

November 15, 2011

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
1910 W Sunset Blvd # 810
Los Angeles, CA 90026-3350

Dear Congressman Becerra,

We the undersigned 23 farm and food organizations from California are writing to urge you, as a member of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, to take a leadership role by modifying the farm bill proposal you will receive very soon from the chairs and ranking members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. Enough is known about that package to know that while it has some positive features, it remains seriously flawed and poor policy in several ways.

On behalf of tens of thousands of California farmers and the millions of urban and rural residents whose health and livelihoods depend on our government to ensure that our farming system remains prosperous, protects natural resources, and provides access to healthy food for all, we implore you to help set it right.

First, we urge you to reduce the cuts to conservation and nutrition included in the farm bill presented to you. Farm conservation support has been cut disproportionately relative to other farm programs. We urge you to scale back the proposed cut to conservation by eliminating the funding reductions being proposed for the Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program. At a time of enormous and rising pressure on farmland and agricultural and natural resources, now is not the time to decimate farm conservation programs. We also object to the idea that any amount of food assistance for low-income people should be put on the chopping block.

Second, we urge you to include the important policies from the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act (Walz) and the Local Farms, Food, and Jobs Act (Pingree), neither of which are included in the bill that will be presented to you. We appreciate that the leaders of the agriculture committees plan to include a few small pieces of these two important farm bill “marker” bills, but we cannot stress enough that this is the farm bill, our only chance in the next five years to enact reforms to support the next, diverse generation of American farmers and to foster job-creating local farm and food efforts. There is real opportunity in agriculture, and we believe it is possible to reverse the steady aging of American agriculture, support farmworkers and other minority farmers as independent entrepreneurs, and improve access to healthy food, but only if we act with the smart policies incorporated in these two bills. We urge you to add these two critical bills to the farm bill section of your overall package. Failure to act would mean no progress on these issues until the 2017 Farm Bill. There is broad consensus within California agriculture in support of programs that advance local food systems and support beginning farmers. Evidence of this is the recent position paper released by the California Department of Food and Agriculture on the farm bill. If we want to improve economic opportunity and job creation in the food and agricultural sector in California and around the country, we cannot wait.

Third, we need to maintain or increase funding for specific programs that have been key to

supporting a more diverse, sustainable California agriculture. The 2008 Farm Bill funded or created programs to ease access to land for beginning farmers and ranchers, fund organic farming research and certification assistance, and support on-farm conservation practices that bring important environmental and health benefits, such as improved air and water quality. It increased support for farmers through technical assistance and training, including ATTRA/National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service and Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. The 2008 Farm Bill also increased funding for the successful Outreach to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers program championed by Congressman Baca and the Latino Caucus.

Finally, we urge you to amend the farm bill to require all farms receiving commodity or crop insurance taxpayer-provided subsidies to comply with soil erosion and wetland protection requirements. Forcing the taxpayer to subsidize the destruction of the foundation of our long-term food security – the soil – and the draining of ecologically-critical wetlands is indefensible. Yet the bill to be presented to you does not tie “conservation compliance” requirements to crop insurance nor does it apply conservation compliance to all of the land that is eroding at unsustainable rates within the commodity subsidy program. Adding “conservation compliance” to both the commodity and crop insurance titles of the farm bill is a simple, straightforward fix that will help protect the environment and our future food security.

Thank you for your careful consideration of our views. We hope to be in direct dialogue with your office on these urgent matters in the next few days and would appreciate an opportunity for representatives of our group to meet to discuss these crucial issues in your Los Angeles office. Please do not hesitate to contact Steve Schwartz at (707) 217-5603 to discuss these issues or to provide further clarification.

Sincerely,

Gary Peterson, Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association

Melody Meyer, Alberts Source Organics

Brice Tencer, California Certified Organic Farmers

Jeanne Merrill, California Climate and Agriculture Network

Reggie Knox, California FarmLink

Tracey Brieger, Californians for Pesticide Reform

Caroline Cox, Center for Environmental Health

Mary Kimball, Center for Land-Based Learning

Kevin Hall, Central Valley Air Quality Coalition

Camille Pannu, Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment

Dave Runsten, Community Alliance with Family Farmers

Neelam Sharma, Community Services Unlimited, Inc.

Ken Dickerson, Ecological Farming Association

Rex Dufour, National Center for Appropriate Technology

Udi Lazimy, Organic Farming Research Foundation

Margaret Reeves, Pesticide Action Network North America

Mike Somers, Pesticide Watch

Martha Dina Arguello, Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles

Michael Dimock, Roots of Change

Shawn Harrison, Soil Born Farm

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Jo Ann Baumgartner, Wild Farm Alliance