

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 30, 2016

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building, Room 200-A
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Seven years ago, President Barack Obama made a bold commitment to clean up the Chesapeake Bay, a national treasure that is a critical resource for the states that we represent. Executive Order 13508 on Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration signaled an important change for the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed—renewed federal leadership and financial support for a multistate effort that lacked adequate funding for decades.

Since then, under the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint (also known as the Chesapeake Bay TMDL), significant progress has been made to reduce pollution from the 64,000-mile watershed, according to a recent assessment by EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program. Commitment and collaboration from the six watershed states and the District of Columbia has been strong.

Yet, there is still significant work to do, and federal funding is more important than ever. With the remarkable participation of the agriculture sector, several states have made significant reductions in nutrient and soil run-off. It is apparent that American farmers want what is good for their land and the supporting waterways. However, when farm incomes are strained and matching funds are limited or even eliminated, federal leadership is incredibly important to support continued investments in conservation.

We know that we still face a major challenge in reducing pollution from agriculture, particularly in resource-strained regions of the Chesapeake watershed. Despite recent funding pressures, farmers throughout the country, and many in the Chesapeake Bay region, have shown that the necessary reductions in agricultural pollution can be achieved at modest cost and without degrading productivity. But family farmers, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet, cannot undertake these activities without financial help. Executive Order 13508 recognizes this by directing the USDA to be the lead agency to target resources to better protect the Chesapeake Bay and its tributary waters. In order to ensure continued success of this important effort, we need to deploy our limited federal resources as efficiently and effectively as possible.

We urgently request your leadership by directing the Natural Resources Conservation Service to reallocate previously allocated, non-expended funds to states in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The purpose of many of the Farm Bill conservation programs is to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals in part by assisting producers in complying with local, state, and federal regulatory requirements. The Chesapeake Bay TMDL presents an historic and comprehensive regulatory requirement. Reallocating any available non-expended funds will provide farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed with financial and technical assistance to help states comply with the TMDL. At the same time, prioritizing investment in the Bay through reallocation will fulfill existing commitments made in Executive Order 13508 to support priority conservation practices that most efficiently reduce nutrient and sediment loads to the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay is this country's largest estuary. Helping to restore the Bay to health can be one of the landmark achievements of your tenure, if farmers are given the right tools and support to help put the Blueprint on a strong future course.

Sincerely,


Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator


Barbara A. Mikulski
United States Senator

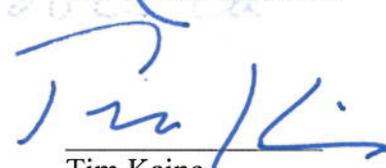

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