

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 21, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write in support of the Long Island Sound (LIS) Watershed proposal through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). As you know, this program was created by the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill in order to address environmental problems at a regional level. This multilayered and collaborative approach to watershed restoration provides a unique opportunity for farmers, conservation districts, and other stakeholders to build on tentative gains made in the Long Island Sound.

Long Island Sound is a Nationally Significant Estuary, a place where fresh and salt water combine to create one of the most productive ecosystems in the world. Ninety percent of the fresh water in LIS comes from three major rivers: the Connecticut River, the Housatonic River, and the Thames River. The LIS watershed begins at the headwaters to the Connecticut River on the Quebec border and encompasses 16,820 square miles in six states. Given the vastness of the watershed, the relationship between LIS ecological health and upland conservation practices are inseparable. An added layer of complexity stems from the over 600 miles of coastline, a constantly changing environment that provides feeding, breeding, nesting and nursery areas for many animals. Over 170 fish species and 1,200 invertebrate species live year round or seasonally in LIS.

As the recent agricultural census demonstrated, agriculture is growing in our state and region and more young and beginning farmers are entering this field. These individuals have embraced their role as stewards of the land, utilizing the suite of National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs to improve the land and to protect watersheds. Additionally, consumer interest in sustainability has demonstrated the economic benefits of conservation to seasoned producers. This convergence has created conservation success stories that dot the landscape across Connecticut. Marrying the upriver improvements and the longstanding conservation efforts along the shoreline remains critical moving forward. The finalized Farm Bill will help with some farmland conservation in the state, but the RCPP will leverage those improvements across the Long Island Sound watershed.

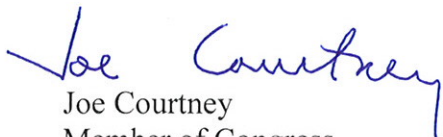
The range of partners that have stepped forward in support of the Long Island Sound Watershed is extensive at every level of government and non-government. In Connecticut many of these partners have a proud history and strong record of improving the watershed. Local municipalities have long worked with USDA to address nutrient management. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture works with the NRCS on a range of issues including Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program to put acreage under easements. There is also a range of national level

organizations including, but not limited to, the American Farmland Trust, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and The Nature Conservancy, which can bring significant national level expertise and resources to bear on top of extensive local and regional experience that will contribute to the success of watershed-wide conservation efforts.

Beyond the longstanding relationships of different entities and programs, the fact remains that the LIS watershed is home to over 650,000 acres of prime farmland and 70,000 acres of aquaculture. However, non-point source pollution is one of the biggest challenges facing LIS and is not being adequately addressed on a watershed basis. While we have seen the health of Long Island Sound improve in recent years thanks to the collaborative work referenced above, federal funding continues to represent an inadequate segment of the equation. Of likely interest to your Department is the fact that LIS ranks fourth out of the 28 estuaries in the Nationally Significant Estuary program for leveraging federal dollars, with every \$1 in federal spending matched by \$98 in non-federal spending. While the application before USDA requests \$19 million with a \$19 million non-federal match, we are confident that the non-federal resources that would be devoted to LIS watershed conservation could be significantly higher.

Examples of dedicated and engaged conservation partners can be found all across the watershed. RCPP could be a vital mechanism to coordinate and enhance the work already being done up and down the watershed and within LIS. We urge you and your department provide the Long Island Sound a place within RCPP. As always, we greatly appreciate your attention in this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Joe Courtney  
Member of Congress



Richard Blumenthal  
US Senator



Christopher Murphy  
US Senator



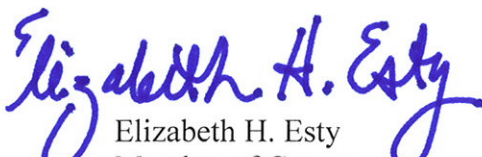
Rosa L. DeLauro  
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