

## CHESAPEAKE BAY REGION



March 3, 2021

Tom Vilsack, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As leaders of state agricultural departments in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and members of the cabinet-level Principals' Staff Committee (PSC) of the Chesapeake Bay Program, we congratulate you on your recent confirmation. USDA and our region's farmers are critical partners in achieving water quality goals for the Bay watershed.

Along with the financial assistance provided through Farm Bill programs, the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) that is a core function of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is key to achieving the productive, sustainable farms that we desire in the Bay watershed. Unfortunately, staffing levels in our region have not kept pace with demand, and backlogs of conservation planning are an unfortunate obstacle to implementation.

That is why we are pleased to hear that NRCS has provided Direct Hire Authority for over 1500 new entry-level field office technical staff. We would like to see Critical Conservation Areas, especially the Chesapeake Bay, prioritized for these new positions, along with the CTA and program funding to support them directly and with adequate overhead.

NRCS has the respect and trust of our agricultural community. Having more of these highly trained professionals in the field will be an asset to both our farmers and water quality.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and for your commitment to this important program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph Bartenfelder".

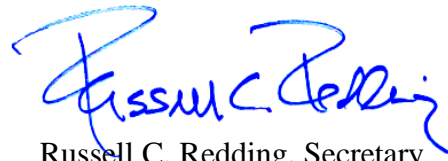
Joseph Bartenfelder, Secretary  
Maryland Dep't of Agriculture

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Leonhardt".

Kent Leonhardt, Commissioner  
West Virginia Dep't of Agriculture



Richard Ball, Commissioner  
New York Dep't of Agriculture & Markets



Russell C. Redding, Secretary  
Pennsylvania Dep't of Agriculture



Bettina Ring, Secretary  
Agriculture and Forestry, Virginia



Ann Pesiri Swanson, Executive Director  
Chesapeake Bay Commission