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COMMITTEES
APPROPRIATIONS
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
INTELLIGENCE
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

June 8, 2018

Chairman Pat Roberts
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow:

Thank you for your leadership in drafting the 2018 Farm Bill – the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. I write to highlight my West Virginia priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill, and respectfully ask for your continued consideration.

As you know well, most authorizations for agriculture, nutrition and forestry programs overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) expire in 2018. These programs play a fundamental role in improving the daily lives of thousands of my constituents. We must reauthorize these programs and take the opportunity to make necessary policy changes to improve their cost, efficiency, and effectiveness. Given the recent failure of the House's version of the Farm Bill – H.R. 2, the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 – it is more important than ever to ensure members of the Senate are able to put our differences aside and find commonsense solutions for our agriculture producers, food insecure populations, and rural communities. A bipartisan and open amendment process like that undertaken in 2013 on S. 954 – the Agriculture Reform, Food and Jobs Act of 2013 – is the best path forward.

My priorities are listed and discussed below:

Opioids:

West Virginia is ground zero for the opioid epidemic. In 2016, West Virginia had the highest per capita rate of opioid caused deaths in the country – 43.4 deaths per 100,000. In 2016, 733 West Virginians succumbed to an opioid-related overdose death. I have led the charge in the Senate to increase federal support for treatment services and other programs to address this crisis – which has ravaged rural communities worse than urban areas. I believe the USDA can and should be doing more to assist rural communities fight this epidemic head on. The USDA recently announced its intent to prioritize funding to grant programs – the Community Facilities Grant Program and the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant (DCT) program. I was pleased to see this announcement and I ask that you consider doing anything you can to expand on this effort and prioritize funding for the development of innovative solutions to help address this epidemic – particularly in rural communities. I am also a cosponsor of S.1678 - A bill to amend the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act to improve access to grants and loans for evidence-based substance use disorder treatment services in rural areas, and for other purposes.

Nutrition:

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helps a lot of struggling folks in my state get by. Approximately 333,000 West Virginians received SNAP benefits in 2017 – amounting to one in every five of my constituents. Furthermore, WIC serves nearly half of all of West Virginian infants and a quarter of our children between the ages of one and four. Federal funds also support West Virginia’s two wonderful food banks – Mountaineer and Facing Hunger. In 2016, these two food banks distributed 16.4 million meals feeding 304,000 West Virginians.

While I believe we must be diligent in protecting and spending taxpayer dollars wisely, West Virginia receives less than one percent of the overall U.S. SNAP budget, yet these funds provide critical support to struggling families. I am concerned that misguided or mean-spirited attempts to cut benefits or increase eligibility requirements for these food programs will put increased pressure on our food banks and make it harder for our most vulnerable neighbors to put food on the table. I ask you to reject these attempted changes and protect these valuable programs that serve our most vulnerable neighbors.

Rural Development/Broadband:

The unfortunate downturn of the coal industry has left many communities, particularly those in the southern part of the state, with limited opportunities and high rates of unemployment. In fact, unemployment in West Virginia remains higher than the national average, and it breaks my heart to see these communities suffer. However, I remain hopeful for their future and I truly believe these areas can recover. The USDA oversees and administers more programs targeting rural development than any other federal agency. That is why I recently joined Senator Warner and Senator Capito to introduce a bill, S. 2733 – The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Act – to rename the Department of Agriculture; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. My bill recognizes and better reflects the key mission of the Department as the lead federal agency for rural development.

Aside from that, the 2018 Farm Bill presents an opportunity to reauthorize and provide policy updates to many of the USDA programs that work directly to bring prosperity to rural areas. Of the four USDA programs responsible for carrying out its rural development mission, I am particularly interested in the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) and its role in the deployment of broadband. Increasing access to affordable, high-speed, broadband service is fundamental for the economic revitalization of West Virginia. In the recently passed Fiscal Year 2018 omnibus spending package, I was proud to help secure \$600 million to promote broadband deployment in rural America through RUS. But I remain concerned that little of that funding will make its way to places like West Virginia that are the hardest and most expensive to serve, what the FCC describes as “above extremely high-cost.”

