



March 22, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Congratulations on your new appointment to lead USDA. We appreciate your making climate-smart farming as well as equity and inclusion your top priorities. Both will greatly benefit all Americans, and we in Washington State are embracing similar ambitions.

The Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), Washington Department of Agriculture (WSDA), and Washington State University (WSU) are excited about Washington's newly created Sustainable Farms and Fields (SFF) grant program. This voluntary program tracks perfectly with your stated goals of creating voluntary, market-based incentives for farmers to sequester carbon while improving soil health on their land. We believe this provides an ideal opportunity for Washington State to partner with USDA by adopting SFF as a pilot program to demonstrate the benefits of climate-smart farming.

SFF was created by the legislature in 2020 to incentivize farmers, ranchers, and aquaculture operations to increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. What makes this program so powerful is that farmers had a strong voice in its development. Not only did representatives from agricultural and environmental groups work together to produce the program's foundation, but individual farmers across Washington had the opportunity to weigh in directly on what they wanted to see in a climate-smart program.

An overwhelming majority of farmers we polled are already implementing practices to sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions – and that they are eager to do more. Farmers considered the top two barriers to implementing these practices were 1) uncertainty about which practices worked best for their farming operations; and 2) the prohibitive cost to upgrade heavy machinery/equipment. The top four NRCS carbon practices that respondents felt should be supported through the SFF program were cover crops, soil health and nutrient management, mulching and compost application, and no-till/direct seed, all of which appear to align with farmers' interests nationwide. Not only will these practices sequester carbon, but they provide numerous co-benefits, including healthier soils, increased crop yields, and more cost-effective farming operations. The SFF program, with assistance from USDA, can help farmers overcome

those barriers by using funding for site-specific technical assistance and financial assistance through conservation districts and other public entities.

The SCC and WSDA were allotted state funds in this current fiscal year towards the development of the Sustainable Farms and Fields program. We received these funds at a time when funding for most new programs was vetoed by Governor Inslee due to the onset of the COVID pandemic and the resulting fiscal crisis. Funding from USDA, perhaps through the Commodity Credit Corporation or other mechanisms, will allow this highly innovative program to thrive and become a model for incentivizing farmers to sequester carbon while improving farming practices and their bottom line.

This program is a high priority to the non-profit organizations Carbon Washington and Audubon Washington, and they are currently fundraising and helping us build private-public partnerships in an effort to secure non-state funds to start awarding SFF grants in July.

We are requesting that you consider funding Washington's Sustainable Farms and Fields grant program as a pilot project for USDA to demonstrate how a voluntary incentive program designed to increase climate-smart farming can be implemented at the state level to serve all farmers, including first-time, low-income, and minority farmers. Our forty-five conservation districts, as well as our farmers who produce over 300 commodities statewide, are prepared to participate in the SFF program, with many shovel-ready projects already identified. We would be happy to share the results of our Measurement and Estimation Verification (MEV) system, cost-benefit measurements, successes, and challenges – all of which could help in the development of a federal partnership.

We are enthusiastic about partnering with you and the Department, and helping you achieve a central goal of the new Administration in addressing climate impacts. And putting agriculture at the forefront of this effort.

We very much look forward to discussing this further with you and your staff.

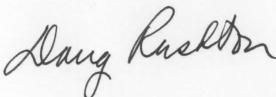
Respectfully,



Carol Smith, Executive Director
State Conservation Commission



Derek Sandison, Executive Director
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