June 21, 2011

The Vice President
Executive Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20501

The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jon Kyl
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Max Baucus
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Eric Cantor
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable James E. Clyburn
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Vice President Biden, Senators Inouye, Kyl, Baucus and Representatives Cantor, Clyburn, and Van Hollen:

We are a diverse group of organizations representing millions of Americans committed to the conservation of our nation's fresh water, air, land, productive soils, oceans, fish and wildlife, and places for outdoor recreation and to the industries and rural communities these resources support. We are writing to express our deep concern about the fate in the budget negotiations now underway of federal programs that sustain our nation's natural resources.

We are concerned that a failure to reach consensus on how to address the multiple causes of the budget deficit will put undue pressure on domestic discretionary spending generally, and on both discretionary and mandatory spending dedicated to natural resource conservation.

As you know, conservation programs are grouped in "Function 300" of the federal budget. This is America's "natural resources budget," which spans a number of programs across the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce and other departments. It represents the sum of our country's remarkable, successful, and bi-partisan 100-year effort to conserve the natural resources that are a foundation for the health, safety, prosperity, national security, and quality of life of the American people.

With federal spending on land, water, ocean, and wildlife programs just 1.26% of the federal budget in 2010, it is clear that this spending is not a primary cause of the current federal budget crisis. Over the past 30 years, federal expenditures have increased dramatically over 100% in real terms. At the same time, spending on natural resources has been stagnant with negligible growth of approximately 2% from 1980 to 2009.

And yet, immense progress has been made in improving the health and quality of our environment. Our water, air, bays and estuaries are cleaner. Risks from toxic chemicals have been reduced. Land and water valued for fish and wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation and historic importance have been set aside for public use. The cost-share and reserve programs of the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill, most of which fall into the category of mandatory spending, have demonstrated that government can partner with farmers, ranchers and forest land owners to protect and restore natural habitat on millions of acres and reduce soil erosion and other impacts of farming while increasing agricultural productivity. Many marine fisheries have been restored. Water resources for human consumption, industrial use and agriculture have been better protected.

The result of our investments in conservation has been to help secure the use and enjoyment of America's natural resources on into the future. Such use remains a large and essential part of our country's economy. According to USDA, farm and farm-related employment includes about 24 million jobs. Estimates by the American Forest and Paper Association are that forest management and forest-dependent industries account for approximately 5 percent of the total U.S. manufacturing GDP, produce about $175 billion in products annually, and employ nearly 900,000 people. According to NOAA, commercial fishing supports one million full- and part-time jobs and generates $116 billion in revenue. A study by US Fish and Wildlife Service found that hunting, angling and wildlife-dependent recreation contribute $122 billion annually to our national economy. Much of this economic activity is located in rural areas where there are fewer other options. Natural resources-based products represent a significant proportion of the export sector so essential to our economic health.

And government investments in conservation have leveraged billions of dollars in non-federal capital for conservation including the personal resources of America's private landowners.

The recent flooding along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers is a good example of the need for continuing conservation funding. The protection of natural floodplains, in places like the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana, allowed floodwaters to be diverted from the mainstem of the river, saving costly damage to urban areas. In a time of economic constraints, continuing investment in such "natural capital" can be the least-cost and most effective way of avoiding the risks of natural hazards and meeting human needs.

But now, we fear that ongoing budget negotiations could result in top line cuts that, without even considering the merits of the nation's key conservation programs, will result in devastating impacts for the future of America's environment. These fears have been realized in both the House Appropriations Committee's FY12 Agriculture and Related Agencies bill, which imposes severe reductions to many Farm Bill Conservation Programs, and the Final FY11 Continuing Resolution, which included disproportionate cuts to programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Forest Legacy. All of these programs help keep our citizens on working farms, ranches, and forests that produce agriculture and forest commodities while maintaining natural resources and environmental quality. Further, these programs provide benefits to the rural economy through hunting and angling opportunities provided by these private lands.

Of course we recognize the need to reduce the size of the federal budget, and conservation should do its share. There is room for creativity and for improving the coordination, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of individual programs, but the House-passed budget resolution for FY 12 cuts all natural resource programs by 18% from 2010 levels and proposes to cut this group of programs by a total of 46% by 2016. The federal budget cannot and should not be balanced on the back of conservation. The natural resource budget should not be cut disproportionately to the budget as a whole. Sufficient funding should remain to keep protection and conservation of America's exceptional environment operational and successful.

In 1912 Theodore Roosevelt said, “There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country.” Over the last century, in good times and bad, with broad bi-partisan support, America has invested in the conservation of land and water, productive soils and wildlife habitat for the benefit of the American people. We have done so in the belief that, regardless of the other demands of society, each generation has a responsibility to pass on to the next natural resources that are healthy, clean, productive and beautiful. We hope and trust the current budget negotiations will not abandon this responsibility.

