

December 2, 2008

Governor Brian D. Schweitzer
Office of the Governor
Montana State Capitol Building
P.O. Box 200801
Helena, MT 59620-0801

Dear Governor Schweitzer:

We are writing to ask for your support of the Farm Bill-authorized Sodsaver provision in the state of Montana. As Governor of this great state, Congress has stipulated that final authority for enacting the Sodsaver provision rests with you. With the recent publication of the Sodsaver rule in the Federal Register, we have entered the time period for decision-making. We encourage you to take full advantage of this opportunity to protect and conserve Montana's last, invaluable prairie.

The Sodsaver provision is a carefully constructed response to a clearly identified need. As cited by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), USDA's National Resources Inventory determined that the Nation's privately owned grassland decreased by almost 25 million acres between 1982 and 2003. And according to the GAO's September 10, 2007 report, "Farm program payments are an important factor in producers' decisions on whether to convert grassland to cropland.... Several economic studies have reached the same conclusion."

This country's remaining grasslands, particularly those in the Prairie Pothole National Priority Area, are one of the most threatened ecosystems on the planet, and they are critical to the livelihoods of our state's ranching families. Enacting the Sodsaver provision in the Prairie Pothole Region of Montana will defuse this threat.

Sodsaver specifies that grassland without a prior cropping history will be ineligible for taxpayer-provided payments for purchasing crop insurance on converted grasslands. Also ineligible are non-insured crop disaster payments made on the very marginal lands that have to this day not yet been converted. In Montana, the remnants of native prairie that yet remains in the Prairie Pothole Region are largely due to it being poor and unproductive land for cropping. Still, under Sodsaver our state's landowners are not prohibited from breaking grassland, but federal payments would no longer provide incentives for doing so.

In addition to protecting Montana's habitat for waterfowl, song birds, federally petitioned species like sage-grouse, and other wildlife—as well as livestock—the Sodsaver provision will produce real budget savings. The Sodsaver provision is the rarest of Farm Bill policies in that it will have no cost for the state of Montana and instead actually saves federal tax dollars.

Our broad and diverse coalition of Sodsaver supporters ask that you take the opportunity Montana has so fortunately been provided, and move to enact Sodsaver for the benefit of all:

- Much of our state's native prairie has long been converted to crop production, most often leaving the least productive land for pasture and wildlife.
- These remaining grasslands are among the planet's most threatened ecosystems, and they are vital to the livelihoods of our state's ranchers.
- Yet federal programs subsidize crop insurance and provide non-insured crop disaster payments on these remaining fragile acres when converted to crops. This sends the message that no land is so poor that the federal bureaucracy won't still ensure payback on an almost certain to fail crop.
- The result is remaining prairie being destroyed with little benefit to food stocks and to the detriment of cow-calf operations. Multi-generation ranch families can not compete for land when grassland conversion to program crops receives federal payments ensuring a positive income whether crops fail, thrive or anything in between.
- A "Sodsaver" provision in place in Montana would defuse a real threat and save taxpayer dollars. Sodsaver simply says that land without a prior cropping history is ineligible for insurance and non-insured disaster payments. Landowners won't be prohibited from breaking native grassland, but federal payments would no longer provide incentives for doing so.

The enactment of the Sodsaver provision in Montana is a vitally important action and one we urge you to take.

Sincerely,

American Prairie Foundation
Audubon Society
Center for Rural Affairs
Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
Izaak Walton League of America
Montana Wildlife Federation
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

National Wildlife Federation
The Nature Conservancy
Pheasants Forever
Quail Unlimited
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Trout Unlimited
World Wildlife Fund

cc: Department of Agriculture Director Ron de Yong
Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Director Mary Sexton