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The Izaak Walton League of America Farm Bill Agenda

America's farms and ranches cover 915 million acres, 41% of our country's land. America has 2.1 million farmers and ranchers, and together they produce most of the fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat we eat¹.

They produce enough to export about 20% of America's agriculture production. Our farms also produce fibers, like cotton and wool, and crops used for biofuels. About 38% of America's corn production and 25% of our soybean production is used to make ethanol or biodiesel².

America's farms and ranches are also home to deer, turkey, ducks, pheasants, quail, grouse, and pronghorn and to a multitude of other birds, butterflies, and bees.

Our agricultural system contributes to some of our nation's most difficult environmental challenges:

- Runoff of pesticides, nitrogen, phosphorus, and animal waste from farm fields and livestock operations is polluting rivers and creeks and creating 'dead zones' from the Gulf of Mexico to the Chesapeake Bay.
- Decades of progress in reducing soil erosion appears to have stalled. America's topsoil continues to erode into our rivers at alarming rates, and the health of our soil is in trouble.
- The Great Plains lost 53 million acres of grassland to wheat, corn, and soybeans since 2009, and our continuing loss of native prairie is driving many grassland birds toward extinction³.

Izaak Walton League of America
Defenders of Soil, Air, Woods, Waters and Wildlife



www.IWLA.org (301) 548-0150
707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, MD 20878

Decisions That Matter

The Farm Bill includes important provisions that are key to day-to-day decisions on most farms, decisions like what crops to plant, how to raise livestock, whether and how to apply chemicals, and what conservation measures to adopt. Decisions by farmers can help solve our conservation problems -- or make water pollution, soil erosion, and loss of native prairie much worse.

The first Farm Bill was developed in 1933, a response to the Great Depression and its impact on America's farmers and rural communities. The Izaak Walton League of America first took an active role in agricultural policy in 1937, when the League adopted a resolution calling for a national program to retire fields in mountainous areas from agricultural use⁴.

Congress revisits the Farm Bill about every five years, and most programs in the current Farm Bill expire in 2018. Among those provisions are Farm Bill conservation programs, which provide nearly \$5 billion per year to help farmers and ranchers be better stewards of our natural resources. These programs are America's largest source of funding for private land conservation.

America's Investment

The 2014 Farm Bill was expected to cost an estimated \$489 billion over five years – nearly \$100 billion a year – and taxpayers deserve to get a good return on their investment in America's food and agriculture system. The Izaak Walton League is working to get the most value out of Farm Bill conservation programs, and to ensure that the billions spent on crop insurance



After decades of improvement, the National Resources Inventory says cropland erosion in the U.S. increased between 2007 and 2012.

premium subsidies, commodity payments, farm loans and other provisions are tied to basic stewardship of our natural resources.

The Izaak Walton League of America's agenda for the 2018 Farm Bill is built on boosting our ability to restore clean water, regenerate our soils, and provide wildlife habitat while providing increased value for taxpayers.

We believe Congress should enact a 2018 Farm Bill that will:

- Increase America's investment in conserving private lands, and avoid robbing one conservation program to pay for increases in another;
- Boost the impact of Farm Bill conservation programs by focusing on the most critical problems and leveraging state and private money to provide solutions big enough to solve the problems; and
- Maintain and build on requirements that farmers who accept Farm Bill crop insurance premium subsidies, commodity program payments or loan subsidies will protect wetlands and have in place soil conservation plans.



Wetlands protected through Farm Bill conservation programs provide habitat for migrating birds like Sandhill cranes.

Where Do Farm Bill Dollars Go?

The 2014 Farm Bill has 12 Titles that address a wide range of issues, including international trade, energy, forestry, research, and other topics. Ninety-nine percent of Farm Bill spending is in the following four areas⁵:

Commodity Payments

The 2014 Farm Bill provides payments to farmers who grow 26 major commodity crops (including corn, wheat, cotton, rice, peanuts, and soybeans). The payments are part of a 'safety net' to assist farmers who see large swings in income and depend heavily on weather and market prices outside of their control. Commodity payments have declined since 2000 as Congress has relied on crop insurance to provide more of that safety net. 2014 Farm Bill commodity payments are currently expected to cost \$37 billion over five years, about 8 percent of Farm Bill spending⁶.

