Dear Distinguished Congressional Leaders:

The below mentioned groups represent millions of America’s conservationist and sportsmen/-women. We would like to thank you for your continued efforts in working to advance the Farm Bill. We appreciate the open dialogue we have engaged in with you and your staff throughout the reauthorization process. Because the conservation programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are so critical to maintaining healthy soil and water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities for America’s 34 million sportsmen/-women, we strongly believe that we must grow conservation in the Farm Bill to meet the diverse needs of our farmers and ranchers while providing them the options and tools needed to succeed in meaningful conservation.

As conference negotiations for the final version of the Farm Bill progress, we would like to highlight one provision specifically that is a top priority for all of our collective organizations. This provision, known as Sodsaver will provide a tremendous benefit to this nation’s most threatened and fragile ecosystem: our remaining native grasslands. A broad Sodsaver provision enacted in the Farm Bill would help defuse the threat to our native grasslands and to our country’s traditional ranching families who depend on this land.

Support and leadership for such a provision has been astounding not only from Members of Congress and the Administration (USDA’s 2007 Farm Bill priorities which includes Sodsaver), but also from the national media -- spurred by the Governmental Accounting Office (GAO) report on grassland conversion that was released last September, and USDA’s new breakings report.

We write asking for your leadership to ensure the Sodsaver language is included in the final Bill. While the Senate language is not everything we want or think needs to be done, we did find the Senate’s version denying crop insurance and noninsured crop disaster assistance program (NAP) benefits on lands converted from native sod after passage of this farm bill critical. Also the Senate bill language does not set a time limit on ineligibility and thus is fundamental to policy success over the House version that does set such a limit to four years. Furthermore, we are supportive of the Senate version’s “common sense” de minimus exception of 5 acres. We do not support increasing this de minimus exception acreage by any amount.

We are cognizant of the budget implications on this Farm Bill and how critical every source of revenue and savings has become. We remind you that the Congressional Budget Office has scored the Senate’s version of Sodsaver at a savings of $23 million over 5 years and $119 million over 10 years.

Finally, we would underscore that a Sodsaver provision does not prohibit landowners from breaking native grassland, but federal payments should no longer provide incentives for doing so.
We look forward to working with you on this and other elements of the Farm Bill as you proceed with conference deliberations. As demands on our nation’s land, water, and resources continue to expand, conservation must become a national priority.

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust  National Audubon Society  National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
American Sportfishing Association  National Trappers Association  National Wildlife Federation
Archery Trade Association  North American Bear Foundation  North American Grouse Partners
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
Bowhunting Preservation Alliance  Northern Great Plains Working Group
Campfire Club of America  Playa Lakes Joint Venture
Carbon Fund  Pope & Young Club
Center for Native Ecosystems  Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
Coevolution Institute  Quail Unlimited
Dallas Safari Club  Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife  Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Delta Waterfowl  Texas Wildlife Association
Ducks Unlimited  The Nature Conservancy
Environmental Defense Fund  The Wilderness Society
Environmental Working Group  The Wildlife Society
Healing Our Water Coalition  Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Illinois Stewardship Alliance  Trout Unlimited
Intermountain West Joint Venture  Union of Concerned Scientists
International Hunter Education Association  Whitetails Unlimited
Izaak Walton League of America  Wildlife Forever
Land Trust Alliance  Wildlife Management Institute
Madison Audubon Society  World Wildlife Fund
Mississippi Fish & Wildlife Foundation
Mississippi Flyway Council
Mule Deer Foundation

Enclosure: Letter from Senator Thune regarding Sodsaver

cc: Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer
   Chairman James L. Connaughton, Council on Environmental Quality
   Director Dale Hall, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service