

Conservation in the Farm Bill

Conference Issue Summary



Funding and Effectiveness

With the huge demand for Farm Bill conservation programs, Congress should provide full funding for the Conservation Title and ensure the funds result in even greater benefits for our natural resources.

- * **Maintain at least full funding for the Conservation Title** for this and future Farm Bills, and avoid diverting Conservation Title funds for programs that don't deliver conservation benefits.
- * **Earmark up to 1% of conservation program funds for assessment and evaluation** designed to improve the conservation results of USDA programs.

Sodbuster and Swampbuster

Sodbuster and Swampbuster are reasonable requirements for farmers to reduce soil erosion and protect wetlands in exchange for commodity program, crop insurance, USDA loan and conservation benefits.

- * **Maintain robust Sodbuster and Swampbuster provisions** linked to all Farm Bill benefits, and ensure Swampbuster is administered using the best available wetland science.

Conservation Reserve Program

The CRP has provided huge water quality, soil conservation and wildlife benefits, but acreage cuts in recent Farm Bills have resulted in lost opportunities for much-needed conservation. The CRP works best when it is targeted to apply the most effective practices in the watersheds and other areas where they will do the most good, such as through Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program or other continuous signup contracts (roughly one-third of current CRP contracts). With incentives for the right vegetative cover, those practices can also deliver multiple benefits for pollinators or other at-risk wildlife.

- * **Maintain rental rates at or near fair market value for CREP and other continuous signup** high priority practices like buffer strips, filter strips, and wetland restoration, especially for partial-field practices. Avoid further reduced caps for subsequent CREP or continuous signup contracts to avoid losing these benefits long-term.
- * **Retain USDA flexibility to offer incentives where needed** to enroll landowners and obtain multiple benefits of high priority practices, including rental rate incentives, Practice Incentive Payments, Signup Incentive Payments, and cost-share incentives, to ensure USDA can adjust to the changing land rental market and enroll farmers in high-value practices where needed.
- * **Savings should stay in the CRP** from any caps on rental rates for continuous signup or general signup contracts, reductions in rental rates for subsequent general signup contracts, incentive payments, or other CRP provisions that save money, and could be used to add program acres.
- * **Require annual updates** based on NASS surveys to keep market rental rate information current.
- * **Prioritize high-value practices** that address water quality or wildlife (SAFE), allow longer contracts for those practices, and provide an easement option for those contracts when they expire.

* **Make CRP haying and grazing more flexible**, in consultation with State Technical Committees, and allow cost-share for fencing and water to facilitate grazing during and after expiration of the contract. Provide flexible grazing and haying options to encourage enrollment in future CRP easement option.

* **Prevent recently broken out land from being enrolled** in the CRP by retaining the requirement that land must have been planted 4 of the 6 years previous to 2014 to be eligible.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) has been very effective at addressing water quality problems in polluted watersheds, and addressing water quantity in the west, while providing wildlife habitat benefits. CREP contracts average less than 25 acres per farm, and just \$3,900 per farm. Currently nearly 1 million acres of CREP, about 4% of CRP acres, are enrolled in 32 state CREPs. The Farm Bill should build on that success by increasing the acres of CRP enrolled in CREP contracts, and encouraging more CREP agreements.

* **Provide fair compensation to farmers** for their valuable land taken out of production. Proposals to cap CRP rental rates at far below fair market value, to eliminate rental rate incentives, Signup Incentive Payments, and Practice Incentive Payments, and to reduce the federal cost-share for establishing vegetation would make it very difficult to enroll farmers.

* **Provide flexibility for state and local partners to participate**, bringing funding and support that can leverage USDA funds and often save USDA money. Avoid requiring an arbitrary 50/50 match that could leave many states and partners unable to participate.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

Easements provide permanent protection for particularly valuable wetlands, native prairie, and other farmland, while keeping the land in private hands. The 2014 Farm Bill cut the budget for farmland easements substantially, and the 2018 Farm Bill should restore funding and increase program flexibility.

* **Increase ACEP funding** to \$500 million/year, and increase wetland county acre cap to 15%.

