

PRINCIPLES FOR STRENGTHENING THE CONSERVATION TITLE

The Conservation Title programs, funding and authorities have never been more important than they are today as we begin serious deliberations about reauthorization of the farm bill.

The voluntary conservation programs and conservation compliance provisions established in the farm bill have delivered great benefits to farmers and ecological integrity over the last 25 years. These benefits include increased farmland sustainability, a dramatic reduction of soil erosion of more than 40 percent, a dramatic decrease in net wetlands loss on farmland, the preservation and enhancement of critical habitat for endangered species, and substantial financial return for farmers and landowners. These gains have been hard-fought, but there is still a lot of work to do.

Far too many water bodies in the U.S. remain impaired for fishing, swimming, and drinking. Crop and livestock production are among the largest sources of the harmful nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment causing these impairments. Agricultural activities are also one of the largest causes of habitat destruction for endangered and threatened species.

Current market and policy factors are exacerbating these existing agricultural-environmental problems and threatening to roll back the gains of the federal conservation programs. Prices for basic commodities are expected to remain historically high for the foreseeable future as economic growth in the developing world spurs growing demand for food, fiber, and fuel. High prices are already pushing farmers to plant fencerow to fencerow, intensify production on existing farmland, and convert environmentally sensitive land to crop production.

Moreover, a dramatic increase in fruit and vegetable production will be necessary if we are to come close to meeting nutritional guidelines with domestic production. Biofuel mandates and subsidies are already adding fuel to the fire, and production of biomass for electricity generation will further intensify the scramble for land and water resources.

Our changing climate is becoming less friendly to agricultural production, which will make meeting these challenges even more difficult. Volatile weather and extreme events are already more evident in the climate record since 1970, and it is likely that intensified droughts, floods, and storms will continue to beset agriculture throughout this century.

Our natural resources and environment simply cannot stand up to this pressure unless conservation intensifies in lock step with production. We will not be able to sustain high levels of agricultural production if we allow our soil and water resources to degrade, especially in the face of challenging weather and increasing prices for energy and other inputs. Moreover, we clearly will fail to sustain critical ecological functions such as drinking water, fish, wildlife, biodiversity, and watershed health if the new farm bill takes a step back from its commitment to conservation.

We will have to run faster and be smarter just to stay where we are today. And where we are today is not where we need to be. In order to meet these challenges, we affirm the following set of principles:

I. FUNDING

Funding must be adequate to continue critical conservation programs at robust levels. We recognize there will be pressure on all farm bill titles to find savings. However, the Conservation Title will have to fill the funding gap left by the expiring budget baseline for the Wetlands Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program. Given the importance of conservation, Congress should prioritize the Conservation Title by funding it as close as possible to the current baseline average of \$6.5 billion a year.

II. HARMONIZE CROP SUBSIDIES, INSURANCE AND CONSERVATION

In order to ensure that the agricultural safety net works in harmony with conservation programs, conservation compliance provisions should be strengthened – and enforced – to blunt the unintended consequences of commodity, insurance, and disaster programs. We must maintain the requirement that agricultural producers and their landlords undertake a basic level of soil and water conservation on vulnerable lands and protect wetlands. In addition, those who plow up native grassland or other environmentally sensitive land should be ineligible for USDA benefits on those lands. Critically, conservation compliance should also be expanded to crop insurance since it is now the largest farm support program. In short, farm bill funding must not subsidize the destruction of wildlife habitat areas or degradation of water resources.

III. PERFORMANCE, RESULTS AND EFFICIENCY

Conservation Technical Assistance – Conservation technical assistance (TA) to farmers and ranchers is critical for maximizing the effectiveness of the programs, but it is chronically underfunded. An increased share of total Conservation Title funding should be devoted to TA.

Focus for Effect – Significant improvements in performance can be achieved by focusing conservation resources where the opportunities for environmental outcomes are greatest. The new farm bill must allocate far more assistance to project-based and outcome-oriented initiatives focused on local priority resource concerns and the most critical areas, while still continuing to help farms in all regions improve conservation of natural resources. In addition, the farm bill must continue to protect and restore the most environmentally important lands – such as wetlands, floodplains, and grasslands – and the most critical wildlife habitat. Program evaluation for conservation effects, particularly the Conservation Effects Assessment Project, should also continue and be granted a secure funding source.

Streamlining – Every dollar in the Conservation Title must be used wisely, so the farm bill should: reduce unnecessary administrative burdens; support the NRCS streamlining initiative; authorize no new programs unless they are successors to existing programs or new combinations or variations of existing programs; and ensure that all Energy Title programs contain robust conservation and environmental standards and provide for on-farm conservation.

Pay for Performance – Conservation programs can achieve better outcomes at lower cost if they pay for quantifiable environmental outcomes – such as units of water conserved, pounds of nitrogen losses reduced, or functional area of habitat provided – and vary payment rates to incentivize higher levels of performance. The conservation programs must move in this direction, pilot new approaches, and take advantage of emerging technologies for estimating performance.

Whole-Farm Systems – The Conservation Title should support whole-farm, sustainable, and organic conservation systems in addition to individual practices. These whole-farm systems have the potential to drastically improve environmental outcomes.

IV. EQUITY AND OUTREACH

More needs to be done to ensure conservation programs are accessible to all segments of the agricultural community. Women and racial and ethnic minority farmers and landowners have been historically underserved by the conservation programs, while new and beginning farmers and ranchers require additional conservation technical and financial assistance to lock in good stewardship for the next generation. Special funding pools for these groups, higher cost-share rates, and targeted outreach should continue, as should efforts begun in the last farm bill to provide conservation resources to underserved fruit and vegetable producers.

Alliance for the Great Lakes
American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
American Rivers
Arkansas Wildlife Federation
Connecticut Forest and Park Association
Conservation Federation of Missouri
Defenders of Wildlife
Environment America
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Environmental Working Group
Future Harvest CASA
Great River Greening
Gulf Restoration Network
Humane Society of the United States
Illinois Stewardship Alliance
Iowa Environmental Council
Iowa Wildlife Federation
Izaak Walton League of America
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Kansas Wildlife Federation
Land Stewardship Project
Milwaukee Riverkeeper
Minnesota Conservation Federation
National Association of Clean Water
Agencies
National Association of Resource
Conservation and Development Councils
National Center for Appropriate Technology

National Parks Conservation Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Nebraska Wildlife Federation
Nevada Wildlife Federation
North Carolina Wildlife Federation
North Dakota Wildlife Federation
Northwest Center for Alternatives to
Pesticides
Ohio Division, Izaak Walton League of
America
Oregon Tilth
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Partners for Sustainable Pollination
Pollinator Partnership
Practical Farmers of Iowa
Prairie Rivers Network
Quail Unlimited
Save the Dunes
Soil and Water Conservation Society
South Dakota Wildlife Federation
Sunseed Eco Education Ministries (WI)
Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council (MI)
Union of Concerned Scientists
Vermont Natural Resources Council
The Wildlife Society
World Wildlife Fund
Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation
The Yell County (AR) Wildlife Federation