

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 19, 2019

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

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write to request that you reallocate previously allocated, non-expended Fiscal Year 2019 Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funds to effective basins in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Reallocating financial and technical assistance to farmers within the Chesapeake Bay watershed where it will reduce nutrient pollution from their farms will help states meet their Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) water quality goals. Prioritizing investment in the region will fulfill the USDA's commitments set out in Executive Order 13508, Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration to support priority conservation practices that most efficiently reduce nutrient and sediment loads to the Chesapeake Bay.

As you know, NRCS conservation programs promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals by assisting producers in complying with local, state, and federal regulatory requirements. The next milestone for the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint presents an historic opportunity to showcase this objective. Agriculture is the largest source of nutrient and sediment pollution entering the Bay. Our states' farms are also a critical source of food, of jobs, of regional identity, and can play a critical role in the protection and enhancement of our shared natural resources. Farmers are an asset to restoring the Bay, and we must ensure they have the support and incentives they need to enter Phase III of the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint strong.

Since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (Bay TMDL) in 2010, the watershed jurisdictions of Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia have developed Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs) in phases to help them determine how to reduce the amount of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment flowing into the Chesapeake Bay and local rivers and streams. The 2017 Midpoint Assessment on their progress informed the Phase III WIPs, which will guide the jurisdictions and their local partners and stakeholders on actions and controls they will need to implement to meet their nutrient pollution reduction goals by 2025.

At the midpoint between the start of the TMDL and its 2025 deadline, our States saw improving signs of recovery for the Chesapeake Bay and its tributary rivers and streams in both water quality and the watershed's living resources, including blue crabs and brook trout. The third phase of our States' Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plans (WIP) identify the strategies, opportunities, and challenges to meet their 2025 Chesapeake Bay restoration targets and sustain restoration into the future.

Farmers have made significant progress towards achieving the Bay TMDL. Reductions achieved to date come from the successful implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs that offer assistance to the agricultural community. Local conservation efforts are the cornerstone to reducing nutrients and sediment from agriculture to the Chesapeake Bay. States have been coordinating with the USDA to maximize the application of federal resources such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) toward WIP achievement.

Forests and wetlands are home to a variety of wildlife and restoring forests, wetlands, and streams can create new habitat for these species, or improve upon existing habitat. Outdoor recreation is a significant economic driver. These natural filters in watersheds surrounding drinking water reservoirs improve local water quality, decreasing the cost of drinking water. Natural filters also increase groundwater recharge, helping to ensure streams do not go dry during low flow seasons or periods of drought, and store rainfall in soils, lessening the need for gray stormwater infrastructure.

Efforts are underway throughout the watershed to identify lands where conservation investments go the furthest toward reducing nutrient pollution. For example, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Chesapeake Bay Comprehensive Water Resources and Restoration Plan (CBCP) identified and evaluated problems, needs, and opportunities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed using an integrated water resources management approach. The team conducted geospatial analyses to identify high-quality areas for potential conservation, degraded areas for restoration, and gaps in restoration actions or duplication of efforts.

The Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) partnership has identified the most effective sub-basins of the watershed—the geographic areas with the greatest influence on Chesapeake Bay water quality, such as the area within the State of Maryland and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that are in the Susquehanna River Basin and other basins within the Chesapeake Bay watershed where best management practices are most effective at improving Chesapeake Bay water quality.

The need for additional investment in conservation assistance for farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed is more urgent than ever, and NRCS funding is an essential component of ensuring farmers have the tools they need to improve the health of the Bay.

Thank you for considering our request for the reallocation of previously allocated non-expected conservation funds to eligible producers and partners in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Sincerely,



Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator