Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 18, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Schumer,

As the primary sponsors of the Climate Stewardship Act (H.R. 2534) and the Agriculture Resilience Act (H.R. 2803), we are writing to underscore the urgency and importance of including bold investments through the Build Back Better Act that expand climate-smart agriculture practices through existing, voluntary incentive-based programs at the USDA. If the United States is going to meet its climate goals, it is essential that we actively enlist the help of those who know the land best - farmers, producers, ranchers, and forestland owners – to not just cut greenhouse gas emissions but actively sequester carbon from our atmosphere. Therefore, as we work with the White House to deliver on the Build Back Better Agenda and develop bold legislation to address the climate crisis and build a more inclusive economy, we urge you to maintain the robust investments in working-lands conservation programs, conservation technical assistance, and innovative conservation partnerships included in the Build Back Better Act as proposed by the House Agriculture Committee.

As we seek to "build back better," it is critical that Congress demonstrate that we intend to do so not just in suburban and urban communities but also in rural communities across the country. The conservation provisions included in the current draft of the Build Back Better Act communicate that vision through targeted investments in climate-smart agriculture that would significantly sequester carbon and reduce on-farm greenhouse gas pollution while growing the bottom-lines of growers and producers nationwide.

Specifically, substantially increasing funding for USDA's voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), is critical for engagement on farmers on the climate crisis. These are proven programs that farmers trust. However, these programs are currently underfunded and oversubscribed with significant backlogs due to high demand. Farmers who want to be part of the climate solution are already being turned away due to funding shortfalls. Last year alone, over 100,000 applications in EQIP and CSP went unfunded.

Similarly, across our districts, we hear a clear cry for greater "boots on the ground" through conservation technical assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and technical service providers (TSPs) trained by USDA. Unfortunately, funding for these positions has also failed to meet the sustained demand for agricultural producers.

The historic investments in conservation programs and technical assistance currently included in the Build Back Better Act would not only help clear the current backlog of conservation projects across the country but would also set USDA on a course to keep up with demand for years to come.

Notably, the new funding proposed by the Build Back Better Act is specifically targeted towards climate-smart agricultural practices already covered by these programs – building off the framework established by the Climate Stewardship Act (H.R. 2534/S. 1072) and the Agriculture Resilience Act (H.R. 2803/S.1337). This targeted funding will enable USDA to meet farmers where they are while engaging them on climate issues.

As the original conservationists, farmers, producers, ranchers, and foresters must be an integral part of any solution to the climate crisis. Critically, natural climate solutions from the agricultural and forestry sectors provide the unique opportunity not afforded by other sectors of the economy to directly sequester harmful climate pollution that has already occurred. As President Biden's American Jobs Plan stated, we must position American agriculture "to lead the shift to net-zero emissions while providing new economic opportunities for farmers."

Unfortunately, too often, these groups are left out of the national conversation on the climate crisis. At times, the discussion of the climate crisis has missed opportunities to learn from growers and learn how voluntary conservation practices benefit the environment and build more sustainable operations.

The Build Back Better Act avoids these pitfalls by including bold investments in climate-smart agricultural practices through existing USDA Programs. This investment recognizes the leadership of farmers, producers, and forestland owners in combatting climate change and ensures they have a seat at the table as we chart a path forward towards a cleaner economy.

American farmers are ready to lead, but they need Congress to provide them with the necessary knowledge, tools, and resources to do so. We are thrilled that the conservation provisions currently proposed in the Build Back Better Act would empower farmers with the resources they need to meet this charge. As such, we strongly encourage you to keep these crucial investments in place as Congress moves forward in crafting and passing a final version of the Build Back Better Act.

Sincerely,

Abigail D. Spanberger

Member of Congress

Chellie Pingree

Member of Congress