



Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition

October 16, 2017

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Joni Ernst
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ranking Member Stabenow and Senator Ernst:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write in support of the improvements and increased funding provided in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program Improvement Act of 2017.

Agricultural runoff continues to be one of the biggest problems facing the Great Lakes. Experts say new algal blooms are being fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms. Stronger storms driven by climate change and invasive mussels also contribute to the problem. Toxic algae has an enormous impact on the Great Lakes environment and economy. It closes beaches, kills fish, impacts local drinking water supplies (E.g., the Toledo water crisis in 2014), and harms small, local businesses like charter boats. Toxic algae is spreading farther and faster with harmful blooms beginning earlier than ever before.

While agriculture contributes to the problem, farmers are contributing to the solution by undertaking conservation on their lands that keeps nutrients out of Great Lakes rivers and streams. More and more producers across the region are embracing conservation practices that yield long-term results. However, more must be done if we are going to prevent toxic runoff from polluting the Great Lakes.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program adds to the tools our region has to tackle issues with polluted runoff. First created by the 2014 Farm Bill, the RCPP provides support to farmers to help them take specific actions designed to protect soil and water quality. Its innovative approach sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers to work together to further the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resources on a regional or watershed scale. It also provides for accountability by linking the projects to local efforts or other regional initiatives (like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative).

Even though the RCPP benefits our region, implementation problems have hampered the effectiveness of the program. The legislation being introduced attempts to fix these issues by:

- Providing greater flexibility to projects so they accommodate the unique needs of a particular area in order to focus the right combination of conservation needed to address a specific natural resource concern.
- Allowing producers to access financial assistance through streamlined contracts that are tailored specifically to the conservation practices targeted by the contract.
- Encouraging more diverse partnerships by simplifying the application process, increasing flexibility in partner matching contributions, and funding project outreach and development activities.
- Authorizing a pilot grant program that allows partners to operate projects in order to foster new and innovative approaches to conservation, like using innovative financing or involving multiple producers at a watershed scale.
- Increasing the focus on conservation outcomes such as water quality and wildlife habitat by requiring progress reports on how projects address natural resource concerns.
- Increasing RCPP funding so it can expand the programs reach to more producers allowing them to increase conservation on their farms and better targets funding to critical conservation areas like the Great Lakes.

The RCPP helps bolster Great Lakes restoration efforts at a time when we're seeing inspiring results from restoration projects implemented across the region. Even with this progress, there's much more work to do, like ensuring strong funding for all Farm Bill conservation programs. The RCPP is a valuable tool for our region and we look forward to working with you as Congress makes additional changes to Farm Bill conservation programs this year. Thank you for introducing legislation that improves the RCPP and increases funding provided for the program.

Please do not hesitate to contact Chad Lord, our Coalition's policy director, at (202) 454-3385 or clord@npca.org with questions.

Sincerely,

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