

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies * California Waterfowlers * Ducks Unlimited * Mississippi River Trust * Pheasants Forever * Quail Forever * The Nature Conservancy * Wildlife Mississippi

April 17, 2018

[Member]

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Via Email

Dear [Member],

The conservation organizations listed above are dedicated to the preservation, restoration and responsible management of wetlands in the United States, and the wildlife species such wetland habitats support. To further this shared goal, we have formed the Wetlands Conservation Policy Coalition.

We are writing to express our strong support and approval for the provisions pertaining to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program contained within Title II, the Conservation title of the House Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (House Farm Bill) released on April 12, 2018.

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated many of the conservation easement programs into what is now known as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), comprised of Agricultural Land Easements and Wetland Reserve Easements. The Wetlands Reserve Easements program (WRE, formerly known as the Wetland Reserve Program “WRP”) is one of the most successful voluntary conservation programs in existence. WRE not only restores previously converted wetlands, but also provides landowners and producers a financially viable alternative to farming marginal cropland with low profitability or negative profits while still retaining property ownership. WRE also reduces government expenditures on commodity and crop insurance program payments. WRE creates habitat for migratory birds and resident wildlife, which diversifies local, rural economies as sportsmen and other wildlife enthusiasts recreate on these lands. WRE also provides additional conservation benefits by improving water quality, recharging groundwater, increasing flood storage and reducing soil erosion.

In the 25 years since WRE implementation (1992-2017), almost 3 million acres have been restored and protected, and assistance has been provided to over 15,000 WRE landowners and producers. However, landowner and producer demand for WRE exceeds available funding, with less than 25% of eligible applications funded annually. WRE has a significant backlog of unfunded applications every year; in fact, the 2017 backlog comprises more than 1,000 applications representing approximately 180,000 acres and \$400 million.

WRE’s success is primarily due to the program being mutually compatible with increasing farming sustainability and targeted wetland conservation efforts by providing an option for landowners to be financially compensated to voluntarily take their least profitable lands out of production, and in turn allowing the protection and restoration of environmentally sensitive wetlands on these lands. This is a true working example of “farming the best and conserving the rest.”

The Wetlands Coalition specifically supports the following provisions in the House Farm Bill:

- Funding of \$500,000,000 per year, plus the additional 7% of program funding that previously supported the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.
- Exempting ACEP from the Adjusted Gross Income requirement, so that significant acreage of environmentally critical habitat will become eligible for the WRE program. Inclusion of these lands will now be judged on the significance of their wetland conservation benefits instead of a landowner's income level. Since the WRE program includes a competitive ranking process, the AGI exemption allows a more equitable opportunity to protect and restore the highest-ranking lands, thus ensuring the best return on investment for limited WRE funds.

Additionally, the Wetland Coalition was encouraged to see that significant provisions within ACEP-WRE in the 2014 Farm Bill were maintained in the House Farm Bill. Namely, no designation of mandatory percentage allocation for ALE vs WRE easements; the 24-month ownership eligibility requirement; providing a Wetland Reserve Enhancement Option; allowing spending of WRE funds on existing (WRP) easements; the county cap exemption for cropland in Land Capability Classes IV – VIII with subclass w (wettest soils); and eligibility for CRP acres already planted in trees.

The Coalition applauds the Committee's recognition of the success of the referenced changes made in the previous Farm Bill and their willingness to maintain those provisions, and enthusiastically endorses their willingness to robustly fund the program going forward and allowing any landowner with suitable habitat to qualify for the program.

WRE shapes how wetlands conservation is carried out on private lands throughout the country and does so in a cost-effective manner. The diverse organizations signing this letter believe the referenced continuations from the previous Farm Bill, as well as the new changes to wetland easements, are strongly needed.

We are committed to a five-year farm bill, and as it proceeds, we strongly urge that these provisions remain in the final Bill.

Thank you.