



Michigan Association of Conservation Districts

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Comments on the 2018 Farm Bill Conservation Title May 6, 2017

The Michigan Association of Conservation Districts consists of 76 local conservation districts. The mission of Michigan's conservation districts is to protect and enhance the state's soil and water resources. They carry out this mission by delivering state programs including MAEAP (Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program) and by working closely with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to implement Farm Bill conservation programs.

NRCS brings the programs and practice standards to districts and district staff provide the local technical assistance to help farmers operationalize, meaning, to implement, practices on the ground.

Going forward we have several concerns that we encourage Congress to address in the next Farm Bill.

- 1) Michigan Conservation Districts are concerned over the potential budget cuts being discussed as our nation goes forward. Farm Bill dollars are an investment in the nation's local infrastructure. They support putting conservation practices on working lands. Farmers match those dollars to implement the practices. Farm Bill dollars support local contractors, crop advisors, and retail agriculture as well as others in the local farming community. Remember the rule of 7. Each federal dollar invested locally is reinvested 7 times across the local economy.
- 2) Conservation technical assistance (TA) and conservation planning are critical to getting more conservation practices on working lands. Technical assistance and conservation planning are critical tools and the first steps in evaluating farmers' resource needs. The technical assistance provided is vital to ensuring that farmers know that they are putting the best conservation practices on their land to best meet the resource needs.
- 3) We encourage flexibility in implementing the farm bill programs across the country. Due to the variability in the soils and local climate in Michigan; we produce over 300 commodities from row crops to specialty crops. We believe in the **locally-led**, incentive based model for addressing natural resources concerns. One size does not fit all. *As an example, the MAEAP model tailors conservation practice recommendations to the local natural resource needs on each farm. Similarly, the Farm bill conservation program should be locally-led and resource-driven with sufficient flexibility to direct funding to local priorities and concerns.* EQIP has a MAEAP fund pool specifically for applicants who have a MAEAP Action Plan and only have a few things left to install before verification. In Oceana County, this fund pool helped with 19 new MAEAP verifications in the past 3 years.
- 4) We encourage farm bill education and outreach to beginning, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged farmers. Unlike farmers raised in a farming family, new and beginning farmers do not know what resources are available to help them successfully farm. We must reach out through education, outreach, and technical assistance, to these farmers who have never heard of a farm bill or technical assistance.



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- 5) We recommend that Congress simplify and minimize the paper work that all farmers (especially new farmers) need to complete to access cost share. Specifically, SAMS and DUNS are time consuming and frustrating procedures for farmers to complete. We really question if this hurdle is necessary. It is an impediment for farmers to access Farm Bill programs. There are a lot of landowners applying for Farm Bill programs as an entity who either don't have reliable internet, or don't have experience using computers. This presents an unfair hurdle for those entities to enroll in programs, and often takes days to weeks longer just for them to fill out applications due to the SAM registration process. They also receive a lot of spam emails about their registration, offering to help entities renew their registration for a hefty price. People who don't have experience with computers and email are highly susceptible to falling for this scam. The real SAM registration and re-activation is free.

We are aware that legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives to eliminate The SAMS and DUNS requirement for conservation programs. Please make it happen.

Conservation Districts are local entities. We know our local farming community and our on the ground successes are dependent upon a Farm Bill with cost share dollars for implementation on working lands that benefit the health of our nation's soil and water resources, upon which we all depend. Locally-led conservation districts are where soil and water conservation actually happens. We urge Congress to support the protection and enhancement of our nation's most vulnerable and valuable natural resources.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Submitted for May 6, 2017 Hearing

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