



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

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April 1, 2011

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Congress and the Obama Administration are currently evaluating measures aimed at reducing federal spending for the present fiscal year and for 2012. The deficit reduction theme undoubtedly becomes more difficult in practice when actual program cuts and sacrifices are required.

As our nation slowly recovers from one of the worst economic crises in decades, policymakers are challenged to achieve spending reductions while not undermining American jobs and our economy, nor the natural resources on which the current and future health and well-being of our nation rests. It is clear that agriculture will be deeply affected by cuts, as will many other areas of the federal budget.

The Land Stewardship Project has serious concerns about the approach to budgeting outside of the federal farm bill. Calibrating agriculture funding and policy is best achieved in the reauthorization framework of the farm bill which provides appropriate consideration as well as public input during deliberations.

In the interim, if agriculture is required to make additional cuts, then all agriculture spending must be on the table. This has not been the case as of late, with conservation and innovative family farm programs bearing the biggest burden, while other more costly and less productive farm program entitlements remain largely untouched.

Leadership during another turbulent time, the Great Depression, provides insight on how our nation can overcome hardships and emerge stronger and more resilient.

In the depths of the Great Depression, when soil erosion was declared a national menace and skies blackened with the Dust Bowl, a great American President and Agriculture Secretary did not say to the nation, "Things are really bad. We've got to cut back. I know soil erosion is bad, but we can't do anything about it. We need to do less."

No. They said that we are a great nation, and that our health and our strength depend on the soil, on our productive land, on our farmers and our conservationists. In order to safeguard and enhance our soil in times of such great stress and troubles, that Administration worked closely with Congress to establish the Soil Conservation Service.

Together, our political leadership did not permit the politics and financial troubles of the day to destroy the basis of our nation and our nation's security. They said that our nation would invest in conservation, because it is the

right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and the wise thing to do.

And history has proven them right. Since that time farmers, ranchers and conservationists, working with the Soil Conservation Service, helped make American agriculture the most productive in the world.

Clearly agriculture has evolved and changed since the 1930's, yet the strain on our landscape and natural resources continue and may be greater than ever. Strong commodity prices, the diverse use and demand of agriculture products, competing land uses, and increased acres in production as well as heavier production on existing acres have all put greater stress on our on farmland.

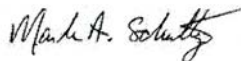
In response, investments in working lands conservation – methods that allow farmers and ranchers to produce agricultural products but also to enrich the health of our natural resources and long-term productivity of farmland through effective conservation farming systems and practices – have become a conservation priority.

Budgetary efforts to undermine effective programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program as well as the Conservation Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program are shortsighted and misguided. While these programs can be enhanced to become more efficient and effective, that debate should be conducted in the context of the 2012 Farm Bill.

The cost of further cuts to these programs will have long-term impacts. It will seriously undercut farmers' and ranchers' ability to achieve conservation while also producing food and fiber. The loss will not be temporary or merely political, but will damage our land, our vision as a nation, our security, and our long-term well-being.

Mr. Secretary, the Land Stewardship Project urges you to uphold the primacy of conservation at this moment in our history. Any falling away from the long-term stewardship of our farmlands must be considered not in the inaccessible reaches of budget deals, but in the context of public policy debate. And any cuts that must be made in the short-term must not disproportionately fall on conservation, but must be borne fairly across agricultural programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark A. Schultz".

Mark Schultz

Associate Director/Policy and Organizing Director