



May 6, 2024

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry

The Honorable Glenn 'GT' Thompson
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture

RE: Farm Bill 2024 Reauthorization Priorities

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

On behalf of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) [Food and Regional Agriculture Member \(FARM\) Policy Committee](#), we would like to share our regional priorities for the upcoming 2024 Farm Bill and appropriations. As the association of local governments in the metropolitan Washington region, COG supports measures that increase food security, healthy food access, small farmers, and food system resilience. These are detailed in our [2024 Legislative Priorities](#).

Based on FARM's collective experiences as local 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 Conservation, Nutrition, Credit, Horticulture, and Miscellaneous Titles.

1) 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 agricultural 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), woman, and veteran farmers who have experienced systemic racism and/or

discrimination. Further, many of our region's small and urban farms, that are eligible for these programs, are individuals with full- or part-time jobs. They have limited time and capacity to complete applications for support.

To address past discrimination and gaps in outreach and education on these programs, we support the deployment of increased technical and financial assistance in the form of program set-asides in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and contracting opportunities for organizations with deep ties to under resourced communities and farmers. These organizations can support outreach, education, and provide technical assistance during the application process. Further, we encourage Congress to request the USDA streamline and standardize the application process for grants and cooperative agreements, across its programs in this title and others.

2) 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 effective¹². We support them being made permanent.** Specifically, we encourage Congress to:

- Replace the Thrifty Food Plan with the 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 expanded access without increasing fraud or misuse)
- Codify Online SNAP and ensure it can be used across state lines
- Allow purchases of hot prepared foods with SNAP benefits at grocery retailers

¹ Aaron L. Troy, Isabella Ahmad, ZhaoNian Zheng, et al. [Food Insecurity Among Low-Income U.S. Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). *Ann Intern Med.*2024;177:260-262. [Epub 2 January 2024]. doi:[10.7326/M23-2282](#)

² Brady PJ, Harnack L, Widome R, Berry KM, Valluri S. Food security among SNAP participants 2019 to 2021: a cross-sectional analysis of current population survey food security supplement data. *Journal of Nutritional Science.* 2023;12:e45. doi:[10.1017/jns.2023.32](#)

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 have become national models. These two organizations 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 insecurity³, improve nutrition intake⁴, and boost economic activity⁵. We support increasing 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 support 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 requirement, and allowing states to prioritize projects for donated food or food purchased at a low cost from local growers and producers.

3) Title V: Credit

We support improving access to financing and credit programs for young, beginning, and historically underserved producers through the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

As detailed in COG's What Our Region Grows report (2019), high land prices in our region make it cost prohibitive for many new and beginning farmers to purchase land. Development pressure causes land prices to rise, which leads to farmland being sold as farmers retire. As more farms are sold, land prices continue to increase to reflect commercial and residential uses. Land ownership has a cumulative effect on farm viability. Producers who own the land they farm can leverage it to make capital improvements, such as purchasing tractors and packing sheds, which increase their profitability and allow them to use their land as collateral for additional land

³ 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>

⁴ ibid

⁵ Thilmany 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

purchases. Farmers who lease their land may be hesitant to make the investments they need to make their enterprise more profitable, for fear of their land being sold.

Due to a legacy of discrimination and historic disinvestment in communities of color, young BIPOC farmers face additional barriers to accessing capital. Black students, who have access to less intergenerational wealth, are more likely to borrow, borrow more, struggle with repayment, and default on their student loans than their peers.⁶

We urge you to improve access to credit for young, beginning, and BIPOC farmers through the FSA. Specifically, allow for farm ownership loan pre-approval to enable farmers to be competitive in the real estate market, ensure FSA farm ownership loan limits remain adequate to cover the cost of farm real estate, provide no-interest loans to beginning farmers of color, and establish lending guidelines for loans to low-income resident farmers and BIPOC-led farmer cooperatives. Finally, it is also essential to remove limitations to credit access due to previous debts, including defaults on student loans.

4) 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.

5) Title XII: Miscellaneous

We encourage you to increase baseline funding for the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production and fully fund its grants. We also encourage Congress to increase support for new and beginning and historically underserved farmers through the Farming Opportunities, Training, and Outreach (FOTO) Program.

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 the 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

⁶ The Education Trust, "Black Student Debt: Explaining the Crisis and Providing Solutions," accessed April 2024, <https://edtrust.org/black-student-debt/>

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, The Honorable John Boozman, The Honorable Glenn 'GT' Thompson, and The Honorable David Scott
May 2, 2024

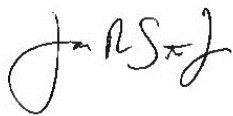
Washington. The office has several initiatives which are of particular interest to our members, including conducting a national scan of promising municipal policies and zoning ordinances for promoting urban agriculture. The establishment of UAIP has and will yield more benefits to this growing sector in our region and around the country. We request increased baseline funding of UAIP's grants and programming to incentivize urban production and composting.

Farmland loss is occurring more rapidly for BIPOC farmers than their white peers across the nation. In our region, BIPOC farmers make up a minority of our region's farmers, in numbers that do not reflect the diverse demographics of Greater Washington's residents. In 2022, just 1% and 2% of farmer operators in Maryland and Virginia identified as Black or African American (respectively), and 1% (Maryland) and 1.5% (Virginia) as Hispanic, or of Latino Origin.

To reverse this trend, it is critical to increase funding and programming to address land access challenges and the need for culturally relevant outreach and technical assistance for new and beginning BIPOC farmers in our region. To provide support to organizations addressing inequity in land access and transition, we urge Congress to increase funding for the USDA FOTO Program, which includes the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (known as the 2501 Program).

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, FARM Committee
Councilmember
City of Fairfax, Virginia



Zachary Parker
Vice Chair, FARM Committee
Councilmember
District of Columbia



Andrew Friedson
Vice Chair, FARM Committee
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C: Offices of the U.S. House and U.S. Senate Majority and Minority Leaders
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