

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 12, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We are writing to urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to finalize the long-awaited Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) agreement for Illinois. We also ask the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to allow payments for “Additional Acres” provided by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to serve as the Illinois match, as has been done for 20 years.

CREP is one of USDA’s flagship agricultural conservation programs, using a federal-state partnership to address state and nationally important environmental issues. In Illinois, CREP allows farmers to enter into voluntary contracts to retire frequently flooded or environmentally sensitive cropland to improve soil quality, reduce waterway runoff and nutrient pollution, and improve critical habitat for fish and wildlife. The Illinois CREP is the second oldest program of its kind in the nation and one of the most successful, with 142,000 acres enrolled and more than \$80 million invested since its inception.

Federal funds for CREP must be supplemented by non-federal funds, and since 2015, the Illinois CREP has been suspended due to state-level budget issues. Under Governor J.B. Pritzker, however, the IDNR now has received \$57 million to support the Illinois CREP for the next decade and has hired six staff to begin outreach to agricultural landowners to participate in the program, but now awaits USDA finalization of the agreement.

IDNR has two acreage types for Illinois CREP easement eligibility: acreage encumbered by a Conservation Reserve Program/CREP contract (known as federal CREP acres) and adjacent acreage not encumbered by the federal CREP contract (known as Additional Acres). These Additional Acres account for nearly half of the acreage enrolled in Illinois CREP easements, and expand and connect the smaller federal CREP acres to establish contiguous blocks of protected lands, and create wildlife corridors and greater water quality protection.

For 20 years, FSA has counted these Additional Acres as an approved state match, but has inexplicably reversed its position. Appropriation language enacted by the Illinois state legislature does not allow Illinois to use its capital funds for Additional Acres if these acres cannot be used as a match. This new, unexpected FSA position will jeopardize the success and integrity of this successful CREP program among Illinois farmers and conservation stakeholders.

Mr. Secretary, we know of your commitment to expanding on-farm conservation. There is widespread support in Illinois for USDA to re-approve this long-established state match, and to get this CREP agreement finalized and operational as soon as possible. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator



Cheri Bustos  
Member of Congress



Bobby L. Rush  
Member of Congress