Crop Insurance

The federal government offers heavily subsidized crop insurance to encourage farmers (and now ranchers) to purchase insurance against crop and revenue losses. Crop insurance has largely replaced disaster assistance as the primary federal means of dealing with losses to farmers from drought, floods, and pests.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency, in 2014 about

297 million acres of land were covered by federal crop insurance policies. That represents 85% of the planted acreage of major commodity crops, 74% of fruit and nut plantings, and 36% of vegetable acres⁷. The crop insurance provisions of the 2014 Farm Bill are now expected to cost taxpayers \$31 billion over five years, about 7 percent of Farm Bill spending.

Conservation Programs

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated 23 conservation programs into 13 programs and reduced dedicated funding for conservation⁸. These programs fund conservation easements that protect wetlands, native prairie, and other farm and ranch lands; pay for 10-year and 15-year contracts to take vulnerable cropland out of production and plant grasses or trees that reduce erosion and provide wildlife habitat; and fund better stewardship practices on farms and ranches. Conservation programs are now expected to cost \$24 billion over five years, just 5 percent of Farm Bill spending.

Nutrition

The largest share of funding in the 2014 Farm Bill is for nutrition programs. By far the largest is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), which provides benefits redeemable for eligible foods for low-income individuals⁹. Nutrition programs are now expected to cost \$365 billion over five years, about 79 percent of Farm Bill spending.

Lynn Betts, NRCS

Pixomar



Charlie Rahm, NRCS



Stephen Ausmus USDA ARS

Restoring Clean Water

Our country has made real progress in improving water quality, but our water pollution problems have not been solved. Of the streams that are monitored, more than half fail to meet basic water quality standards, and 80% of the streams across America are not even monitored for pollution¹⁰.

Runoff of pesticides, nitrogen, phosphorus, and animal waste from farm fields and livestock operations is one of the greatest threats to our creeks and rivers. That pollution harms fish and wildlife, and communities that rely on those rivers spend billions removing pollutants to make the water safe to drink¹¹.

America's wetlands are also in trouble. We have lost over half of the wetlands that were in the lower 48 states in colonial times¹². Despite state and federal rules designed to protect wetlands and programs to conserve wetlands, wetland loss in our country continues¹³. The Prairie Pothole Region alone lost more than 74,000 acres of wetlands between 1997 and 2009¹⁴.

The 2018 Farm Bill should focus on restoring health to our rivers and lakes and protecting and restoring wetlands.

Defend Swampbuster

“Swampbuster” is a common-sense provision that says farmers who receive taxpayer-

funded subsidies for crop production, crop insurance or farm loans or get funding for conservation practices through the Farm Bill cannot drain or fill wetlands to grow crops.

However, this protection can be undermined by how it is implemented by USDA. In some states, USDA has used inaccurate, outdated wetland maps to allow farmers to drain wetlands without losing Farm Bill benefits¹⁵.

► **We will work to ensure that compliance with Swampbuster remains a basic requirement for farmers to obtain subsidized crop insurance and commodity program benefits, and that it is enforced fairly using up-to-date wetland maps.**

Dennis Larson, NRCS



Great Blue Heron on a South Dakota wetland protected by a Wetlands Reserve Program easement.



Lynn Betts, NRCS

Without Swampbuster, wetlands like these in the Prairie Pothole Region in Iowa could be at risk.

Restore Funding for Wetland Conservation

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated several USDA programs that fund conservation easements to protect wetlands and grasslands and for farmland preservation, creating a single Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

Congress then cut the funding for the consolidated program sharply, reducing the number of wetlands that can be protected each year. As a result, wetlands protected through



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these programs fell from a high of 246,000 acres in 2010¹⁶ to just 46,338 acres in 2015 and 39,604 acres in 2016¹⁷.

► **We will work to restore funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program to at least \$500 million per year to protect wetlands and grasslands for future generations.**

Expand and Improve Buffers that Protect Streams

Grass buffer strips planted along streams and wetlands filter chemicals, soil, and livestock waste that run off farm fields, keeping them out of our waters. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays farmers to take environmentally sensitive land out of crop production and plant grasses or trees to filter runoff and provide habitat for wildlife.

High-value practices such as buffer strips along streams, windbreaks, and grassed waterways that reduce erosion, protect streams, and restore wetlands receive special incentives. USDA also uses the program in partnership with state agencies and conservation organizations to target CRP contracts to watersheds or regions with special water or wildlife needs.

Just under one-third of CRP acres are currently enrolled in these special initiatives (dubbed ‘Continuous Signup’ contracts by USDA). The remaining two-thirds

of CRP acres are in whole-field contracts enrolled through the program’s general signups¹⁸.

The 2014 Farm Bill cut the Conservation Reserve Program by 25% to 24 million acres, reducing the ability of the program to protect streams and wetlands. In May 2017, USDA cut off new enrollments under most ‘Continuous Signup’ practices to avoid going over the 24 million acre limit¹⁹.

