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RANKING DEMOCRATIC MEMBER

# U.S. House of Representatives
## Committee on Natural Resources
## Washington, DC 20515

January 14, 2013

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 2025

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I write with concern regarding severe drought and dust storms across the Great Plains. In December a dust storm in West Texas killed one person, injured 17, and forced large portions of a major highway to close.[1] As of January 1st more than 60% of the continental United States was experiencing moderate to severe drought.[2] Many states in the Great Plains have endured disproportionate drought, with the period between December 2011 through November 2012 the driest on record for Montana and Nebraska and one of the driest on record for Colorado and South Dakota.[3]

According to the State of the Climate report issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2012 was the warmest year on record for the continental United States.[4] The report found that the average temperature was over 3°F above the 20th century average with a record warm spring, second warmest summer, and record warm July.[5] Average precipitation for the continental United States was 2.57 inches below average, making it the 15th driest year on record.[6] 2012 was also the second most extreme year on record having 9.2 million acres burned in wildfires and 11 disasters with $1 billion or more in losses.[7] Warming temperatures combined with low precipitation dries out soil, leaving it vulnerable to erosion and creating conditions for dust storms.

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[1] http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-19/national/35929720_1_dust-storm-accidents-west-texas
[2] http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/DM_tables.htm?conus
[3] http://www1.ncdc.noaa.gov/pub/data/cmb/sotc/drought/2012/11/st-pcp-ranks-201112-201211.gif
[4] http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/national/2012/13
[5] http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/national/2012/13
[6] http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/national/2012/13
[7] http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/national/2012/13

As the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) manages implementation of agricultural policies and keeps crop statistics, I would appreciate answers to the following questions by February 1, 2013:

1) What is USDA doing to monitor drought situations and incentivize protection of fragile and highly erodible landscapes? Is data being collected on the damage to environmental quality and crop quality resulting from dust storms?

2) The Conservation Reserve Program has been an important tool to stabilize soil, trap moisture, and prevent wind erosion. How have the drought conditions over much of the U.S. agriculture lands impacted this program?

3) What resources would be required to increase enrollment in Conservation Reserve and Conservation Stewardship Programs? Does USDA have sufficient resources to monitor rates of erosion and collect data on dust damage?

4) The 1985 farm bill included conservation compliance provisions which require that producers maintain a minimum level of conservation on highly erodible lands in exchange for certain USDA program benefits which could be lost if a producer was noncompliant. Would adding subsidized crop insurance to the list of benefits that could be lost further reduce soil erosion and increase other environmental benefits such as wildlife habitat and water quality?

5) What will be the impact on erosion rates if Conservation Reserve Program enrollment is further reduced and limited to 25 million acres, as proposed in both the House and Senate versions of the 2012 farm bill? As of October 2012 only 29 million acres were enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. Is there any indication that this reduction in enrollment may have contributed to the dust storms we are now seeing?

6) High commodity crop prices could reduce interest in the Conservation Reserve Program and encourage planting on marginal and highly erodible lands. What effect do high commodity crop prices have on programmatic costs? How will USDA determine how to adjust rental rates to compete with rising commodity crop prices and what impact will this have on the amount of land that can be enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program?

7) What is USDA doing to understand the impact of climate change on the Conservation Reserve Program and other programs in the department designed to protect and enhance marginal agricultural lands in the United States?

Thank you for your assistance and cooperation in responding to this request. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Dr. Ana Unruh Cohen of the Committee's Democratic Staff at (202) 225-6065.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey

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Ranking Democratic Member
Committee on Natural Resources