* **Provide flexibility to meet non-federal match** with donations or in-kind services.

* **Conservation plans** should be required to obtain funding, but need not be in the easement.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

EQIP provides cost-share and incentive payments to install practices to better manage nutrients, pests, woodlands, grazing systems, or wildlife habitat. The Farm Bill should focus EQIP funds on practices that provide the highest conservation benefits per dollar, and in areas where they are most needed.

* **Require a review of EQIP practice standards and payment rates** to focus funds on highest conservation benefits per dollar. Make consideration of local resource concerns a leading factor in allocating EQIP to states, and require that USDA streamline and better coordinate EQIP and CSP.

* **Earmark EQIP funds for a soil health** demonstration pilot program; add biological soil health testing and remediation and soil health and conservation planning as specifically eligible practices; and provide that USDA manage EQIP to boost soil health.

* **Increase wildlife habitat allocation** to at least 10%, allow wildlife practice contracts for up to 10 years, and direct USDA to prioritize livestock funding for grazing systems to boost multiple benefits.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program provides support to install conservation systems designed to address multiple resource concerns on a whole-farm basis. Congress should maintain the CSP as a separate program, and streamline and focus the program to achieve maximum conservation benefits.

* **Require that USDA manage the CSP to boost soil health;** add payments for soil health plans, conservation plans, weather volatility; add supplemental payment for advanced grazing management.

* **Require that USDA streamline CSP** and better coordinate CSP and EQIP.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) focuses conservation funds to address a high-priority resource concern in a particular watershed or region, with a targeted set of conservation solutions, in partnership with state and local agencies and organizations. The Farm Bill should expand the use of the RCPP's targeted approach, reduce the administrative burden, provide flexibility in partnerships, and increase funding to deliver additional conservation.

* **Increase funding for RCPP to at least \$350 million per year**, providing an increase in dedicated funding of at least \$100 million per year.

* **Streamline RCPP by allowing RCPP contracts** (rather than separate ACEP, CSP, or EQIP contracts), and add authorities covered by CRP and Watershed Protection & Flood Prevention, but ensure a transition to allow the program to continue during the rulemaking process.

* **Provide for partnership agreements longer than 5 years**, broaden eligible activities, allow non-profits to be partners, allow in-kind partner contributions, and let partners bundle applications.

Crop Insurance

Crop insurance is valuable to farmers, but should not provide incentives to destroy native prairie, should not deter farmers from adopting conservation practices, and insurance premiums should better reflect the lower risk presented by farmers who adopt practices that build soil health and resilience.

* **Expand Sodsaver** to other prairie states. At a minimum, give governors the authority to 'opt in' to Sodsaver coverage. Close the alfalfa loophole to protect the intent of the provision.

* **Give USDA authority to offer a crop insurance discount** for farmers who use practices like cover crops and diverse rotations that build soil health, to reflect their lower loss exposure.

* **Clarify that cover crops should be considered as a good farming practice** that should not affect the insurability of cash crops if implemented according to NRCS standards.

Voluntary Public Access & Habitat Incentives Program

VPA-HIP benefits rural communities, farmers and outdoor recreationists by supporting state and tribal efforts to provide public recreation access on private land.

- * **Provide \$50 million over 5 years** in mandatory funding for VPA-HIP.

Other Provisions

Other controversial provisions that could sink the potential for a successful, bi-partisan Farm Bill should be avoided. ***Provisions to avoid*** include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- * **Repeal of the Clean Water Rule**, or changes to the statutory definition of Waters of the U.S.
- * **Changes to FIFRA** that would eliminate a requirement that the Fish & Wildlife Service be consulted with respect to pesticide impacts on wildlife, and changes to federal water quality laws that would prevent a state or the EPA from protecting state waters from the discharge of pesticides.
- * **Broad categorical exclusions** that reduce or eliminate public review and participation in Forest Service management decisions.

For more information:

Duane Hovorka, Agriculture Program Director
Izaak Walton League of America
707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, MD 20878
(402) 804-0033, Agriculture@iwla.org
www.iwla.org



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