The 2018 Farm Bill should expand use of the program to protect rivers and wetlands and provide high-value wildlife habitat, especially in the most degraded watersheds.

► **We support efforts to increase the acreage cap in the Conservation Reserve Program and to substantially increase the acres of CRP used for high-value practices such as buffer strips, filter strips, and grass waterways.**



Without a buffer strip to protect it, farm chemicals, sediment, and fertilizer will run off into streams, polluting the water and destroying habitat for fish and amphibians.



A buffer of grasses and shrubs protects Bear Creek in Iowa from runoff from nearby fields.

Regenerating Our Soils

When pioneers first cleared forests and plowed up prairies, they found deep, rich soils that were loaded with organic matter, healthy bacteria, and fungi, which made them incredibly productive.

More than a century of plowing, disking, and tilling and decades of chemical use have degraded the helpful bacteria and fungi in the soil. Livestock are now concentrated in feedlots instead of spread out on the land, robbing the land of needed nutrients²⁰. More and more of America's cropland is devoted to just three crops – corn, soybeans, and wheat²¹. Fields left bare for much of the year encourage erosion.

The Dust Bowl of the 1930's – when winds carried eroded soil from the Great Plains to New York, Washington, and beyond – highlighted what happens when drought and wind act on soils that have been depleted of the organic matter and microscopic life that binds them together. With today's farming practices, the United States is losing soil 10 times faster than the natural replenishment rate²².

Since the Dust Bowl days, federal and state agencies have focused on reducing erosion from rain and wind. After decades of improvement, progress seems to have stalled. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from 2007 to 2012, total erosion on cropland increased from 1.65 to 1.67 billion tons, and erosion per acre increased as well²³.

To reduce erosion and restore real health to our soils, we need a different approach. Healthy, living soils and well-managed grasslands catch and hold far more water in a heavy rain than degraded soil and poorly-managed grasslands.

Cutting-edge farmers have shown how – working *with* nature – they can restore depleted soils and return health to our landscape by eliminating tillage, using diverse crop rotations, growing cover crops, reducing chemical use, and better managing livestock on the land.

Adding organic matter and restoring life beneath the surface helps soil hold far more rainwater, be more resilient to drought, and boost crop yields. It also takes carbon out of the air and stores it in the ground²⁴.

With a past focus on conservation planning for highly erodible soil, we have reduced erosion on the most erosion-prone lands. But today nearly half of cropland soil erosion comes from land that is *not* considered “highly erodible”²⁵.

We believe *every* farm – and every stream near a farm – would benefit from a conservation plan that builds soil health and reduces soil erosion and runoff into nearby streams.

NRCS



Dust Bowl storms from the Great Plains darkened the skies of Washington, DC, in the 1930's.



“We don't have a runoff problem. We have an infiltration problem.”

- Ray Archuleta, Conservation Agronomist,
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS



The 2018 Farm Bill should help farmers and ranchers regenerate America's depleted soils.

Defend Sodbuster

“Sodbuster” is a common-sense provision that reduces incentives for farmers to plant crops on highly erodible lands without having adequate plans in place to reduce soil erosion on those lands²⁶.

The provision applies to farmers who want to get federal commodity or crop insurance subsidies or participate in conservation or loan programs, but it only applies to the roughly one-fourth of America’s cropland that is considered highly erodible.²⁷ It only requires that the farmer put in place a soil conservation plan to reduce erosion, but some oppose even that modest requirement.

► **We will work to ensure that Sodbuster remains a basic requirement for farmers with highly erodible land to obtain subsidized crop insurance, commodity payments, and other Farm Bill benefits.**

► **We support long-term efforts to require that every farmer or rancher who receives taxpayer-subsidized crop insurance, commodity payments, loans, or other Farm Bill benefits has a resource conservation plan in place for their whole farm.**

Lynn Betts, NRCS



Sodbuster ensures that farmers with highly erodible soil have a soil conservation plan, but every farm that receives federal subsidies should have a comprehensive conservation plan.



Kyle Ellison, Unsplash

Expand Sodsaver

The “Sodsaver” provision was added to the 2014 Farm Bill to reduce the crop insurance subsidy for farmers who plow under or break out native prairie to plant crops. The Sodsaver provision currently only applies in six Prairie Pothole states: Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana²⁸.

► **We will defend Sodsaver and work to expand it nationwide to reduce subsidies that encourage farmers to plow under or break out native prairies.**



The Great Plains has lost 53 million acres of grassland to crops since 2009, threatening grassland birds. Sodsaver reduces federal subsidies on prairie converted to cropland.