Thank you for your consideration.

National Organizations

Access Fund
Agricultural Stewardship Association
American Alpine Club
American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
American Fisheries Society
American Fly Fishing Trade Association
American Forest & Paper Association
American Forest Foundation
American Forests
American Hiking Society
American Land Conservancy
American Rivers
American Whitewater
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
Association of State Floodplain Managers
Biomass Energy Resource Center
Blue Goose Alliance
CarbonVerde, LLC
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Large Landscape Conservation
Center for Rural Affairs
Coastal States Organization
Community Consultants
Conservation Law Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Eastern Forest Partnership
Ecological Farming Association
Ecosystem Management Consultants
Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental and Energy Study Institute
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Working Group
Food System Economic Partnership
Forest Capital Partners
Friends-of-U.S. National Wildlife Refuges
Hardwood Federation
International Mountain Bicycling Association
Izaak Walton League of America
Kinney Land Company
Land Conservation Associates
Land Trust Alliance
National Alliance of Forest Owners
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Association of State Foresters
National Association of University Forest Resources Programs
National Parks Conservation Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
National Woodland Owners Association
Natural Land Institute
New Forests Inc.
Ocean Conservancy
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Outdoor Alliance
Outdoor Industry Association
Outdoors America
Plum Creek
Quail Unlimited
Restore America's Estuaries
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Scenic America
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
The Conservation Fund
The Garden Club of America
The Lyme Timber Company
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
Tierra Environmental
Trust for Public Land
Wildlife Forever
Winter Wildlands Alliance
World Wildlife Fund

Regional and State Organizations

1000 Friends of Maryland
Ahahui Malama i Ka Lokahi
Alabama A&M University
Alabama Coastal Foundation
Alabama Forest Resources Center
Alabama Innovation Engine
Appalachian Mountain Club
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
ArborOne Farm Credit
Battin Farm
Beaufort County Open Land Trust
Bedminster Regional Land Conservancy
Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest
Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper Inc.
Black Warrior Riverkeeper
Blue Mountain Audubon Society
Blue Mountain Land trust
Branford Land Trust
Cacapon & Lost Rivers Land Trust, Inc.
Cahaba River Society
Cahaba Riverkeeper
Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve
Capital Region Land Conservancy
Capitol Land Trust
Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy
Cascade Land Conservancy
Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation, Inc.
Cazenovia Preservation Foundation
Center For Carolina Living
Central Coast Land Conservancy
Charles River Watershed Association
Chelan-Douglas Land Trust
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Chicago Wilderness
Choctawhatchee Riverkeeper
Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and its Tributaries, Inc.
Coastal Conservation League
Columbia Land Trust
Community Open Land Trust
Congaree Land Trust
Connecticut Audubon Society
Connecticut Ornithological Association
Conservation Council for Hawaii
Conservation Federation of Missouri
Conservation Resources
Conservation Voters of South Carolina
Countryside Conservancy
Cragsmoor Conservancy, Inc.
D&R Greenway Land Trust
Davidson Lands Conservancy
Delaware River Greenway Partnership
Delaware Riverkeeper Network
Development and Conservation Management, Inc
Eastern Sierra Land Trust
Edison Wetlands Association
Endangered Habitats League
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Farmington River Watershed Association
Fire Island Land Trust
Five Valleys Land Trust
Flint River Watershed Coalition
Friend of Bayou Teche National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Acadia
Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges
Friends of Anahuac Refuge
Friends of Back Bay
Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Camas National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Congaree Swamp
Friends of Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Haystack Rock
Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space
Friends of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Las Vegas National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Noxubee Refuge
Friends of Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Princeton Nursery Lands
Friends of Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Sunkkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the 500th
Friends of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Friends of the Lower Suwannee & Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges
Friends of the National Wildlife Refuegs of Rhode Island
Friends of the Neches River
Friends of the Prairie Learning Center
Friends of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the Refuge Headwaters
Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges, Inc.
Friends of Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Wake Soil and Water Conservation District
Friends of Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge
Gathering Waters Conservancy
Genesis Farm
George Rogers Clark Land trust
Georgia Conservancy
Georgia Land Conservation Center
Great Egg Harbor Watershed Association
Great Swamp Conservancy, Inc.
Greater Irvington Land Trust
Greater Newark Conservancy
GrowFood Carolina
Hampshire County Farmland Protection Board
Hawaii Community Stewardship Network
Hawaiian Islands Land Trust
Hawaii's Thousand Friends
Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy
Heart of the Rockies Initiative
Highlands Campaign
Highstead
Hudson Highlands Land Trust
Hunterdon Land Trust
Huron River Watershed Council
Huyck Preserve and Biological Research Station
Illinois Audubon Society
Illinois Environmental Council
Indian River Lakes Conservancy
Indiana Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Institute for Ecological Health
Ipswich River Watershed Association
Jackson County Tourism
Jefferson Land Trust
Jersey Off Road Bicycle Association
Kamakani O Kohala Ohana -- Kako'o
Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Kentucky Woodland Owners Association
Keweenaw Land Trust
Kilauea Point Natural History Association
Kingston Greenways Association
Kittitas Conservation Trust
Lake County Forest Preserve District
Lancaster Farmland Trust
Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain
Land Trust of Arkansas
Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia
Land Trust of Virginia
Leelanau Conservancy
Life of the Land
Livable Hawaii Kai Hui
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, Inc.
Lummi Island Heritage Trust
Maine Coast Heritage Trust
Maine Forest Service
Mass Climate Action Network
Mendocino Land Trust
Mesa Land Trust
Midwest Environmental Advocates
Migratory Bird Research Group
Minnesota Forestry Association
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
Mississippi River Corridor - Tennessee
Mississippi's Lower Delta Partnership
Mobile Baykeeper
Mohonk Preserve, Inc.
Mojave Desert Land Trust
Molalla River Alliance
Monadnock Conservancy
Montana Association of Land Trusts
Montana Audubon
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montgomery Nature Conservancy
Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust
Mount Pleasant Land Conservancy
National Association of Clean Water Agencies
National Committee for the New River
Natural Capital Development, Inc.
Natural Resources Initiative of Mississippi
Naturaland Trust
Neponset River Watershed Associaton
New England Forestry Foundation
New England Wood Pellet LLC
New Jersey Audubon Society
New Jersey Conservation Foundation
New Jersey Highlands Coalition
New Jersey Recreation & Park Association
New River Land Trust
New York - New Jersey Trail Conference
New York Agricultural Land Trust
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference
Nisqually Land Trust
North Carolina Coastal Land Trust
North Olympic Land Trust
North Shore Land Alliance
Northern Forest Center
Northern Sierra Partnership
Northern Virginia Conservation Trust
Northwest Watershed Institute
Oblong Land Conservancy
Ohio Forestry Association
Okanogan Valley Land Council

