



Lance Cheung, USDA

The Izaak Walton League of America 2023 Farm Bill Agenda

The 2023 Farm Bill represents a tremendous opportunity to help farmers reduce their need for expensive inputs like fuel, fertilizer and pesticides, eliminate soil erosion, cut polluted runoff from farms, reduce flooding, grow healthy food, support fish and wildlife, and address climate change.

We can accomplish *all* of those if we:

- ◆ **Put soil health at the center** of America's agriculture policy.
- ◆ **Increase long-term investment** in the suite of Farm Bill conservation programs that have a proven record of success.
- ◆ **Focus conservation dollars** on programs that leverage non-federal funds, like a proposed State & Tribal Soil Health Grant Program.

Soil Health at the Center

Since the very first Farm Bill in the 1930's, the legislation has had three primary goals: making healthy, affordable food available for all Americans; ensuring the financial viability of farmers; and protecting our soil and other natural resources.¹ Putting soil health at the center of agriculture policy will promote all three.

Widespread adoption of soil health systems would give consumers access to healthier, more nutritious food. Farmers could reduce their dependence on expensive fuel, fertilizer, and pesticides. Our soil, climate, water, and wildlife would all benefit. With lower input costs and more resilient yields, farmers and ranchers would be able to maintain the soil health systems, providing enduring benefits.

Increase Investment

Farm Bill conservation programs have a proven track record of success. They are so successful that demand from farmers and ranchers has far outstripped available dollars.² The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 provided nearly \$19.5 billion in funding that will help reduce the backlog of demand for these programs, but we think farmer demand will continue to grow.

If USDA focuses the new funding on suites of soil health practices that will address climate change and benefit other natural resources, it can serve as a catalyst to widespread adoption of soil health systems. Congress should take this opportunity to lock in long-term funding for conservation programs that will meet the growing demand.

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



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Leverage State and Private Funds

Programs that leverage state and private funds multiply the benefits of our federal investment. A new State & Tribal Soil Health Grant program would support state, local and private initiatives and investment in soil health systems adapted to each state's soil, climate, and farming systems.

Programs like Conservation Innovation Grants (under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program), the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program all leverage state and other funding to support conservation.

Why Soil Health?

A growing body of research is shedding light on how important healthy soils are for both our natural resources and net farm income.³

Healthy soils are rich in organic matter, the living and decaying roots and leaves from plants and the microbes (fungi and bacteria) that are critical to plant health. The beneficial microbes feed on that organic matter, breaking it down and helping plants access the nutrients stored within. Plants return the favor by pumping carbohydrates into the soil to feed the microbes.

Those microbes bind soil particles together, creating soil structure that absorbs water like a sponge. Rain and snow soak in instead of running off, reducing runoff of fertilizer, pesticides, soil, and manure, cutting downstream flooding, and storing water for future crop use. Soil health practices like reduced tillage, growing cover crops, and diverse crop rotations protect the soil from erosion, and used together they can store a ton or more of carbon per acre per year in the soil.⁴

Producers and economists agree that restoring healthy soils can help farmers cut their fuel use and radically reduce their reliance on expensive inputs. When soils are healthy they feed the plants, so farmers can reduce their fertilizer bill. Healthy plants – fed by healthy soil – are resistant to pests and disease, so farmers need fewer pesticides.⁵

Livestock producers using well managed rotational grazing systems can produce more pounds of beef or lamb on the same land with reduced input costs, all while restoring the health of grasslands that benefit wildlife.⁶

We all win because healthy soils grow healthy food.⁷ Soil health practices like planting cover crops and grass buffer strips along streams also boost habitat for fish and wildlife.

Producers benefit from farming systems more resilient to drought and flooding. Taxpayers benefit as well because they pay more than 60% of the cost of federal



Tim McCabe, NRCS

After decades of improvement, the National Resources Inventory says cropland erosion in the U.S. increased between 2007 and 2017.⁸

crop insurance that pays out when a farmer loses his or her crops to drought or flooding.

Rural towns benefit from cleaner streams, better wildlife habitat, and more farm income kept within the community.

Building a Better Farm Bill

The federal Farm Bill drives day-to-day decisions on America's farms and ranches. What crops to plant, how to raise livestock and manage crops, and what conservation measures to adopt – the Farm Bill has a huge influence on these decisions and many more.

