

MGA

Midwestern Governors Association

June 8, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
SR-328A
Washington, D.C. 20510-6000

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Dear Senator Harkin:

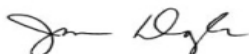
Thank you for your leadership on the issues of conservation regarding the 2007 Farm Bill. These issues are of great importance to the Midwestern states.

At your hearing, you requested suggestions from Midwestern Governors Association members on how federal and state governments can better coordinate conservation efforts to avoid program duplication. Overall, the governors suggest the following changes in the Farm Bill to increase conservation program efficiency and effectiveness:

- Increase the emphasis on farm-scale and watershed conservation planning in order to streamline Farm Bill programs and facilitate their coordination with state programs. Conservation funding should be based on needs identified in a comprehensive assessment or plan (e.g., an Environmental Quality Act, Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan and/or Conservation Plan at the farm- scale, as well as a watershed plan to coordinate multiple priorities and sources of funding at that scale). The current approach, in which funding is driven by the administrative vagaries of independently implemented programs, has led to random improvements which, more often than not, fail to add up to tangible results at the watershed scale.
- Streamline the menu of Farm Bill conservation programs. While the current Farm Bill conservation programs have merit, they evolved independently with little or no coordination along the way. This lack of "internal coordination" complicates external coordination with state programs. The use of block grants may be one way to streamline Farm Bill programs.
- Create joint federal-state positions and/or temporary interagency assignments to resolve barriers to cooperation. Currently, legal and administrative concerns often restrict the sharing of federal information and technical and financial resources. These barriers are often beyond the control or authority of field offices, or fail to get resolved simply because of lack of dedicated personnel. For example, a Natural Resources Conservation Service partnership grant to a state agency requires the agency to report on conservation gains resulting from the grant, but various USDA restrictions prevent the state from accessing and integrating some of the necessary data from USDA. It isn't clear which party is responsible for untangling the impasse, so it remains unresolved, hindering both party's desire to be accountable to taxpayers.
- Designate a staff member in each state to focus on coordinating state and federal conservation programs. The degree of coordination needed to develop sophisticated, long-term, adaptable partnerships is often a full-time job, but few federal or state conservation positions are currently devoted to it. In the long run, a few such positions in the right places could save money by better targeting and leveraging conservation dollars.

We hope that these recommendations will be useful to the committee and provide adequate answers to questions that you have posed. If there is anything else that you require, please do not hesitate to let us know.

Sincerely,



Jim Doyle
Governor of Wisconsin, and
MGA Chair



M. Michael Rounds
Governor of South Dakota, and
MGA Vice Chair

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cc: MGA Congressional Delegation