United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 22, 2013

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
The Honorable Patrick Leahy
The Honorable Tom Harkin
The Honorable Max Baucus
The Honorable Sherrod Brown
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
The Honorable Michael Bennet

The Honorable Thad Cochran
The Honorable Pat Roberts
The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
The Honorable John Boozman
The Honorable John Hoeven

Dear Senate Conferees:

Agriculture is a growing and vibrant sector of our nation's economy. However, the average age of a farmer is over fifty-five and significant hurdles stand in the way of beginning farmers and ranchers who wish to pursue a career in agriculture. We write to respectfully request that you maintain the strongest possible support for beginning farmers and ranchers through targeted programs that provide new and young farmers with education and training, access to credit, and access to affordable land with support for conservation practices.

One of the most successful initiatives for beginning farmers is the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, which provides grants to community organizations and educational institutions to assist beginning farmers and ranchers. This is the only federal program exclusively dedicated to training the next generation of farmers and ranchers. Its demonstrated success and the growing demand for the program underscore the importance of the program to young and new farmers. This program has also been important for fostering the success of socially disadvantaged producers, limited resource producers, and military veterans. In the conference process, we urge you to dedicate, at a minimum, $20 million per year over the next five years for this program.

Access to credit is critical for new and young farmers. These farmers can face significant hurdles in obtaining loans through commercial lenders or existing federal credit programs. The House Farm Bill's Credit Title provides and improves access to microloans for new farmers and ranchers. We urge you to support the inclusion of this microloan program, which will enable small, beginning, and returning veteran farmers to access capital that meets their needs and reflects the scale of their operations.

Finally, the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is proven to be effective for fostering land stewardship and for supporting beginning farmers. CRP includes the Transition Incentives Program, which supports beginning farmers and ranchers access land from retiring farmers. We urge you to provide, at a minimum, $50 million in funding for this program. In addition, we urge you to provide for an increase in the advance payment option within the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Thank you for your attention to and consideration of these important issues. Your support for these provisions in a new Farm Bill will help create jobs, increase opportunities for a new generation of farmers, and enhance the nation's economy.

Sincerely,

Al Franken
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Tom Udall
United States Senator

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Angus King
United States Senator

Jon Tester
United States Senator

Tim Johnson
United States Senator

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Robert P. Casey Jr.
United States Senator

Christopher Murphy
United States Senator

Bernie Sanders
United States Senator

Jeff Merkley
United States Senator