

## **Don't cut spending for conservation**

**By Mike McGrath,  
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LANESBORO, MN – This month, the Senate and House Agriculture Committees are poised to cut \$3 billion from the 2006 agriculture budget as part of a budget reconciliation process that addresses huge deficit spending over the past four years.

Some members of congress want the cuts in funding to come from USDA conservation, food stamp, and rural development programs, including the Conservation Security Program and the Value-Added Grants Program, both of which provide economic incentives to farmers and rural communities in Minnesota and other Midwestern farm states.

Conservation and rural development programs benefit rural farm communities in a multitude of ways. From cost-share dollars for erosion and flood control to economic assistance through business support and nutrition programs, these USDA programs provide long-term rural opportunities. They build for the future by protecting vital natural resources and helping to find new ways for rural America to become more diverse and innovative.

The Conservation Security Program has been subject to budget cuts several times since it was authorized in the 2002 farm bill. But despite these cuts, this program that rewards farmers for conservation on working lands has grown in popularity, with over 590 contracts awarded in Minnesota alone during the recent sign-up. In Iowa, 2,040 farmers enrolled, while many were turned away across the nation.

The Value Added Grants Program has yet to be funded at a level even close to its authorized amount. This innovative program provides rural development grants for start-up costs for rural businesses that support agriculture by adding value to the farm product. Farmer-owned ethanol plants, small regional meat processing plants, and farmer marketing cooperatives are just a few examples of the kind of rural-boosting businesses that this program has supported.

Rather than slice off funds from programs that benefit so many rural residents, Congress should slice off the agriculture waste that threatens to reduce fair rural spending.

Senators Grassley of Iowa and Dorgan of North Dakota have an alternative plan before the Senate Agriculture committee that will tighten the cap on farm payments to \$250,000 per farmer per year. The savings would amount to \$2 billion, sparing many conservation and rural development programs from the congressional chopping block.

The impact on Minnesota's farmers from the tightening of this payment limit would be miniscule at best. Only a handful, about 20 farms out of tens of thousands of Minnesota farmers, receive more than \$250,000 per year in farm subsidies. Mainly huge cotton and rice farms in the South and West get the larger payments.

Minnesota's congressional delegation needs to support new payment limits of \$250,000 per year per farm, so that Minnesota farmers don't have to give up their fair share of vitally important conservation and rural development dollars, while large farms in other parts of the country receive more than their fair share of the federal subsidy pie.

With a war in Iraq, huge deficit spending, record-high energy costs, and hurricane-devastated gulf shipping ports, it is easy to see that times are tough -- there's only so much money to go around.

So, if Congress has to cut farm bill spending then they should start by cutting the waste, not by cutting the programs that will help our Midwest rural communities to diversify and build for a new future.

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