

January 13, 2009

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and
Forestry Committee
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and
Forestry Committee
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss:

As a coalition of America's leading sportsmen's and conservation organizations, we welcome the opportunity to work with the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee in the 111th Congress. No doubt, there will be many important conservation issues considered during this time to address the evolving challenges facing farmers and ranchers in their efforts to remain effective stewards of the land and provide quality habitat for fish and wildlife.

One of your first items of business, considering the nomination for Secretary of Agriculture, will be an important step towards shaping the course of our nation's conservation policy. As you know, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the leadership provided by the secretary have a profound impact on the daily lives of millions of Americans. We look forward to hearing the views of Governor Vilsack on the importance of USDA conservation programs and how they can be strengthened to meet the needs of the future. We anticipate a positive and informative hearing of your committee when it considers his nomination for this important position.

USDA conservation programs represent the single largest federal investment in conservation on private lands and are critical to maintaining healthy fish and wildlife habitat, soil and water quality, and recreational opportunities for America's 34 million sportsmen/-women. For these reasons, the Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group (AWWG) of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) has been actively involved in educating policymakers, farmers, ranchers, sportsmen, union members and the media on the importance of effective, well-funded USDA conservation programs.

There are many programs and issues that we look forward to working with the House, Senate, and administration on during the course of the coming years. Among others, priorities important to America's hunters and anglers and that we hope are discussed with Governor Vilsack include:

- strengthening the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP),
- and funding the new Open Fields access program.

CRP stands as our nation's largest and most successful conservation program on private lands. Through CRP, farmers and ranchers are making a real difference in the protection and enhancement of the environment. This vital program is extremely important to sportsmen as millions of acres of wetland, grassland, and forest habitats benefiting many fish and wildlife species have been conserved. Enrollment in CRP has continued to decline in recent years, however, as millions of acres have come out of the program due to contract expirations, limited opportunities to enroll new lands, and heavy competition from other land uses. We encourage the new administration to make a strong and competitive CRP a priority. Steps should be taken to ensure continued enrollment opportunities, including regularly-scheduled (at least once per year) general sign-up periods, continuous sign-up opportunities, and additional sign-ups for the

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The payment structure for CRP should be modernized to compete with the many land use challenges that face landowners. We support establishment of an annual CRP rental-rate review and adjustment process to ensure these rates are competitive and accurately reflect local rates. Additionally, the continued use of regionally developed CRP management activities on CRP tracts is vitally important for maximizing wildlife benefits.

The Voluntary Access and Habitat Incentive Program, or “Open Fields,” was authorized by Congress for the first time ever in the 2008 Farm Bill. This new program provides for \$50 million in federal money over the next four years to the states to enhance or create voluntary sportsmen’s access programs on private lands. Landowners can voluntarily enroll their land in one of these state-access programs and receive a small financial incentive in exchange for opening it to the public for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation. Not only will these landowners receive a bit of a financial infusion in difficult financial times – helping the national economy – they will simultaneously boost America’s sporting heritage. We urge full support from the new administration to implement this fledgling program. We also request full funding of the program over the next four years in the new administration’s budget requests as well as appropriate apportionment of those funds from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Thank you in advance to the committee for the important work and collaboration we look forward to sharing in during the 111th Congress. Again, we anticipate an informative confirmation hearing for USDA Secretary and are anxious to work with you and the new administration on growing and improving USDA conservation programs in order to make it a new national priority.

Sincerely,

American Sportfishing Association
Ducks Unlimited
Izaak Walton League of America
Land Trust Alliance
National Wildlife Federation
Pheasants Forever
Quail Forever
Quail Unlimited
Ruffed Grouse Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Wildlife Management Institute
The Wildlife Society

cc: Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee