

(Date)

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Glenn 'GT' Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott,

We are writing on behalf of the [Food and Agriculture Regional Member \(FARM\) Policy Committee](#) of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG) to share our priorities for the upcoming 2024 Farm Bill and appropriations process negotiations. Based on our collective experiences as elected officials, subject matter experts, and organizational leaders in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, we ask for your continued support for the following programs and policies that are critical to the economic, environmental, and public health of our region through the 2024 Farm Bill's Nutrition, Conservation, Horticulture, and Miscellaneous Titles.

Title II: Conservation

We support maintaining current levels of funding for the conservation programs in Title II and the inclusion of provisions to increase program access for historically underserved producers.

Although metropolitan Washington contains large urban areas, agriculture and aquaculture are also critical to our region's economy and security. Ensuring the agriculture sector contributes to environmental health is vital to our collective efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay. The on-farm conservation programs funded in this title provide a pathway for farmers to advance the goals of the Chesapeake Bay Program, build soil health, mitigate the impacts of climate change, and support their viability by increasing the productivity and sustainability of their operations. To continue these positive impacts and for the Chesapeake Bay Program to meet its 2025 nutrient reduction goals, current levels of funding for the conservation programs in Title II must be maintained.

Additionally, conservation programs that are funded in this title can, unfortunately, be hard for producers to access. These challenges are especially prominent among Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), small, woman-owned, and veteran-owned farmers who have experienced systemic racism and/or discrimination. To address past discrimination and gaps in

outreach and education on these programs, we support the deployment of financial assistance in the form of technical assistance, increased program set-asides, and contracting opportunities.

Title IV: Nutrition

We support increased funding for both Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and healthy food incentive programs and reduced barriers to enrolling, maintaining, and using benefits. We encourage you to fully fund the Healthy Food Financing Initiative. Finally, we ask that you increase funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)'s Farm to Food Bank Program.

Though the pandemic has ended, food and economic insecurity remain elevated in our region. One in three residents said they were food insecure at one point over the past year, according to the Capital Area Food Bank [2023 Hunger Report](#). SNAP is one of the nation's—and our region's—most important defenses against hunger. Emergency pandemic provisions, including increased benefits, protected many in our region from falling into more severe levels of food insecurity while making it possible for food retailers to stay profitable and keep their doors open. **The pandemic-era changes to SNAP benefits and administrative requirements were demonstratively effective. We support them being made permanent.** Specifically, we encourage Congress to:

- replace the Thrifty Food Plan with the more appropriate Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP allotments;
- no longer condition eligibility for college students on performing 20 hours of outside employment or work-study;
- reduce barriers to SNAP recertification (e.g., allow telemedicine appointments and institutionalize pandemic waiver provisions that expand access without increasing fraud or misuse);
- codify Online SNAP and ensure it can be used across state lines;
- and, allow purchases of hot prepared foods with SNAP benefits at grocery retailers.

Our region incubated the first farmers market-based double value coupon program at Crossroads Farmers Market in Takoma Park and one of the country's most innovative Food-is-Medicine Programs, DC Green's ProduceRx program, both of which have become national models. Both programs have taken advantage of Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) funding, which provides grants to organizations to implement SNAP incentives and produce prescription programs, and to leverage other federal SNAP incentive programs. Though GusNIP programs vary widely in structure, they have uniformly been found to reduce food insecurity¹, improve nutrition intake², and boost economic activity³. We support increasing

¹ Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information Center (GusNIP NTAE). (2021). Year 2 Impact Findings. <https://www.nutritionincentivehub.org/media/fjohmr2n/gusnip-ntae-impact-findings-year-2.pdf>

² *ibid*

³ Thilmann D, Baumann A, Love E, Jablonski Becca BR. January 2021. The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives. fairfoodnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Economic_Contributions_Incentives_2_2_21.pdf

funding levels for SNAP produce incentives and produce prescription programs and allowing GusNIP funds to support the matching of Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP). Many of our regions' farmers' markets were matching Senior and WIC FMNP before GusNIP became the main funding mechanism and some continue to match these programs with privately raised funds.

We encourage Congress to reauthorize and fully fund the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) to meet the growing demand for healthy food access in underserved communities. There is uneven access to healthy food retail in our region. This has negative health and economic consequences for our residents. Further, grocery stores often serve as anchor institutions which supports the growth of additional businesses. HFFI's financial and technical assistance to eligible healthy food retailers and food enterprises is a critical piece of the puzzle for our jurisdictions seeking to piece together sufficient resources to address high costs and other barriers to market entry.

Finally, we ask you to double down on our nation's commitment to ending hunger in all communities by strengthening TEFAP. Our region's food banks and pantries increased purchases of locally grown produce during the pandemic, benefiting both food-insecure residents and our agricultural economy. To sustain these benefits, we support increasing federal funding for TEFAP's Farm to Food Bank Program, removing the state match, and allowing states to prioritize projects for donated food or food purchased at a low cost from local growers and producers.

Title X: Horticulture

We encourage maintaining current funding levels for the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), which includes the Farmers Market Promotion Program, Local Food Promotion Program, Regional Food System Partnerships Program, and Value-Added Producer Grants program.

Farm Bill reauthorization is a key opportunity to expand, build, and sustain the development of regional food and farm economies everywhere. While our state and local jurisdictions and food and farm enterprises continue to innovate to make federal dollars go farther, sustained and increased investment is needed at all levels to increase regional food and farm development and resiliency. We encourage maintaining, or increasing, current funding levels for LAMP programs. LAMP program grants are critical to strengthening farm-to-table investments, bolstering regional food system planning, development, and coordination, and increasing access to healthy local food in all communities. By supporting food production near where it is consumed, these programs contribute to decreased emissions and runoff and a diversified regional agricultural economy.

Title XII: Miscellaneous

We encourage you to fully fund the Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grants and increase support for historically underserved farmers.

As a region with a vibrant and rapidly growing urban farming community, we applaud Congressional action in the previous Farm Bill which facilitated creation of USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP), and its subsequent deployment of grants and cooperative agreements. Supporting urban agriculture and urban farmers is an increasing priority in Metropolitan Washington. The establishment of UAIP has and will yield more benefits to this growing sector in our region and around the country. We request, at a minimum, full funding of UAIP's grants and programming to incentivize urban production and composting.

[Paragraph addressing New & Beginning Farmer Programs will go here]

[Paragraph addressing programs supporting historically underserved farmers will go here]

Thank you for your continued leadership in ensuring the next Farm Bill will support and strengthen the health of our community and economy. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or other inquiries. The FARM Committee is prepared to uplift local leaders with a vested interest in Farm Bill programs and policies and to support you throughout the reauthorization process.

Sincerely,

Jon Stehle
Chair, Food and Agriculture Regional Member Policy Committee
Fairfax City, Virginia

Zachary Parker
Vice Chair, Food and Agriculture Regional Member Policy Committee
District of Columbia

Andrew Friedson
Vice-Chair, Food and Agriculture Regional Member Policy Committee
Montgomery County, Maryland

Cc: (COG's Congressional Delegation)