Farm Bill conservation programs are America's largest source of funding for farm and ranch conservation, providing some \$6 billion per year. They fund conservation plans for farms and ranches, educate producers about conservation systems, and pay for a share of the cost of implementing conservation practices on their land.

As critical as these conservation investments are, they represent just 7% of the funding provided for in the Farm Bill. Commodity programs, subsidized crop insurance and other Farm Bill provisions can often work against conservation, which is why the Farm Bill includes safeguards like Swampbuster, Sodbuster, and SodSaver – and why the crop insurance provisions of the next Farm Bill need to recognize the value of soil health practices in reducing risk.

In the past USDA programs have often actively discriminated against farmers of color, Native American Tribes, and women. The 2023 Farm Bill should seek to end discrimination and neglect but should also help redress those past injustices.



Where Do Farm Bill Dollars Go?

The 2018 Farm Bill has 11 Titles that address a wide range of food and agriculture issues, including international trade, energy, forestry, research, and other topics. 99% of Farm Bill spending is in the following four areas:⁹

Nutrition

The largest share of Farm Bill funding is for nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), which helps low-income individuals buy food. When enacted in 2018, nutrition programs were expected to cost \$326 billion over five years, about 76% of Farm Bill spending. Since 2020 Congress has also provided over \$60 billion in pandemic assistance through nutrition programs, and adding in changes in how SNAP benefits are calculated the expected 10-year cost of the nutrition title has increased by over 60%.¹⁰

Crop Insurance

The federal government pays over 60% of the cost of crop insurance premiums to encourage farmers (and now ranchers) to purchase insurance against crop and revenue losses from drought, floods, pests and most other natural causes. Taxpayers also pay for the operating costs and a guaranteed rate of return to the 15 private insurance companies that sell crop insurance policies to farmers and process claims for losses.

In 2021 over 444 million acres of land were covered by federal crop insurance policies.¹¹ That includes over 90% of the planted acres of major crops like corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, and cotton. Participation tend to be lower for fruit, nut and vegetable growers.¹² The crop insurance provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill were expected to cost taxpayers \$39 billion over five years, about 9% of Farm Bill spending.¹³

Commodity Payments

The 2018 Farm Bill provides payments to farmers who produce over two dozen agricultural commodities (including corn, wheat, cotton, rice, peanuts, soybeans, and dairy). The payments are part of a ‘safety net’ to help farmers who see large swings in income because they 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. 2018 Farm Bill commodity payments were expected to cost \$30 billion over five years, about 7% of Farm Bill spending.

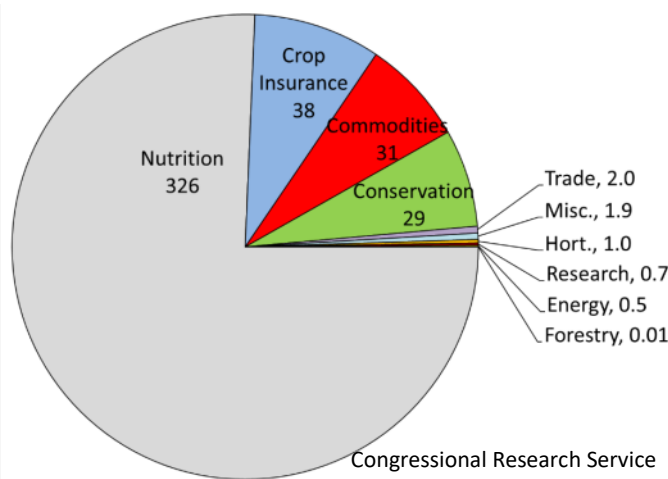
In 2019 and 2020 USDA provided over \$25 billion more to farmers and ranchers harmed by a trade war with China, and since 2020 over \$30 billion in pandemic assistance has been provided to farms.¹⁴

Conservation Programs

The Farm Bill’s conservation 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 soil health systems and a wide variety of structures and stewardship practices on farms and ranches. Conservation programs were expected to cost \$30 billion over five years, about 7% of Farm Bill spending.¹⁵

In 2022 the Inflation Reduction Act provided nearly \$19.5 billion more over the next few years to help farmers and ranches adopt climate-smart practices through five USDA conservation programs. The legislation also provided \$5 billion for federal and nonfederal forest conservation and \$4 billion for water management and conservation efforts in the Colorado River Basin and other areas experiencing drought.¹⁶

Projected Outlays, 2018 Farm Bill



Soil Health

The 2018 Farm Bill included many soil health provisions, and with good reason.