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Promote Healthy Soils

While some programs pay farmers to take land out of production, the Farm Bill’s “working lands” programs promote conservation on lands used to grow crops or raise livestock. These programs help farmers and ranchers invest in practices that rebuild soil health, reduce runoff of soil and chemicals, and put in place better grazing systems. They can reward the farmers and ranchers who do the best job of stewarding our soil, air, woods, waters, and wildlife.

The next Farm Bill should provide incentives so many more farmers “go big” to restore soil health by using diverse crop rotations, planting cover crops, eliminating tillage, reducing or eliminating chemical use, and adopting rotational grazing strategies.



► **We support maintaining at least current funding for the Farm Bill’s two biggest working lands programs, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program. We support efforts to expand the use of these programs to regenerate our soil and improve water quality by offering added incentives for farmers to adopt practices like cover crops, conservation crop rotations, reduced chemical use, and rotational grazing.**

Farmers who are the best stewards are using farming systems that keep topsoil in place. They are building the health of their soils, making them more resilient to drought and more able to capture and hold heavy rains. Their stewardship should reduce their risk of crop losses, but that reduced risk is currently not recognized in the price they pay for crop insurance²⁹.

Worse, the current crop insurance system imposes overly restrictive rules on the use of cover crops, and can even penalize farmers who adopt good

conservation practices like nutrient management, integrated pest management, and resource-conserving crop rotations, by raising their premiums, reducing coverage, or denying legitimate claims. The Farm Bill should promote soil health, recognize that good stewardship reduces the risk of loss, and require that crop insurance rates reflect that reduced risk.

► **We will work to see that farmers who adopt practices that build soil health and lower their risk of crop loss pay lower insurance premiums that reflect that reduced risk through a kind of “good driver discount,” which would reward good land stewards and encourage others to adopt similar practices.**

► **We will work to ensure that farmers who adopt good conservation practices are rewarded through the crop insurance system, not penalized by losing coverage, paying higher premiums, or having legitimate claims for losses denied.**

Tm McCabe, NRCS



Jeff Vanuga, NRCS



NRCS

Scott Bauer, NRCS



Jeff Vanuga, NRCS

Farmers are having success regenerating healthy soil structure, substantially boosting water holding capacity, and increasing soil carbon levels through a combination of practices including (clockwise from top) no till, diverse crop rotations, reducing or eliminating chemical use, cover crops, and rotational grazing of livestock.

Providing Wildlife Habitat

In many states, Farm Bill conservation programs are the largest single source of funds available to protect and conserve wildlife habitat on private land. The programs provide incentives to landowners to conserve and improve habitat on tens of millions of acres of land. That provides habitat for ducks, pheasants, grouse, deer, elk, butterflies and other wildlife, and it benefits outdoor recreation as well.

The habitat conserved can help keep critters off the Endangered Species List. For example, through targeted efforts, Farm Bill conservation programs help landowners provide habitat for the sage grouse in the west, lesser prairie chickens on the Great Plains, and Monarch butterflies in the central and eastern United States.

The Farm Bill can also support state and tribal programs that provide free access for hunters, anglers, and hikers to private lands – bringing recreation dollars and jobs to rural communities.

The 2018 Farm Bill should continue to make a place for fish and wildlife on America's farms and ranches and should fund state and tribal public access initiatives.

Promote Targeted Conservation

The 2014 Farm Bill eliminated important regional programs, including the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program and Great Lakes Basin Program, combining them into a single Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

The new program brings partners together in a watershed or region, using USDA's suite of conservation programs to leverage state and private funds to focus on a conservation

challenge important in that area. The projects often deliver \$2 or \$3 in state or private funds for every \$1 of federal funds³⁰.

Chesapeake Bay Program



In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, RCPP projects protect the Bay by funding fences that keep livestock out of creeks and farm plans that reduce runoff into trout streams.

Using a cooperative, integrated approach and leveraging state and private funding means solutions can be put in place at the scale needed to solve conservation problems in a targeted area. Most RCPP projects address water quality or quantity problems while improving habitat for fish and other aquatic species. Other RCPP projects benefit wildlife by promoting better-managed grazing

systems, restoring grasslands, or improving forest or shrub-land.

