

January 21, 2022

**To:**

**Rep. Daryl Metcalf, chair House Environmental Resources & Energy Committee and Rep. Greg Vitali, Democratic Chair, House Environmental Resources & Energy Committee**

**Dear Chairman Metcalf and Chairman Vitali:**

Thank you for inviting Pennsylvania Farm Bureau to participate in a hearing in support of House Bill 1901 and the need to invest in clean water funding. This legislation, which also creates the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program, is our organization's top legislative priority for this legislative session. We firmly believe that the time has come for Pennsylvania to create a mechanism to allocate funding to all corners of the state to help pay for on-farm conservation and improve local water quality.

For over the past three years, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau has been having conversations with a diverse group of organizations about how to further encourage on-farm conservation that will result in improved local water quality. The culmination of those conversations is the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program, which would create a mechanism to fund additional on-farm best management practices.

This program is based on several overarching philosophies: First, farmers want to perform additional conservation practices on their farms but are often hampered by the up-front costs of those practices. Second, conservation on farms improves local water quality, which helps local communities and those downstream. Improved water quality also improves wildlife habitat, which is critical for regional economies that rely both on agriculture and outdoor recreation. Lastly, local control is the best approach towards conservation, instead of a top-down, one-size fits all approach.

Pennsylvania already has a successful conservation program based on these philosophies: The Dirt and Gravel Road program. And that is where Farm Bureau

and others got the inspiration for a program focused on agriculture and the environment.

Pennsylvania's Dirt and Gravel Roads program is administered by county Conservation Districts. Each year, districts receive an allocation that they can spend on updating dirt and low-volume roads that might be washing sediment into local streams. Allocations are based on several factors, including miles of dirt roads in a county and proximity to sensitive streams. Counties with more of those factors qualify for additional funding over others. It targets dollars to the counties that need it the most but leaves the decisions of which roads get improved to county Conservation Districts.

The Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program will follow the same approach. ACAP will allocate money to counties that have the highest concentration of livestock agriculture, most miles of agriculturally-impaired streams and total crop acres. Counties with a greater number of those factors will qualify for funding against others. I think it's important to note that several counties outside of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed would qualify for funding above counties within the bay. This is a statewide program to address the issue of local water quality. It will benefit the Bay for certain, but also the Delaware and Allegheny watersheds, and others in between.

Clean water benefits agriculture, but also the communities around those farms. Many major rivers and streams are used as a source of drinking water, so any reduction in nutrient and sediment at the headwaters will reduce treatment costs. In addition, healthy streams support a variety of wildlife. That's why the Dirt and Gravel Road program has had the support of conservation and wildlife groups—because it makes measurable improvements in the small creeks and streams that sustain brook trout and other species. For those reasons, our efforts to create an agriculture conservation program has also garnered the support of wildlife organizations.

Like the Dirt and Gravel Road program, decisions on which projects will receive funding through ACAP remain at the local level. That's important for several reasons. First, it recognizes the unique topography of Pennsylvania and the diversity of our growing regions. The conservation needs for farmers in Lancaster

County differ from the needs in Wayne County. The conservation district professionals on the ground in those communities, the ones working everyday with farmers, are going to be in the best position to recommend practices and understand the conservation goals of individual farmers. In addition, farmers are accustomed to working with their local conservation districts on best management practices.

The practices that will be funded through ACAP can best be described as agriculture infrastructure. These conservation practices are not once and done fixes, but lasting legacies. Projects like manure storage, stream bank fences, buffers, or filter strips all become part of the landscape and management of a farm. These are lasting improvements that have a positive influence on reducing nutrient loads and mitigating soil loss year after year.

By passing House Bill 1901 and using federal dollars allocated to Pennsylvania as part of the American Rescue Plan, Pennsylvania can make significant investments in agriculture infrastructure. It will also help Pennsylvania meet the nutrient reduction goals outlined in the federal Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan. Because this program will be administered by conservation districts, and records kept of conservation practices put on the ground, this data can be used to help us achieve nutrient reduction goals set out in the implementation plan. Our organization has worked extensively with Penn State to survey farmers on the conservation practices they have funded using their own dollars to make sure that agriculture is getting proper credit for nutrient reduction goals in the Chesapeake Bay. ACAP would produce data that would be incredibly beneficial in getting Pennsylvania further credit for nutrient reduction.

House Bill 1901 presents Pennsylvania with an excellent opportunity to make lasting improvements on farms across Pennsylvania. It will give each conservation district a predictable source of funds to work with farmers on conservation goals. It will help address local water quality in communities across Pennsylvania and have positive impacts downstream. It will retain local control and local decision making on project funding and help farmers achieve the conservation goals they have set for their farms.

Our hope is that House Bill 1901, and the allocation of \$250 million in federal dollars towards clean water projects, becomes part of the final 2022-2023 state budget. This legislation, and the ACAP program, represents our organization's leading legislative priority. We look forward to working with the General Assembly on passage of this legislation.

Regards,



Darrin Youker  
Director, State Government Affairs