The US has lost about half of the fertile topsoil we had two centuries ago.¹⁷ With today's farming practices we are losing soil 10 times faster than natural replacement rates.¹⁸ Organic matter in our soils is about half of what it once was.

Since the Dust Bowl days federal and state agencies have focused on reducing erosion from rain and wind. After decades of improvement, progress has stalled. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says from 2007 to 2017 total erosion on cropland *increased* from 1.65 to 1.70 billion tons, and erosion per acre increased as well.¹⁹

1. Congress should give USDA a goal to help craft a soil health plan for every farmer or rancher who wants one over the next decade.

Cutting-edge soil health 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.

The healthy soils they restore deliver a wide variety of financial benefits for farmers and conservation benefits for all of us. But the transition takes an investment of learning, time, and dollars. Congress can help farmers and ranchers make the transition by putting soil health at the center of agricultural policy, starting with soil health planning.

Promote State Leadership

2. A State & Tribal Soil Health Grant Program could provide \$100 million a year to support innovative approaches that spur widespread adoption of soil health practices.

Soils, weather, and farming systems vary from state to state, and we cannot rely solely on USDA to help farmers understand and adopt soil health systems. State, Tribal, and local agencies have innovative solutions. Federal grants could support their efforts to

NRCS



Edwin Remsburg USDA SARE

Cover crops, a key soil health practice, are used successfully in every state but on less than 8% of US cropland acres.

help farmers and ranchers adopt systems that restore healthy soils.

Modernize Crop Insurance

3. Congress should continue the \$5/acre crop insurance discount for cover crops and ask USDA to use a multi-year pilot program to test a broader 'good farmer discount' for farmers who adopt a suite of NRCS-approved soil health practices.

Soil health systems that combine practices like reduced tillage, cover crops, and diverse crop rotations have been shown to reduce the likelihood that farmers will suffer a large crop failure due to drought, flooding or pests. Yet farmers who have invested in those low-risk systems are charged the same price as everyone else to insure their crops under the federally-subsidized crop insurance system.²⁰

In 2021 and 2022 USDA provided a \$5 per acre discount on crop insurance premiums for farmers who certify they planted cover crops. The



discount recognizes the benefits of that practice in reducing risk.

Strengthen Rural Infrastructure

4. Funding a Soil Health Infrastructure Initiative at USDA Cooperative Services would help rural cooperatives lead the transition to soil health systems.

Farmer-owned rural cooperatives help farmers buy, store and sell what they produce, and they can play a key role in helping farmers with soil health planning, soil testing, and advice. They can buy, mix and sell cover crop seeds and provide specialized equipment like high-boy planters and roller crimpers to better manage cover crops.

Farmers and ranchers will need recipes for rebuilding healthy soils that have proven they work in local soils, climates, and farming systems. Cooperatives can help, but many cooperatives will need to adapt their business plans and acquire training, equipment, and help to provide farmers with the knowledge and infrastructure they need to succeed.

Improve Conservation Programs

5. Congress should help USDA put soil health at the center of USDA working lands conservation programs. That includes prioritizing funds for the adoption of bundles of soil health practices through CSP, EQIP, and RCPP, and making soil health testing part of every contract that includes soil health practices.

Farm Bill conservation programs provide technical advice, conservation plans, and a share of the cost of installing or adopting a wide variety of conservation practices. Not all of those practices deliver the multiple natural resource benefits that soil health systems provide.

Yet soil health cropland practices like cover crops, reduced tillage, conservation crop rotations, Integrated Pest Management, and rangeland practices like rangeland planting, fencing and water systems to provide for rotational grazing receive only a small part of the funding from USDA's primary working lands programs.

For example, from 2017-2020, no more than 31% of EQIP funding was invested in practices that improve soil health, split between support for grazing practices and for cropland practices like cover crops, integrated pest management, and diverse crop rotations.²¹

6. Congress should provide incentives to help ensure that the substantial gains in soil health and soil carbon are not lost when CRP contracts expire.