► **We support increasing the share of conservation program funds allocated through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program from 7 percent to 10 percent. We will work to ensure the program addresses our greatest conservation challenges like cleanup of agricultural pollutants from the Chesapeake Bay.**

Boost Wildlife Benefits of Conservation Programs

The 2014 Farm Bill eliminated the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, merging it into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) but requiring that at least 5% of EQIP dollars go for wildlife habitat practices. The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), USDA's other large working lands program, rewards farmers and ranchers practicing the highest levels of conservation, but it has no designated minimum funding for fish and wildlife habitat.



NRCS



Many of the practices funded through these programs benefit fish or wildlife indirectly by reducing polluted runoff into streams, improving grazing systems, or reducing the use of pesticides and other chemicals. Only a few of the practices provide direct benefits to wildlife by restoring or conserving habitat in our uplands, wetlands or streams.

The 2018 Farm Bill should ensure that a fair share of these working lands program dollars directly support fish and wildlife habitat on farms and ranches.

► **We support allocating at least 10% of both major working lands programs (EQIP and CSP) for practices that directly benefit fish and wildlife by restoring or conserving habitat in our uplands, wetlands, or streams.**

Joel McNeel, NRCS



EQIP practices like stream habitat improvement can put in place structures like this one that create pool habitat for fish.

public access for fishing, hunting, and other recreation. Federal conservation dollars provide valuable wildlife habitat, and incentives for landowners to give the public access to that land for recreational uses helps the economy of rural communities and is especially important in states with very little public land.

► **We support increased Farm Bill funding for state and tribal programs that provide incentives for landowners to open their private farm, ranch, or forest land to the public for recreational use.**

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Monarchs and other pollinators would benefit from wider use of pollinator-friendly plants in conservation program plantings.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides wildlife habitat, reduces soil erosion, and improves water quality by restoring grasslands and forests on marginal cropland. But it could do much more to help bees, butterflies, and other pollinators by restoring milkweeds and other flowering plants to the landscape.

► **We support adding pollinator-friendly plants to seed mixes farmers use when restoring grasslands on lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and for other conservation purposes like grass waterways, buffer strips, and cover crops.**

Fund Public Access

The 2014 Farm Bill continued a voluntary public access initiative to support programs that use state, tribal, and private funds to pay landowners to provide

Kayt Jonsson, USFWS



The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program helps the economy of rural communities by supporting public recreation access on private lands.



Value for Our Tax Dollars

The Farm Bill provides some \$18 billion per year for federal crop insurance subsidies, commodity payments, and conservation programs. Taxpayers expect good value and accountability for their investments in agriculture and conservation programs.

Our recommendations outlined in this document would protect Sodbuster and Swampbuster provisions, expand Sodsaver coverage, and broaden requirements for basic conservation planning, ensuring that taxpayers get a fair deal for the billions of dollars spent to aid farmers. Our other recommendations will increase the conservation benefits provided through practices that deliver multiple benefits for soil, water, and wildlife.



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USDA has also been unwilling to share information it collects, including data that would help researchers and conservation organizations evaluate program success, identify the links between conservation

practices and crop insurance risk, and estimate the loss of native prairie.

Information on Conservation Stewardship Program contracts has been especially difficult to obtain. It is completely feasible to give the public information about the outcomes of programs and policies, including county-level data, without disclosing information about individual producers. USDA program data should be broadly available, while protecting the privacy of individuals as required by law.

While USDA conservation programs accomplish many worthwhile goals, some programs also fund practices that help farmers but deliver little or no *public* benefit. For example, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program has helped farmers fund the expansion of large feedlots and purchase expensive center pivot irrigation systems that provide few environmental benefits.

► **We believe conservation programs should only fund projects that deliver clear public conservation benefits, and should not fund practices that deliver primarily private benefits.**

In the past, USDA has measured conservation program success by counting contract acres and dollars spent. Those don't tell the real story of whether or not the programs are reducing polluted runoff, improving water quality, regenerating soil health, or boosting fish and wildlife numbers. More monitoring and evaluation is needed to understand how Farm Bill programs are working to solve the resource problems they are designed to address³¹.

► **We support Congressional requirements that USDA better measure, assess, and report on the practices funded through Farm Bill conservation and other programs and evaluate and report on the actual soil conservation, water quality, wildlife, and other benefits they deliver.**

► **We support development of an Information Warehouse where USDA would be required to make information it collects readily available to researchers and the public in ways that protect the privacy of individuals.**



For more information on the Farm Bill and the Izaak Walton League of America's work to defend our soil, air, woods, waters and wildlife, visit IWLA.org or contact us at 707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, MD, 20878.

Carol Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress



End Notes

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George Gentry, USFWS

Izaak Walton League of America, July, 2017.
707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, MD 20878

