September 26, 2023

United States House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

**Re: Vote No on H.R. 4368, which drastically cuts funding for agricultural programs, undermines climate progress, and threatens rural communities**

Dear Representative,

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, the undersigned groups **urge you to oppose H.R. 4368, the House Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations bill as well as any amendments that are detrimental to our environment and public health.** This includes a self-executing amendment to further slash 14.15% on top of the already draconian cuts in the base FY24 bill outlined below.

 After a summer full of record-breaking heat, horrific flooding and droughts, and wildfire smoke that blanketed much of the nation, this bill would reduce funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) by more than forty percent, rescind historic investments in rural clean energy and energy efficiency programs, and gut agricultural research and technical assistance programs that farmers and ranchers rely on to innovate their operations. H.R. 4368 would also introduce an onslaught of extreme anti-environmental policy mandates that have no place in the appropriations process. Taken together, this bill would seriously harm rural communities and agricultural producers and is simply another attempt to unwind the significant climate progress made in the Inflation Reduction Act at the behest of big polluters.

H.R. 4368 would cut overall funding for the agencies to the lowest level in more than 20 years, more than $10 billion below FY 2023 and $3.62 billion below the President’s budget request. However, the cuts to USDA programs writ large are far deeper than this given that the bill also rescinds $5.77 billion from programs from the Inflation Reduction Act intended to benefit rural communities, farmers and ranchers, and small businesses and tackle the climate crisis.

These include more than $1.5 billion in cuts to the Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program and the Rural Energy for America Program that lower energy costs for rural families and small businesses and make rural energy systems more reliable and resilient. The Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program provides the financial tools for rural electric cooperatives, who provide power to 92% of persistent poverty counties in the US, to make investments in clean energy systems. By providing financing for rural energy systems, New ERA helps drive down the cost of electricity for rural ratepayers while increasing the reliability and availability of clean energy. The program is also set to provide an economic boom to rural economies, with estimates indicating that New ERA can help drive 90,000 jobs to rural areas. In addition to rescinding $500 million in REAP funding, the bill includes a major policy change by restricting funds to loan guarantees only rather than both loan guarantees and grants. This change would undermine access to the program for many farmers and rural small businesses.

The bill would also rescind over $2.2 billion intended to provide financial assistance to producers who have experienced discrimination in USDA’s farm lending programs prior to January 1, 2021. In addition, it would cut more than $2 billion that was intended to provide relief to distressed borrowers with certain Farm Service Agency loans whose agricultural operations are at financial risk.

H.R. 4368 would cut other important programs for agricultural producers such as eliminating funding for the USDA’s Climate Hubs, which have been funded since they were first created in 2015. The Hubs provide regionally-specific information, tools and technical support to farmers, ranchers and forest owners to inform their decision-making as they seek to navigate the challenges a changing climate poses to their operations. The bill would also zero out funding for USDA’s Office for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production which was created in the 2018 Farm Bill to promote urban, suburban, indoor and other innovative agricultural practices, and serves diverse communities. In addition, the bill would jeopardize access to clean water for rural communities by cutting funding for water and waste disposal projects by more than 36 percent.

Additionally, the bill is likely to serve as a vehicle for proposed amendments that would further undermine our environmental and public health safeguards, attack the historic progress to fight the climate crisis made in the Inflation Reduction Act, and advance the interests of fossil fuel companies and other big polluters. Lastly, H.R. 4368 also includes a number of provisions that would harm the most vulnerable communities, including low income communities and communities of color who are already disproportionately impacted by pollution and the accompanying health burdens.

Again, we urge you to REJECT H.R. 4368, the FY 24 Agriculture appropriations bill, which would threaten the health and safety of rural communities, undermine critical investments and programs that benefit farmers, and worsen the climate crisis.

Sincerely,

Alaska Wilderness League

American Friends Service Committee

Climate Action Campaign

Climate Reality Project: Chicago Metro Chapter

Earthjustice

Elevate

Endangered Species Coalition

Environmental Defense Fund

Environmental Law & Policy Center

Environmental Working Group

GreenLatinos

Health Care Without Harm

Interfaith Power and Light

League of Conservation Voters

Natural Resources Defense Council

NextGen America

ONE Northside

Prairie Rivers Network

Sierra Club

South Bronx Unite

The Wilderness Society

Union of Concerned Scientists

Western Watersheds Project