Under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) landowners take cropland out of production, typically planting grassland mixes that help rebuild organic matter and restore soil health over the 10-15 year CRP contract.

Providing a share of the cost of installing fencing and water for grazing during the CRP contract would allow grazing to be used for mid-contract management and provide for an easy transition to a managed rotational grazing system once the contract ends.

Prioritizing applications under USDA working lands programs (CSP, EQIP, and RCPP) to implement bundles of soil health practices on expiring CRP contract lands would protect many of the carbon, water quality, and wildlife benefits delivered during the CRP contract should the land be placed back in crop production.

7. The EQIP Conservation Innovation Grant program funding dedicated to on-farm soil health trials should be at least doubled to \$50 million per year.

The Conservation Innovation Grant program (part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program) supports the development of innovative approaches to conservation by leveraging state and private dollars. Farmers and ranchers need to know which soil health systems will work best in their locales.

Address Drought Through Soil Health

8. Congress should promote more widespread use of soil health systems in drought-prone areas of the US by prioritizing on-farm research, farmer and rancher education, and financial assistance for soil health systems in the West.

Soil health systems can reduce the impacts of drought. With healthy levels of organic matter and good structure, healthy soils can capture and hold water in the root zone.²² However, dryer lands in the West can present challenges to soil health practices like getting cover crops established.

USDA can help farmers and ranchers build resilience and cope with drought by testing and identifying suites of most effective soil health practices, educating farmers and ranchers about those practices, and prioritizing financial assistance to speed their adoption.

Edwin Remsberg USDA SARE



In drought-prone areas soil health practices help conserve moisture.



Grow Our Investment

The federal Farm Bill is our Nation's largest pot of funding to encourage voluntary efforts to conserve farm and ranch land. The suite of Farm Bill conservation programs have proven so successful that farmers who apply are being turned away in record numbers.

In 2019 and 2020, more than 70% of farmers who asked for help through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) or Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) were turned away. That represents a failed opportunity to put conservation in place on tens of millions of acres of land.²³

9. Congress should ensure that USDA makes the best use of the \$19.5 billion provided in the Inflation Reduction Act by focusing the bulk of the funds on soil health systems that deliver multiple natural resource benefits.

The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 provided nearly \$19.5 billion to help farmers and ranchers adopt climate-friendly farm and ranch practices,²⁴ working through the current conservation programs that producers are familiar with — the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and USDA conservation operations.

That influx of funds over the next several years will help address the large backlog of applications for USDA assistance. If used wisely, it will also spur the widespread adoption of soil health measures that address climate change while delivering multiple natural resource benefits for soil conservation, water quality, water conservation, and wildlife.

10. The 2022 Farm Bill should provide long-term funding levels adequate to meet

the growing demand for the six primary conservation programs included in the 2018 Farm Bill — ACEP, CSP, EQIP, RCPP, as well as the Conservation Reserve Program and Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program.

The influx of funds from the Inflation Reduction Act will be of enormous help, but it does not address the problem for the long term. Meeting the demands from farmers and ranchers for these popular programs -- and meeting our natural resource needs — would likely require a doubling of America's investment in Farm Bill conservation dollars.

Even at that level, conservation funding would represent just one in eight Farm Bill dollars. If focused on soil health practices, the investment would return billions of dollars of financial

benefits to farmers in reduced costs for fuel, fertilizer and pesticides — on top of the many conservation benefits.

11. Congress should put a priority on programs that leverage state, local, and private dollars to deliver carefully targeted conservation benefits.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Wetlands Reserve Enhancement

Partnership, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program all combine federal funds with state and local dollars to deliver conservation benefits in targeted areas. State and local partners identify the priority conservation needs in an area and bring together partners and funding to address them, multiplying our federal investment.

Our proposed State & Tribal Soil Health Grant Program takes a similar approach, providing matching funds to help states and tribes craft and implement soil health strategies.



Soil health practices like buffer strips, cover crops and diverse crop rotations are also climate friendly.



NRCS



Improve Conservation Delivery

The Farm Bill's suite of conservation programs provide \$6 billion per year to fund a wide range of conservation solutions for America's farm and ranch land. With some thoughtful changes these programs can provide even more benefits for farmers, rural communities and our natural resources.

