The 2012 Farm Bill: CONSERVING AMERICA'S FUTURE

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TO BEST SERVE AMERICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY, THE NATION NEEDS A MODERN FARM POLICY THAT WILL SUSTAIN OUR FARMS, OUR LANDS, AND OUR PEOPLE.

From the start, Izaak Walton League members understood the connection between agriculture and natural resources. That's why the League has long advocated for conservation programs to be part of national farm policy. At the same time, League members have also worked to support America's farmers and farm economies.

In the early 1930s, when migratory bird populations were decimated due to drought, the League sponsored farmer-hunter partnerships to encourage use of marginal farmland for bird habitat. In 1937, Ikes adopted a resolution calling for a national program to retire fields in mountainous areas from agricultural use. Our work to clean up America's waterways included efforts to limit farmland erosion and encourage farming practices that reduce soil erosion.

The Walton Soil Proposal of 1955 recommended that instead of using federal money to shore up crop prices, the government should pay farmers to retire marginal farmland as "conservation reserves." The retired land would become a long-term "soil bank." Congress adopted the

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Soil Bank program in 1955, but by the early 1970s, the program had faded away. The League worked with Congress to create several new conservation programs, including Sodbuster and the Conservation Reserve, that were implemented in the 1985 Farm Bill. The League has worked since then to strengthen Farm Bill conservation programs and ensure the programs are fully funded by Congress every year.

CONSERVATION CRISIS

These Farm Bill conservation programs and the resources they were intended to protect are in jeopardy today due to an unusual set of circumstances. Commodity prices are at historically high levels, encouraging production on every available acre and fueling conversion of marginal lands to crop production. At the same time, the purchasing power of Farm Bill conservation programs is eroding as crop prices drive up land prices and rental rates and Congress continues to cut conservation program budgets.

Moreover, the long-standing covenant between farmers and American taxpayers is breaking down. For decades, taxpayers have provided generous income support and an insurance safety net to farmers. These voluntary programs require producers to implement common-sense conservation measures if they accept program benefits. This arrangement is known as "conservation compliance," and it's been standard practice for years. However, many of the Farm Bill's traditional income support programs are not providing payments because commodity prices are so high that payments are not being triggered, which means conservation compliance does not apply. In addition, this shift has not delivered meaningful savings for taxpayers because subsidies to producers have increased in other areas, especially subsidized premiums for crop insurance.

As taxpayer subsidies for crop insurance premiums continue to increase, taxpayers are receiving fewer conservation benefits for their investment. That's because conservation compliance does not apply to the federal crop insurance program. Conservation is eroding out of our nation's farm policy.

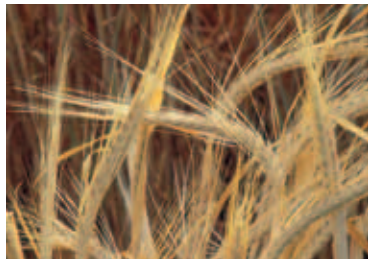
Decisions made by Congress in the coming months will have a profound impact on conservation and our country's landscape. During debates on the 2012 Farm Bill, members of Congress will decide which payment programs will be included and what — if any — conservation requirements will accompany those payments. This makes the 2012 Farm Bill debate critically important to all Americans.

WHAT IS THE FARM BILL?

America's farm policy was developed in the 1930s in response to the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression on farm and rural economies. The Farm Bill affects more U.S. land than any other single piece of federal legislation. That's because more than 50 percent of the land in the United States — nearly 1 billion acres — is in agricultural use, from cropland and farmsteads to grassland pastures and grazed forest land.

The Farm Bill is a package of laws that govern a wide range of farm income support, conservation, and food assistance programs. Each Farm Bill is made up of policy sections called "titles" that cover areas such as commodities, conservation, trade, nutrition, rural development, and research.

There have been 16 Farm Bills in our nation's history. Congress revisits this legislation approximately every five years to ensure the policies are responsive to current needs and market conditions. This offers an opportunity for Americans to voice their concerns and



HEAVILY SUBSIDIZED SAFETY NET

Providing crop insurance as a "safety net" for American farmers makes sense. Farming is risky, and crop insurance can protect against the unpredictability of weather and ensure producers can continue to meet our nation's needs. However, crop insurance premiums are costing taxpayers billions of dollars. Federal subsidies for crop insurance premiums grew from $500 million per year in the 1980s to more than $7.4 billion in 2011. On average, taxpayers cover 60 percent of a producer's crop insurance premiums, although subsidies are often as high as 80 percent. Over the next decade, crop insurance subsidies are projected to account for more Farm Bill spending than any program other than nutrition.

These federal crop insurance policies are very different from the insurance most of us have for our cars or homes. The average American car owner, for example, pays an insurance premium every year but only receives a pay out if the car is damaged. However, many crop insurance policies pay out regardless of whether a crop is damaged, flourishing, or anything in between — encouraging risky agricultural production that often works against our nation's conservation goals.

TAXPAYERS LOSE CONSERVATION BENEFITS

Crop insurance policies can be used to guarantee a producer's revenue for a specific crop year — regardless of actual production