



June 18, 2018

The Honorable Richard Shelby
United States Senate
304 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Doug Jones
United States Senate
326 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Shelby and Jones:

We are writing to ask you to support the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the Farm Bill) that was approved by the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee on June 13. We believe that the bipartisan approach to reauthorization of the Farm Bill taken by Senators Roberts and Stabenow is vastly superior to the deeply partisan, and flawed, bill that failed to achieve passage in the House Agriculture Committee. Specifically, we support the following provisions in the Senate version of the Farm Bill:

Reauthorization of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Nearly 1 in 8 Americans, including nearly 900,000 Alabamians, depend on SNAP to help them keep food on the table. And each year, SNAP contributes \$1.3 billion to Alabama's economy, spent in more than 5,000 Alabama stores.

Standing in stark contrast to the House Farm Bill, which could terminate or reduce benefits for more than 2 million people, the Senate Farm Bill reauthorizes SNAP, strengthens the program's operational integrity, and expands existing pilot employment and training programs so that additional states can test promising avenues to work for unemployed and low-wage SNAP participants.

The Senate Farm Bill encourages states to tailor employment and training activities to the needs of local businesses and to broaden these activities beyond work programs funded directly by SNAP's Employment and Training Program. Alabama's recent expansion of job training opportunities for SNAP participants through the community college system shows great promise, and we are pleased that the Senate Farm Bill has chosen to encourage similar state-level innovations rather than the one-size-fits-all, punitive work requirements in the House Farm Bill. We were also pleased to see that the Senate Farm Bill prioritizes employment and training services for SNAP participants who face additional barriers to employment—such as older workers, homeless people, people with

disabilities, and people exiting prisons. Such targeted services are more effective, and less expensive, than the mammoth employment program envisioned by the House Farm Bill.

We also support the Senate Farm Bill's provision that will allow vendors to accept EBT cards at multiple locations, which will be particularly helpful for local growers selling produce at multiple farmers' markets.

Finally, we support the extension of SNAP and Commodity Supplemental Food Program certification periods for elderly and disabled households with no earned income. These households are the least likely to have changes in income that would affect benefit levels and are the most likely to have difficulties accessing the services they need. Allowing for longer certification for these low-risk households benefits both the state and our most vulnerable SNAP participants.

Environmental and Clean Water Provisions. Each iteration of the Farm Bill has wide-reaching environmental impacts, both positive and negative. The recently released bipartisan Senate bill would benefit Alabama's water and natural environment by funding important conservation programs, strengthening water infrastructure, and protecting our most crucial environmental laws. We urge you to support the Senate Farm Bill and to reject any attempts to significantly impair the nation's waters or peel away commonsense protections for the environment. For instance, sections within H.R. 2 would completely repeal the Clean Water Rule and make it easier to use pesticides that pollute waters and endanger wildlife. Agriculture is incredibly valuable to the State of Alabama and the country as a whole, deserving of special attention and protection. Our environment, especially our rivers and streams, is our most important natural resource. Rather than establishing programs that exploit and degrade the environment, the Farm Bill needs to be written to protect farmers while also protecting wildlife, public health, and water.

As it currently stands, the House version of the Farm Bill poses several serious threats that the Senate version does not. First, the Banks Amendment, which was adopted by the full House, would repeal the Clean Water Rule. Referred to as the "dirty water rider," the Banks Amendment would make it easier for polluters to put chemicals, heavy metals, and carcinogens into wetlands and intermittent streams that flow into rivers and important drinking water supplies. Fortunately, the Senate version does not have a similar provision. The Clean Water Rule clarifies the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce our water protection laws, reducing and preventing pollution of American waterways. The dirty water rider is a clear rejection of science, as thousands of pages of peer-reviewed studies conclude that the Clean Water Rule is necessary for clean, accessible water. Over half of all Alabamians get their drinking water from surface water that could be threatened by the repeal of this rule. In order to protect vital drinking water and significant aquatic habitats, it is crucial to oppose any attempts to repeal the Clean Water Rule.

