

October 8, 2008

Office of the Governor
500 E. Capitol Ave.
Pierre, SD 57501

Dear Governor Rounds:

We are writing to ask for your support of the Farm Bill-authorized Sodsaver provision in the state of South Dakota. As Governor of this great state, Congress has stipulated that final authority for enacting the Sodsaver provision rests with you. We encourage you to take full advantage of this opportunity to protect and conserve South Dakota's invaluable prairie.

The Sodsaver provision (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, Sec. 12020 Crop Production on Native Sod) 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 Region, are one of the most threatened ecosystems on the planet, and they are critical to the livelihoods of our state's families with grazing-based dairy and cow-calf operations. Enacting the Sodsaver provision in the Prairie Pothole Region of eastern South Dakota would help defuse the threat of grassland conversion and protect the livelihoods of South Dakota's ranching families.

Sodsaver specifies that grassland without a prior cropping history, if converted to cropland, would be ineligible for federal crop insurance and noninsured crop disaster assistance program (NAP) payments for a period of 5 years. In South Dakota, most acres of native prairie in the Prairie Pothole Region were converted to cropland long ago. However, nearly 6.3 million acres still remain, largely due to it being land unsuitable for dependable crop production. Sodsaver would not prohibit our state's landowners from converting grassland; it would simply ensure that the federal government is not providing incentives for doing so.

In addition to protecting South Dakota's world renowned habitat for waterfowl, song birds and all wildlife—as well as livestock—the Sodsaver provision will produce real budget savings. The Sodsaver provision is the rarest of federal Farm Bill policies in that it has no cost and actually saves federal tax dollars.

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

- Much of our state’s native prairie has long been converted to crop production; most of what remains is unsuitable for crop production.
- These remaining grasslands are among the planet’s most threatened ecosystems, and they are vital to the livelihoods of our state’s cow-calf operations.
- Current federal farm policy provides incentives through crop insurance and disaster assistance that encourages conversion of these fragile acres of grassland to crops. This sends the wrong message to taxpayers that no land is unsuitable for crop production – even if crop failure is a common occurrence – because the federal government removes much of the financial risk.
- The result is native prairie being destroyed with little benefit to food stocks and to the detriment of grazing livestock. 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 South Dakota would defuse a real threat and save taxpayer dollars. Sodsaver simply says that land in the Prairie Pothole Region of South Dakota, without a prior cropping history, is ineligible for federal crop insurance and noninsured crop disaster assistance program 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 South Dakota 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
 High Plains Wildlife Association
 Izaak Walton League of America
 Izaak Walton League – South Dakota
 Division
 Izaak Walton League – Sunshine Chapter
 National Catholic Rural Life Conference
 National Wildlife Federation
 The Nature Conservancy
 Norbeck Society
 Northern Prairies Land Trust

Quail Unlimited
 Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
 South Dakota Association of Conservation
 Districts
 South Dakota Chapter of National Wild
 Turkey Federation
 South Dakota Conservation Alliance
 South Dakota Farmers Union
 South Dakota Parks and Wildlife
 Foundation
 South Dakota Wild Grassland Coalition
 South Dakota Wildlife Federation
 South Dakota Wildlife Society
 Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
 World Wildlife Fund

cc: South Dakota Department of Agriculture, Secretary Even
 South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, Secretary Vonk