Openlands
Orange County Land Trust
Orient Land Trust
Pacific Crest Trail Association
Pacific Forest Trust
Parker River Clean Water Association
Passaic River Coalition
PCC Farmland Trust
Peconic Land Trust
Piedmont Environmental Council
Pinelands Preservation Alliance
PONO Pacific
Prairie State Conservation Coalition
Protect Our Wetlands, Water and Woods
Putnam County Coalition to Preserve Open Space
Putnam Land Conservancy
Redwood Coast Land Conservancy
Regional Plan Association
Richland County Conservation Commission
Richland County Soil & Water Conservation District
Ridges to Rivers Open Space Network
Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust
River Alliance of Wisconsin
Roots of Change
Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy
Save Mount Diablo
Save the Dunes Conservation Fund
Scenic Hudson
Scenic Virginia
Schoolhouse of Wonder
Seattle Audubon Society
Sebasticook Regional Land Trust
Sequoia Riverlands Trust
Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association
Shining Mountain Land Services
Skagit Land Trust
Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests
Soda Mountain Wilderness Council
Somers Land Trust
South Carolina Aquarium
South Carolina Businesses for Clean Energy
South Carolina Conservation Credit Exchange
South Carolina Wildlife Federation
Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition
Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy
Spokane Riverkeeper
Surfrider Foundation, Hawaii Chapters
Tennessee Riverkeeper
The Clinch Coalition
The Conservancy of Montgomery County
The Friends of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
The Friends of the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuges and Wetlands
The Greater Jackson County Chamber of Commerce
The Land Connection
The Land Conservancy for Southern Chester County
The Land Conservancy of New Jersey
The Land Trust of North Alabama
The Longleaf Alliance
The Mountaineers
The Preserve Graydon Coalition
The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham
The Trustees of Reservations
Three Village Community Trust
Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust
University Center for Economic Development, Tuscaloosa, AL
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Upper Raritan Watershed Association
Upper Savannah Land Trust
Upper Valley Land Trust
Upstate Forever
Valley Conservation Council
Vashon-Maury Island Land Trust
Vermont Land Trust
Virginia Eastern Shore Land Trust, Inc.
Wallowa Land Trust, Inc
Warwick Conservancy
Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition
Weeks Bay Foundation
West Virginia Land Trust
Western Nebraska Resources
Western Pennsylvania Conservancy
Western Rivers Conservancy
Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association
Whidbey Camano Land Trust
Wild South
Windward Ahupua`a Alliance
Wisconsin Environment
Wisconsin Lakes
Wisconsin Land & Water Conservation Association
Wisconsin Wildlife Federation
Woodstock Land Conservancy
York Land Trust