Throughout the last two decades, Congress has used the Farm Bill as a vehicle to advance policies that incentivize the expansion of broadband in rural parts of the country – specifically by creating and updating the Rural Utilities Service Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program and the Community Connect Grant Program. I respectfully encourage you to

reauthorize these important programs as well as provide policy updates ensuring the RUS has fair eligibility criteria standards for rural areas. Since 2009, West Virginia has received 22 awards via the four RUS loan grant programs totaling \$49.5 million. We are thankful for this valuable funding; however, we need more help. As I travel the state from county to county meeting with constituents, I hear deep frustration over the amount of red tape required during the application process. Furthermore, many communities lack the required cash-on-hand or viable commercial operations needed in order to obtain approval. As you continue discussions over the Rural Development Title, I ask you to consider eliminating the 25% requirement for users to be a commercial interest and to ensure the USDA prioritizes grants and loans to truly rural areas and not moderately populated suburbs.

Conservation – Chesapeake Bay:

West Virginia first began participating as a formal partner in the Chesapeake Bay cleanup in 2002, and I am proud to say, has largely kept pace with its goals outlined in the West Virginia watershed implementation plan. However, further collaboration is needed between the federal government, states, and local stakeholders in order to reach the 2025 goals for the watershed. Several USDA programs have contributed to improving the overall health of the Bay. The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) provide financial and technical assistance to local stakeholders and private landowners to improve water quality in local streams and on working lands. Since 2014, the RCPP has completed 88 projects with a total investment of \$19.1 million.

These projects have a systemic effect on improving the overall quality of the Chesapeake Bay – the nation’s largest estuary and a source of drinking water for 18 million Americans. My bills S. 2139, the Chesapeake Bay Farm Bill Enhancement Act and S.2978, the Conservation Reserve Enhancements Program Improvement Act provide policy updates to improve the delivery and implementation of these programs in Chesapeake Bay watershed states. West Virginia and other states within the Chesapeake Bay watershed have invested time and resources to improve the water quality of the Bay and I believe we should continue to see this investment through to its fruition.

Forestry:

The Monongahela National Forest is a 919,000 acre National Forest occupying 10 counties in West Virginia. Today the Monongahela plays an important role as an economic engine in West Virginia as it truly is a working forest by supplying timber, serving as a watershed for four states, and providing recreational opportunities to the surrounding region. Under the Trump Administration, the Forest Service plans to increase its timber production on the Monongahela National Forest. I support this effort and believe the Forest Service should be working as a friend and partner to the local timber industry, which provides jobs, and economic benefits to rural communities in my state.

I would like to see improvements in forest health management on federal and nonfederal land addressed in the Farm Bill. Section 8204 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 provided a valuable tool to the Forest Service to address the health and vitality of our National Forest System. Like other

forests in the National Forest System, the Monongahela is not immune to forest pests such as the hemlock wooly adelgid or the emerald ash borer and the challenges these and other pests bring. Declining forest health in the Monongahela also negatively affects the state and privately held land that enjoins the forest. West Virginia is the third most forested state in the nation with 87 percent of the state's forest held in private ownership. It is clear to me that we must continue our efforts to improve forest health. Section 8204 is a positive example of what can be done to help the Forest Service increase the pace and scale of landscape forest restoration. I ask you to consider building off this effort and provide the Forest Service with useful and innovative tools to streamline the planning, pace and scale of restoration projects in the National Forest System.

Thank you both kindly for your consideration of my priorities in the 2018 Farm Bill. I look forward to working with you and the members of the distinguished Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry – from both sides of the aisle – on this important text. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact my staff, Elliot Howard, at 202-228-6718 or via email at Elliot_Howard@manchin.senate.gov.

With warm wishes,



Joe Manchin III
United States Senator