

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

May 14, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you today urging that you designate the Mississippi River Main Stem as a Critical Conservation Area under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill.

As you know, the Mississippi River Basin is home to diverse agricultural production that greatly contributes to the overall economic success of the region. In an effort to maintain future agricultural productivity, farmers along the Mississippi River Basin have met conservation challenges through local and regional cooperative efforts. These challenges include wetland management, wildlife habitat preservation, flood control, irrigation, groundwater preservation, erosion prevention, sediment management, and so on. We believe RCPP provides an important opportunity for conservation organizations to leverage USDA's resources to most effectively meet their goals.

In 2010, USDA created the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Waters Initiative (MRBI) as a means to work with producers and landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices. As you know, MRBI has been successful meeting its primary goal of addressing growing water quality and nutrient concerns. The conservation practices put in place have benefited our natural resources and enhanced agricultural profitability through reduced inputs and enhanced soil health. We encourage USDA to use the critical conservation designation as a tool to build on MRBI's successes to provide additional assistance to producers and producer organizations along the Mississippi River Basin.

RCPP designation is an opportunity for the region to expand existing partnerships, and provide producers the tools to meet their goals. The River, running through ten states and connecting 31 through an expansive tributary system, meets the criteria of having water quality and quantity concerns, and of furthering the conservation use of natural resources on a regional scale. Given that this is a new initiative that builds on previously Congressionally-authorized USDA conservation programs, we would like to state clearly that the intent of RCPP is to make available voluntary assistance to farmers, and not to provide the basis for new environmental regulations or studies by USDA or any other agency.

Again, we urge you to give all due consideration to designating the Mississippi River Basin as a Critical Conservation Area under the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Adequate conservation performance throughout the region is necessary to

maintain the critical agricultural output the United States enjoys. With Critical Conservation Area status, farmers, ranchers, and other stakeholders, whose jobs and livelihoods depend on our natural resources, can address the conservation issues they face cooperatively and effectively.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron Kind". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Ron Kind  
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim Walz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T".

Tim Walz  
Member of Congress