



May 15, 2023

The Honorable Andy Harris  
Chairman  
House Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies

The Honorable Sanford Bishop  
Ranking Member  
House Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies

Dear Chairman Harris and Ranking Member Bishop:

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is a network of community leaders, land management practitioners and conservation partners across the West that work to align land stewardship with rural community benefit.

Following passage of two historic sources of funding through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, our coalition partners would like to underscore the crucial need to build rural community-based capacity in order to reduce barriers to accessing these resources and advance equity for rural stakeholders within important federal programs.

At RVCC, we are committed to the following funding priorities:

1. Adequate funding for federal programs and resources that support collaborative capacity, community-based investments, and partnership-based approaches to land management.
2. Sustained investment in programs that support both land stewardship and rural economic benefit across land ownerships.
3. Support for rural development programs, including Rural Business Development Grants and the Rural Energy for America Program.

We ask that the subcommittee support the following programs and initiatives as you draft the FY24 spending bill.

- **Include dedicated funding for collaborative and community-based capacity.** Effective use and implementation of many USDA programs and authorities requires established partnerships and relationships; stakeholder engagement and support; well-developed plans and proposals; and coordination, administration, and implementation capacity. However, there is little to no funding to support the community-based, collaborative efforts required to create these enabling conditions for implementation. Dedicated funding is needed for this work, which is why we advocate for both standalone collaborative and community-based grant programs as well as the deliberate incorporation of capacity support into existing implementation-focused programs. Potential avenues include:

- Create a new Congressional appropriation or direct agencies to pool funding sources to support a dedicated fund that supports baseline coordination and operations capacity for conservation-focused partnerships working across jurisdictions. This concept is captured in the Network for Landscape Conservation’s “National Landscape Partnerships Fund” [proposal](#).
  - Support dedicated grants for community-based capacity, such as those found in the following legislative proposals:
    - The National Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program proposed in the [National Wildfire Emergency Act](#).
    - The Restoration and Resilience Grant Program proposed in the 2023 [Protect the West Act](#).
  - Direct the NRCS to use at least \$10 million a year in Conservation Technical Assistance funding for multi-year grants to support the development of partnerships that build the capacity of local partners to develop, apply for, and implement effective projects.
  - Fund the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership and include the provision that 20% of the program’s funding must be reserved for technical assistance, project development, and/or local capacity building.
  - Utilize report language to encourage the allocation of CFLRP funding towards non-Forest Service partners that provide crucial CFLRP collaborative support functions.
  - Authorize the Forest Service, and the National Forest System in particular, to enter into agreements with eligible parties to support the overall work and capacity support needs of collaboratives working on issues affecting Federal and adjacent non-Federal lands.
- **Encourage agencies to provide upfront funding to enable more equitable participation in USDA programs.** Through report language, we request that the Appropriations Committee direct USDA agencies to provide more opportunities for advance funding – instead of reimbursements – to enable greater participation by under-resourced partners and landowners in federal programs.
  - **Maintain robust funding for programs that enhance the stewardship economies of rural communities.** This includes funding for the following programs: Community Forest and Open Space Conservation, Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Landscape Scale Restoration, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program, and Wood Innovation Program.
  - **Invest in rural development.** Growing economic opportunity is vital to maintaining healthy rural communities. Federal investments in rural infrastructure and business development are critical to help start and expand rural business ventures through programs such as the Rural Business Development Loans, the Rural Energy for America Program, Rural Cooperative Development Grants, and the many programs under the Economic Development Administration.
  - **Enhance the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.** We ask that the Appropriations Committee allow RCPP recipients to use program funding for allowable indirect expenses, with a default indirect rate of 20% for Tribes or partners working with historically underserved recipients without a negotiated rate. With this adjustment, RCPP will be more accessible to

small, community-based partners that have limited funding sources to support critical overhead functions.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working together to ensure rural voices are considered throughout the appropriations process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurel Harkness". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L'.

Laurel Harkness, Coalition Director  
Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition  
[laurel@ruralvoicescoalition.org](mailto:laurel@ruralvoicescoalition.org)  
(530) 859-9168