



California State Association of Counties
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Regional Council of Rural Counties
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June 6, 2012

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts:

On behalf of the 58 counties of California, we are writing to express our strong support for passage of the 2012 Farm Bill with responsible funding levels to help support California's economy, including the health of our families, communities and environment. Together CSAC and RCRC represent county government before the California Legislature, administrative agencies and the federal government. Our members reflect the wide diversity of California, and the Farm Bill is critical to our urban, suburban and rural communities alike. We applaud the bipartisan work of the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee in developing the *Agriculture Reform, Food and Jobs Act of 2012* (S. 3240), and we fully understand the tough choices made by the Committee to help ease the overall budget deficit.

California's \$38 billion a year agriculture industry leads the nation in producing 400 different commodities and supporting over 1 million jobs. However, our state is still struggling with the nation's third highest unemployment rate and roughly one in four children lives in poverty. In these tough economic times, a robust Farm Bill will help create jobs, support economic development, protect our natural resources, and assist California families with better health and nutrition.

Specifically, California's counties support an enhanced commitment to Rural Development and Conservation programs in the next Farm Bill, especially key infrastructure and business development programs that assist with community needs and the retention and creation of businesses and jobs. Programs such as: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQUIP), funding for broadband deployment, rural infrastructure, and rural business development grants have helped California communities grow and evolve.

We thank the Committee for including provisions in the Rural Development title to streamline the management of these vital programs and make them work better for county government. Technical assistance efforts and a simplified applications process will make the programs more accessible.

However, we are concerned that the Committee bill zeroed out all mandatory funding for Rural Development. The Farm Bill has included mandatory spending for Rural Development programs

since 1996, and the 2008 Farm Bill provided \$150 million. This funding helps bolster the discretionary funding, which has been cut nearly 25 percent in the last two years through the appropriations process. These cuts hamper the U.S. Department of Agriculture's ability to partner with local governments and businesses to create jobs in rural areas. We urge the Senate to restore mandatory funding to the Rural Development title.

Additionally, historically, California has not received adequate resources from Farm Bill programs due to the use of various definitions of "rural" which do not reflect the state's actual demographics, topography and rural makeup. California counties are quite large with diverse topography. Limiting the determination of rural to county boundaries only provides an inaccurate picture of our communities and undercounts the number of rural and poverty areas, which in turn deprives the state of much-needed resources.

We thank the committee for standardizing and simplifying the definition of rural for Rural Development programs. While we are still evaluating how the proposed change may affect funding for California, we believe the use of a standardized definition will help with eligibility consistency and clear up confusion among applicants. We do recommend that as part of the criteria, the Senate utilize census tract data in lieu of county boundary data to determine areas of poverty. Also, the Senate should consider allowing Rural Development programs to support a portion of essential services (hospital, clinics) in non-rural areas if they serve rural residents.

Finally, California's Counties also urge the Senate to retain and even strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California. The CalFresh program – with federal, state, and county participation – keeps hunger at bay for almost four million low-income families and elder residents. In fact, since the 2008 recession began, California has added nearly one million new SNAP cases; all based on need in an economy that still suffers from almost double-digit unemployment levels.

California's counties stand ready to work with you to make the 2012 Farm Bill a success. We support a strong commitment to the nation's agriculture, rural communities, struggling families, and our environment. Should you have any questions regarding our position or would like additional information, please call Melissa White, RCRC Federal Affairs Coordinator at (916)447-4806, or Karen Keene, CSAC Director of Federal Affairs at (916)327-7500 ext. 511.

Sincerely,



Karen A. Keene, CSAC
Director, Federal Affairs



Melissa M. White, RCRC
Federal Affairs Coordinator

cc: The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
The Honorable Barbara Boxer