I encourage you or your staff to contact me at (541)-850-9007.

Sincerely,



Dan Keppen
Executive Director