

Conservation cuts prompt land stewardship concern

BY JOLENE STEVENS

Contributing writer

The Minnesota-based Land Stewardship Project is among the most recent agriculture-related organizations to call on the U.S. Congress and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to retain USDA funding for future conservation efforts.

"Any turning away from the stewardship of our nation's farmlands must be considered not in the inaccessible reaches of budget deals, but in the context of public policy debate," said Mark Schultz, the group's associate director/policy director in a phone interview Wednesday.

"Any cuts that must be made in the short-term must not disproportionately fall on conservation, but must be borne fairly across agricultural programs," he added following up on an April 1 letter on the topic. "It's important that Congress, as well as Secretary Vilsack and the Obama Administration get the message right now."

In the letter, Schultz said the Land Stewardship Project has "serious concerns" on an approach to budgeting outside the farm bill and that it appeared agriculture will be "deeply affected" — as well as many other areas of federal government.

"Calibrating agriculture funding and policy is best achieved in the reauthorization framework of the farm bill which provides appropriate consideration as well as public input during deliberations," he wrote.

"In the interim, if agriculture is required to make additional cuts, then all agriculture spending must be on the table," he stated. "This has not been the case as of late, with conservation and innovative family farm programs bearing the biggest burden, while other more costly and less productive farm program agriculture entitlements remain largely untouched."

Schultz called cuts in the Conservation Stewardship Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Programs "shortsighted and misguided."

He asked Congress and Vilsack to recall establishment of the Soil Conservation Service "in the depth of the great depression" to remove the "national menace and skies blackened with the Dust Bowl" to "safeguard and enhance" the soil.

In other excerpts from his letter, Schultz said, despite new changes, agriculture has continued to face added strain on the nation's landscape and natural resources.

Today's "strong commodity prices, increased and heavier production, the diverse use and demand of agriculture products, and additional competing land uses" are currently adding to this stress he said.

"Investments in working lands conservation — methods that allow farmers and ranchers to produce agricultural products and to enrich the health of our natural resources and long-term productivity of farmland through effective conservation farming systems and practices — have become a conservation priority," the letter continued.

These, he wrote, should be debated in the context of the 2012 Farm Bill debate rather than as in the current budget negotiations.

Schultz said doing otherwise will undermine effective pro-