

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 7, 2014

Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We are writing today to request the strong consideration of the Upper Mississippi River Basin and the Great Lakes in your designation of “Critical Conservation Areas” within the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Located in Title II of the recently passed *Agricultural Act of 2014*, or Farm Bill (Public Law 113-79), Section 1271B establishes an innovative Regional Conservation Partnership Program to garner and fund new joint partnership agreements with producers and local entities. These partnerships are intended to address a variety of issues including, but not limited to, water quality and quantity.

One fundamental aspect of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program is the designation of up to eight “Critical Conservation Areas.” Under the new Farm Bill, the law designates five specific priority criteria for geographic regions being considered, all of which can be applied to these nationally important bodies of water.

It is hard to imagine two watersheds that are more important to the country and Illinois than the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes. As transportation channels, critical sources of fresh water, and recreational keystones to the state of Illinois, these landmark bodies deserve significant focus to preserve and restore their ecosystems and long term sustainability.


The Mississippi River has many factors stressing its health, and yet many communities rely on significant economic activity fostered by it. Specifically, the Upper Mississippi River Basin covers 190,000 square miles between northern Minnesota and the southern tip of Illinois. This land mass accounts for about 17 percent of all U.S. crop sales in 2007, including 41 percent of all corn harvested for grain in the U.S. It’s designation as a “Critical Conservation Area” will allow farmers to more effectively utilize conservation programs and continue to act as environmental stewards of the land and water in such a vital watershed.

Also, as members of the Great Lakes Task Force, we have consistently advocated for the most effective efforts to restore the Great Lakes to their most pristine status. The Great Lakes are a national treasure, a significant economic resource, and an invaluable recreational ecosystem going back centuries. In 2011, the University of Michigan released a study that showed 1.5 million jobs and \$62 billion in wages were directly attributable to the Great Lakes. As you consider the Great Lakes and their watersheds, I would encourage you to use the U.S. Forest Service's definition under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which makes note of the historic watershed boundary, including Cook and Lake Counties in Illinois.

We are both committed to working with you to ensure that the new Farm Bill and its conservation initiatives aid in the continuing restoration of the Mississippi River and Great Lakes. We appreciate your consideration and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,


Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator


Mark Kirk
United States Senator

CC: Honorable Jason Weller, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service