

March 23, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Russia's decision to invade Ukraine last month has resulted in the needless and tragic deaths of civilians and soldiers, the destruction of towns and cities, and the displacement of millions of refugees. This unprovoked invasion also has disrupted global agricultural trade due to the key role Ukraine plays in global production.

As Russia's latest aggression against the sovereign nation of Ukraine enters its fifth week, there is growing concern over the implications this war will have on global food security. Ukraine is the breadbasket of Europe, and from an export perspective it provides 12 percent of the world's wheat, 15 percent of the world's corn, 15 percent of the world's barley and 50 percent of the world's sunflower oil. World stocks-to-use ratios, which are a measure of supply to demand adequacy, for wheat, corn, barley, and sunflower oil already are running low. If Ukraine's agriculture is taken offline, these ratios will return to the extremely low levels that happened between 2006 and 2013 and led to rationing among grain end users.

It remains unclear whether Ukrainian farmers will be able to safely plant crops this spring or harvest their soon-to-ripen winter wheat crops, or if carriers will be able to safely export available commodities out of the region. In addition, as Russia seeks to cut off Ukraine's supply chains, Ukrainian farmers may be unable to source critical items for grain production such as fertilizer, seed, fuel, and repairs. Tragically, this situation recently prompted United Nations Secretary General António Guterres to warn of a possible "hurricane of hunger and a meltdown of the global food system." He noted that 45 African and least-developed countries import at least a third of their wheat from Ukraine or Russia, with 18 of those importing at least 50 percent.

As USDA examines all available tools to address this looming commodity supply challenge, we urge you to provide flexibility for acres within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The United States needs to produce more grain and oilseeds to offset the loss of Ukraine's grain and sunflowers. Time is of the essence. The planting window in the United States has already opened in some southern regions and will spread quickly north as we enter spring.

According to USDA's 2017 National Resources Inventory, 4,164,000 acres of the 15,941,000 acres in CRP's general signup (CRP) were deemed "prime farmland". Prime farmland is defined as "land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops that is also available for these uses." To help address the fact that 26 percent of general CRP acres were prime farmland,

Congress lowered the statutory rental rates for general CRP sign-up in the 2018 Farm Bill to no more than 85 percent of the county rental rate.

We urge USDA to provide flexibility to producers to plant crops on prime farmland as well as the least environmentally sensitive acres currently in the program without penalty, whether on an emergency basis or through an early-out of their current CRP contracts. We firmly believe that prime farmland acres should be accessible to working lands programs, including Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Security Program (CSP), that provide proven environmental benefits while continuing to produce abundant crops to the benefit of both U.S. and global consumers.

In addition, general sign-up for CRP just closed on March 11. As these applications are considered, we urge USDA to only enroll environmentally sensitive land and preclude the addition of any additional prime farmland into CRP. We encourage USDA to instead use EQIP and CSP on prime farmland to the maximum extent possible. In the future, we also urge USDA to adhere to the rental rates caps codified in the 2018 Farm Bill for general and continuous CRP sign-ups. Finally, we request an updated inventory of the types of land within CRP.

Thank you for considering these proposals. The U.S. is blessed with some of the best quality soils on the planet, coupled with the best farmers in the world. The U.S. should do all it can to feed a growing hungry population now threatened by a likely global production shortfall by reassessing vital productive acres being idled here at home. Our members stand ready to carry out their respective roles along the agricultural value chain to produce, transform, and deliver a safe, abundant, and affordable food supply.

Sincerely,

American Bakers Association
American Farm Bureau Federation
Agricultural Retailers Association
National Grain and Feed Association
National Oilseed Processors Association
North American Millers' Association
North American Export Grain Association