March 29, 2012

The Honorable Herb Kohl
Chairman, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Members of the Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jack Kingston
Chairman, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Sam Farr
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Members of the Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515

Dear Members of the Senate and House Subcommittees on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies:

As Congress considers funding priorities for Fiscal Year 2013, Farmworker Justice and the undersigned organizations strongly urge you to include at least the Fiscal Year 2012 level for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Pesticide Recordkeeping Program and Methyl Bromide Transition Program.

Farmworkers suffer from the highest rate of chemical-related injuries of any occupational groups in the U.S. Yet many agricultural workers are not covered by workers’ compensation laws and few workers are provided with health insurance by their employers. Moreover, since they earn on average about $12,500 per year, farmworkers often lack the financial resources to secure medical treatment. Farmworkers frequently are exposed to pesticides during their work harvesting our nation’s fruit and vegetables through long hours in pesticide-treated fields; direct spray or drift of pesticides; or by mixing, loading or applying these chemicals. Accordingly, federal programs focused on agricultural occupational health and safety, and dedicated to serving rural communities provide much needed services to this marginalized population.
The Pesticide Recordkeeping Program, established by the 1990 Farm Bill, requires certified applicators of restricted use pesticides to maintain records of the product name, amount and approximate date and location of each such pesticide for a 2 year period. It also utilizes services of State pesticide regulatory agencies to conduct record compliance inspections of private applicators in 27 States that are under the federal pesticide recordkeeping program. Requiring comprehensive records of pesticide applications provide researchers and regulators with a more complete picture what is being used, when, and where. Additionally, the data gathered under this program is used by health professionals providing treatment to persons with known or suspected exposure to pesticides.

According to the most recent report on PRP activities, the PRP achieved a wide array of educational outreach projects and workshops aimed at providing training to pesticide applicators in 2010. For example, the Nevada Department of Agriculture conducted several Restricted Use Pesticide training seminars around the state to assist applicators in complying with federal and state regulations. The training sessions focused on how applicators can renew their pesticide certification through the continuing education program and provided an extensive overview of the pesticide recordkeeping requirements. PRP also provided workshops designed to update agents and specialists on pesticide applicator training procedures and practices in Georgia and Virginia. Furthermore, PRP conducted 4,210 inspections of certified private applicators.

The PRP begins to tackle the problems of farmworker illness and injury as a result of pesticide exposure by acquiring the data needed to provide the government with information to help set regulatory standards for toxic pesticides, and improve how medical personnel diagnose and treat poisoned farmworkers.

Another critical program that would be eliminated under the President’s budget is the Methyl Bromide Transition Program, which supports the development and implementation of practical pest management alternatives to methyl bromide uses as well as to minimize its uses and emissions. Methyl bromide (MeBr) is a highly toxic pesticide that can cause respiratory, kidney, neurological effects. NIOSH considers MeBr to be a potential occupational carcinogen as defined by the OSHA carcinogen policy, 29 CFR 1990.

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Clean Air Act mandated the U.S. to reduce MeBr production and net imports beginning in 1991. Although MeBr was supposed to be completely phased out in 2005, a few remaining applications still do not have effective alternatives. Each year the United Nations Environment Program’s Methyl Bromide Technical Options Committee (MBTOC) advises each country to use a prescribed amount of methyl bromide, called a Critical Use Exemption. The EPA submits Critical Use Nominations for an exemption when: 1) no alternatives currently exist that are technically and economically feasible; 2) there are no alternatives currently acceptable from a public health standpoint; and 3) an active research program is seeking viable alternatives to use of methyl bromide fumigation or seeking reduction in emissions for that nomination.

Due to the recent withdrawal of Methyl Iodide, the strawberry pesticide alternative to MeBr, from the U.S. market by its producer, some farmers may continue to use MeBr under the Critical Use Exemption until a safe alternative is found. Earlier this month, California announced a $500,000 grant to the California Strawberry Commission to advance research into fumigant alternatives.
Accordingly, research into alternatives to MeBr is crucial given its toxicity to human health and the environment and the withdrawal of methyl iodide from the U.S. market.

The EPA estimates that 10,000-20,000 farmworkers are poisoned on the job annually due to pesticide exposure; however this figure likely underrepresents actual injury due to the difficulty of diagnosing pesticide poisoning without adequate information. Moreover, the exact number of workers injured each year by pesticides is unknown, because there is no national incident reporting system. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that farmworkers suffer the highest rate of chemical-related illness of any occupational group: 5.5 per 1,000 workers.

According to a recent U.C. Davis study on the economic impact of occupational injuries, the total cost for occupational injuries and diseases is approximately $250 billion, which is $31 billion more than the direct and indirect costs of all cancer; $76 billion more than diabetes; and $187 billion more than strokes. This data indicates that a greater emphasis should be placed on reducing work-related injury and illnesses. The total cost of these two programs in question is a mere $4 million, which when compared to the sums expended annually to compensate for workplace injuries and diseases, is a small price to pay for programs that positively impact the lives and working conditions of an already disadvantaged population.

Funding of these programs is critical to preventing farmworker workplace injuries and death. Farmworker Justice and the undersigned urge you to reinstate funding for these programs.

Sincerely,

Farmworker Justice
Alaska Community Action on Toxics
American Bird Conservancy
Californians for Pesticide Reform
Californians for Alternatives to Toxics
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Environmental Health
Empire State Consumer Project
Farmworker Association of Florida
Healthy Child Healthy World
Kentucky Environmental Foundation
MD Pesticide Network
Migrant Clinicians Network
Migrant Health Promotion
Natural Resources Defense Council
Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance
Organizacion en California de Lideres Campesinas, Inc.
Pesticide Action Network North America
Pesticide Research Institute
Pesticide Watch
Rachel Carson Council
TEDX (The Endocrine Disruption Exchange)