Additionally, multiple provisions in the House bill—but not in the Senate version—would remove restrictions on highly toxic chemical pesticides; H.R. 2 would allow large

pesticide users to ignore the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act, even when spraying directly into rivers and streams. It should be noted that H.R. 2 would increase funding for water infrastructure for rural communities and water conservation programs. We support the inclusion of these positive measures in the final bill, but implore you to oppose any efforts to repeal the Clean Water Rule or decrease regulations on pesticide use. As members of the Alabama Delegation, you have a distinct role to play. Agriculture is a top priority in the state, but it must be responsible and sustainable—or else endanger Alabama’s water quality, public health, and long-term economic productivity. For the benefit of the state’s ecological wellbeing, please support the Senate Farm Bill and keep it as protective of the environment as possible.

Supports for Sustainable Agriculture. The Senate Agriculture Committee Farm Bill supports local growers by incorporating many of the provisions of the Local Food and Regional Market Supply (FARMS) Act, which was introduced in both the House and the Senate and endorsed by many farm and food organizations. Most notably, the bill includes the centerpiece of the Local FARMS Act: the streamlining of the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP), Value-Added Producers Grant Program (VAPG), Value Chain Coordinators, and a new regional public-private partnership initiative into a single program that builds on the success of existing investments, while also establishing permanent farm bill baseline funding. We believe that these improvements will significantly help small scale and sustainable growers in Alabama and deserve your support.

Key policy reforms in the bipartisan bill also include several programmatic improvements from the GROW Act and the SOIL Stewardship Act, which were both introduced by members of the Senate Agriculture Committee. These provisions make critical reforms to increase the effectiveness and accessibility of farm bill conservation programs that would help farmers to improve their soil health and water quality. The bill also expands the Title’s support for organic agriculture and historically underserved producers.

At a time when farmers of color and beginners trying to break into the business face significant and disproportionate barriers to success, the Senate Committee’s bill takes steps toward leveling the playing field and increasing access to critical tools and resources for underserved producers. The bill permanently reauthorizes and funds two of the USDA’s flagship training and technical assistance programs for underserved producers – the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and the Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (Section 2501). The bill combines the two programs into a new Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Program while still protecting the functions and purposes of each component program. It also ensures that all beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers enrolling in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) have the option to receive 50 percent of their cost-share payment up front.

Some Concerns: Overall, the draft Senate bill is a good starting point from which to strengthen and expand federal support for sustainable agriculture, though it does contain some concerning provisions. Among the most troublesome provisions is the cutting of much-needed funds from CSP and the Environmental Quality Incentives program (EQIP); these funds are re-purposed to support other programs in the Title. Though the Senate maintains the overall funding level for the Conservation Title, we do not believe that boosting one conservation program at the expense of another is a sustainable strategy.

While we are in support of most of the nutrition provisions of the Senate Farm Bill, we do have concerns about two provisions and would encourage you to consider possible amendments to strengthen these sections. First, we were disappointed to see the elimination of most state performance bonuses. These bonuses have been significant in helping Alabama improve SNAP administration and have encouraged the state to reduce error rates and improve payment accuracy. While we recognize that there are concerns about the quality of the data underlying these payments, we believe that elimination of the payments is premature and that other quality control efforts could improve the data on which the bonuses are based.

Unfortunately, the Senate bill does not adequately reinvest additional funds in the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which is essential to our work to feed those who are food insecure and to broader efforts to close the hunger gap in our communities. While the 2014 Farm Bill provided an additional \$205 million over 10 years for TEFAP, enhancing our ability to feed hungry families, the current Senate bill invests only \$105 million over 10 years. This falls well short of what is needed for us to help hungry families in our communities.

Finally, we urge you to resist any floor amendments to the Farm Bill that would weaken SNAP such as the imposition of rigid work requirements, the restriction of state flexibility, or the privatization of SNAP administration. We believe strongly that SNAP is working well to support employment while ensuring that Alabama families, our children and our seniors have the food they need to thrive and succeed. Imposing additional barriers to access or reducing assistance will only increase hunger in Alabama and damage the state's economy.

We appreciate your consideration of our recommendation, comments, and concerns and urge you, at the appropriate time, to vote "yes" on the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee's Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 and to oppose amendments that would weaken access to food assistance, clean water, and support from sustainable agriculture.

Sincerely,

Scott Douglas

Scott Douglas, Executive Director
Greater Birmingham Ministries

Alice Evans

Alice Evans, Executive Director
Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network

Kimble Forrister

Kimble Forrister, Executive Director
Alabama Arise/Arise Citizens' Policy Project

Laura Lester

Laura Lester, Executive Director
Alabama Food Bank Association

Cindy Lowry

Cindy Lowry, Executive Director
Alabama Rivers Alliance