



Sodsaver: Cost-Effective Conservation

The Farm Bill affects more U.S. land than any other piece of federal legislation in place today. For agricultural policy to best serve America's needs in the 21st century, we need a modern Farm Bill that will sustain our farms, our lands, and our people. The Izaak Walton League has identified focused, cost-effective policies for the 2012 Farm Bill that can be implemented within existing frameworks and without additional spending. In fact, these recommendations can save taxpayer dollars while also ensuring conservation benefits. Taking these modest steps to protect and enhance our nation's natural resources will promote sustainable agriculture, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, and provide economic opportunities for all Americans.

Izaak Walton League 2012 Farm Bill Priority:

Enact a nationwide Sodsaver provision to prohibit federal farm program and crop insurance subsidies for native land converted to production if that land does not have a prior cropping history.

Dwindling Native Lands Too Important to Lose

The first "Farm Bill" was enacted in 1933 to help rural and farm communities devastated by the Great Depression and Dust Bowl conditions. Agricultural expansion and over-grazing of America's plains in the 1920s and earlier decades were followed by extreme drought in the early 1930s. Crops failed, leaving the soil dry and exposed. When winds whipped across the plains, they carried away tons of top soil. If native grassland had remained intact in some areas, soil would have been protected along with the livelihoods of thousands of American families.

Today, a fraction of our country's native grasslands remain. Although these lands have marginal value for commodity crop production, they have significant environmental, habitat, and other values. For example, the native grasslands of America's northern plains are necessary to the livelihoods of ranching families, providing feedstock for cattle and other livestock. Prairie grasslands provide critical breeding and nesting areas for migratory waterfowl, song birds, and other wildlife. Approximately half of all ducks in North America are born in this region of the United States. Once these grasslands are converted to agriculture or other uses, it is almost impossible to restore the ecosystem services – soil conservation, improved water quality, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation – they provide.

Conservation Programs Declining

Farm policy has evolved since the 1930s to meet the nation's changing agriculture needs. However, essential natural resources remain at risk and current farm policies do not effectively address the threats to these resources. Consider the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This program pays rural landowners to convert environmentally sensitive cropland to long-term grass, tree, and wetland cover. These attempts to mitigate prairie losses provide important perennial plant cover, but the critical ecosystem services of native prairie lands cannot be restored once the prairie is plowed under.

Moreover, enrollment in CRP is declining and the program's rental payments are not economically competitive. The 2008 Farm Bill reduced CRP's maximum enrollment to 32 million acres – that's 4.7 million acres less than the program's peak in 2007. Since then, CRP enrollment has dropped from a high of 36.7 million acres in 2007 to 29.6 million acres as of March 2012. In addition, CRP payments can't compete with high market prices for commodity crops or skyrocketing rental rates, making the program much less attractive to producers and landowners. According to USDA's Economic Research Services, CRP rental rates would have to double to maintain the environmental benefits currently provided by the program. However, it is highly unlikely funding will be available to significantly boost CRP rental payments. Congress is focused on cutting – not increasing – spending in the 2012 Farm Bill.

With the potential of big rewards under high commodity prices and limited risk due to the federal crop insurance premium subsidies, there is now a strong financial incentive to convert remaining native lands to agricultural production. **That's why the 2012 Farm Bill must include a nationwide "Sodsaver" provision.**

Sodsaver Balances Conservation with Fiscal Constraint

Sodsaver will strengthen Farm Bill conservation goals by prohibiting federal farm program and crop insurance subsidies for native land converted to production if that land has no prior cropping history. The program will not prevent landowners from using their land as they want, but it will ensure that taxpayers no longer subsidize potentially destructive actions on America's remaining native lands

In April 2012, the Senate Agriculture Committee adopted its version of the 2012 Farm Bill. This bill included a nationwide Sodsaver program and was approved by the full Senate in June. Sodsaver balances conservation with fiscal constraints. Subsidies for crop insurance premiums alone totaled \$7.4 billion in 2011 and are projected to consume more Farm Bill funding than any program other than nutrition over the next 10 years. On the other hand, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the Sodsaver program included in the Senate Farm Bill would save nearly \$200 million over 10 years. Identical Sodsaver legislation has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

With a nationwide Sodsaver provision in place, if a producer converts native lands to commodity crops, the federal government would not provide subsidized crop insurance or make other program payments to that producer. Sodsaver can be a powerful incentive to conserve natural resources.

It's time for taxpayers to stop subsidizing the destruction of irreplaceable native prairies. With a nationwide Sodsaver provision in place, taxpayers will save both money and our native lands.

This is one of a series of fact sheets on Izaak Walton League priorities for the 2012 Farm Bill. Visit the League's Web site at www.iwla.org/agriculture for more information.