

August 20, 2003

The Honorable Ann M. Veneman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
14th and Independence Ave, S.W, Suite 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Veneman:

Since the signing of the 2002 farm bill 16 months ago, we have been eagerly anticipating the implementation of two new and important initiatives included in the conservation title, Conservation Innovations Grants (CIG) and especially Partnerships and Cooperation (P&C). The authority granted by these initiatives provides an ideal opportunity for USDA to collaborate with state, local, and tribal governments and private organizations on specific natural resource stewardship projects across the country. We are confident that your decision to move forward with P&C and CIG will encourage a new wave of conservation success stories. These initiatives will help to organize landowners in particular watersheds or other clearly defined regions and energize them to create flexible and efficient solutions to complex resource conservation challenges. In addition, by forming collaborative relationships from the local to the federal level, those involved will be better positioned to leverage available funding, technical knowledge, and outreach capabilities to put conservation practices on the ground.

In your seminal report, Food and Agricultural Policy: Taking Stock for the New Century, you wisely stated that the greatest challenge in designing the next generation of conservation programs is to simultaneously address multiple environmental problems, support rural communities, make efficient use of Federal funds, and comply with international trade agreements. Furthermore, you state that the nation needs a carefully designed "portfolio" approach - employing coordinated land retirement, stewardship incentives, conservation compliance, and regulatory assistance, each where most appropriate - to enhance agricultural environmental protection most efficiently. What better way to achieve these worthwhile goals through a portfolio approach than to implement with all deliberate speed the provisions of the Partnerships and Cooperation section of the Conservation Title?

Understandably, in the early stages of the farm bill roll-out, priority was given to the development of general program rules. Now that the majority of rules have been finalized and the funding for conservation programs that would support P&C and CIG are near their peak, we urge you to move forward with these new policies. In particular, we urge you to have P&C on the ground and running through a Request for Application process early in FY 04.

We would like to arrange a meeting with you to discuss Partnerships and Cooperation and Conservation Innovations Grants and the promise they hold for the future of USDA's focus on collaborating with non-federal efforts to help private landowners conserve their natural resources. Thank you for your consideration of these issues and we look forward to a chance to visit with you in person about them.

Sincerely,

Will Baker
President
Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Ralph Grossi
President
American Farmland Trust

Kate Clancy
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