

**United States Senate**

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 19, 2012

Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition and Forestry  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Pat Roberts  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition and Forestry  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts:

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the programs authorized in the Farm Bill are crucial to Alaska's food security, jobs, health, and infrastructure. As you draft the next reauthorization of the Farm Bill, I want to highlight programs of great importance to Alaska, which I strongly support for inclusion in the legislation. Broadly, the bill should continue to support Rural Development assistance, domestic food assistance programs, Alaska's expanding agricultural economy, in-state research, biomass development, and reauthorize the Denali Commission.

As Senator Stabenow has seen firsthand, Alaska has hundreds of small rural communities facing unique challenges based on their remoteness and inaccessibility by road. Because of that, USDA Rural Development provides essential assistance for infrastructure improvements, public health, communication, and housing. Specifically important for Alaskans are the Water, Waste Disposal and Wastewater Facility Grants, especially the Water Systems for Rural and Native Villages in Alaska. This assistance to rural Alaska is vital for sanitary sewer and solid waste disposal, and for clean drinking water. Rural Development programs also support expanded deployment of broadband in Alaska, which in turn supports education, the delivery of health care through telemedicine, and increased economic activity. Loans and loan guarantees should be expanded, while broadband grants should be available to continue expanding access to broadband.

The Farm Bill provides the opportunity to reauthorize the Denali Commission, a federal agency vital to health, safety and economic development throughout Alaska. The Commission is charged with a variety of critical rural infrastructure development, job training, and government coordination functions. In conjunction with USDA Rural Development, the Commission has responsibility for providing rural energy, health facilities, transportation development and job training to Alaska communities and villages. In addition to reauthorization, the Farm Bill can make necessary technical fixes to improve and streamline the functions of the Commission.

The importance of federal nutrition programs for Alaska cannot be overstated. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program help protect nearly 100,000 Alaskans each year from hunger and food insecurity. Congress should not restrict eligibility or cut benefits from these

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programs while unemployment remains high and the country is still recovering from the recession. In fact, I believe this Farm Bill should make mandatory funding for TEFAP more responsive to changes in the economy. Additionally, I support expanded use of Alaska wild salmon throughout our domestic food assistance programs.

Food security is a major concern for Alaskans, as 95 percent of our food must be imported from outside the state. Because of this, I support many efforts to increase our in-state agricultural production and make farming more cost-effective for Alaskans. The Geographically Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers—Reimbursement Transportation Cost Payment (RTCP) program assists our food producers, who must transport equipment and supplies from out of state. RTCP should be reauthorized at a \$15 million level. A robust Regional Equity program is also vital for states like Alaska with smaller agricultural economies; it must be preserved. These conservation programs, especially the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), have been very successful in our state. The EQIP funding spent on the High Tunnel (hoop houses) Pilot Project has greatly increased production in Alaska.

Many of the recent advancements in Alaska's agricultural economy are directly related to federal research occurring in the state. With Alaska's unique climate and growing season, state-specific research is imperative to the continued advancement of our agricultural and rural economies. The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) performs that important research function, and language should be included in the next Farm Bill ensuring every state has at least one ARS research station; Alaska currently does not have any. The USDA also supports research by land grant universities and the cooperative extensions, which disperse new advancements throughout the state. This Farm Bill should continue to support that important research and outreach.

Lastly, the legislation's provisions regarding forestry and biomass production could help Alaska move toward renewable biomass energy sources in rural and urban Alaska. The Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) is a promising program to develop a sustainable and affordable energy supply for many Alaska communities. I support strong funding for BCAP in this year's reauthorization.

Thank you for your hard work on the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. I look forward to working with you over the coming months to ensure the bill supports many of these vital programs and creates jobs, increases food security, builds infrastructure, and protects health in Alaska.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich  
United States Senator