Conservation Reserve Program

12. The Farm Bill should provide at least 50% of the cost of installing fencing and water infrastructure on existing and new CRP contract lands to facilitate managed grazing after the CRP contract expires and during mid-contract management.

13. Congress should prioritize the use of the CSP, EQIP and RCPP during the CRP contract for landowners to take initial steps to transition their expiring CRP contract acres to managed rotational grazing, agroforestry, or a suite of soil health cropland practices.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) already provides huge benefits for soil conservation, water quality, wildlife, and climate change. With a few improvements the program can better serve as a transition program, helping landowners take highly erodible and marginal cropland and make the long-term transition to a well-managed rotational grazing system, agroforestry, or a cropping system centered on soil health.

Any of these three options would maintain most of the soil conservation, water quality, wildlife and climate benefits provided once the CRP contract expires.

14. The next Farm Bill should increase the caps on per-acre rental payments, should restore mid-contract management payments, and should raise the overall

CRP payment limit to at least \$100,000 per person.

Most CRP lands benefit from management actions during the contract, like prescribed burns and brief grazing that rejuvenates a grassland. But the 2018 Farm Bill eliminated payments for mid-contract management.

The 2018 Farm Bill also went too far in slashing CRP rental rates and reducing incentive payments, and that has reduced landowner interest in enrolling vulnerable land in the program. The \$50,000 annual cap on how much a landowner can get in CRP payments has not changed in decades, so the amount of land an individual can have in CRP has dropped by more than half since 2000.

15. The next Farm Bill should require that USDA consider the conservation benefits of the management plan when scoring applications for CRP grassland contracts.

The CRP Grasslands option provides funds to protect native prairie and other grasslands that are vulnerable to conversion to cropland or urban development. Over the past several years USDA has increased the enrollment of Grasslands CRP contracts to 7 million acres in October, 2022 from less than 2 million acres just two years before.²⁵

USDA's scoring of applications considers the vulnerability of the land to development, the type of vegetation and its location in the landscape, but it currently does not consider how the property is managed. The difference in conservation benefits between pasture or range that is well-managed with prescribed grazing and grassland that is over-grazed, often through continuous grazing, can be stark.

16. Congress should push USDA to do more to promote Continuous CRP signup, and should maintain or increase the goal



Jeff Vanuga, NRCS

CRP contracts are a great way to transition marginal cropland into productive grazing land.



Lynn Betts NRCS

of at least 8.6 million CRP acres in these high-value practices.

Continuous signup CRP contracts include high-value conservation measures that are typically done on part of a field. Examples are grass buffer strips along streams, filter strips, windbreaks, and restoring wetlands and native prairie, and landowners can enroll in Continuous CRP contracts at any time.

Continuous Signup CRP enrollment peaked in 2016 and 2017 at more than 1.3 million acres each year, but has fallen off sharply.²⁶

Improve Working Lands Programs

17. Congress should require USDA to increase CSP cost-share rates to be equivalent to EQIP rates for the same practice. Congress should restructure CSP payments to reward early adopters with higher payments for maintaining high value conservation practices.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) helps farmers and ranchers implement whole-farm conservation plans that address multiple natural resource problems. It could be an ideal program to reward ‘early adopters’ who have been leading the way to develop, test and implement soil health and other climate-friendly farming.

Unfortunately farmers who enroll in CSP contracts find that the cost-share rates paid are far less than USDA pays for the same practice through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. With USDA focusing CSP payments on the adoption of new practices, the CSP also pays very low rates for maintaining practices.²⁷

18. If Congress maintains an EQIP set-aside for livestock, it should direct USDA to focus the funds on installing grazing infrastructure, prescribed grazing and range management, all of which deliver multiple resource benefits.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program helps producers put in place structures like fencing and water, irrigation systems, or livestock manure lagoons. It also helps farmers add management practices like planting cover crops, clearing brush, and prescribed grazing plans. Congress directed that USDA spend at



Jeff Vanuga NRCS

least half of EQIP funds on livestock practices, and grazing systems provide far more conservation benefits than large feedlots and hog barns.

19. Congress should require USDA to streamline the process for RCPP partnership agreements so the funds get more quickly to farmers and ranchers.

20. The Farm Bill should allow and encourage broader use of RCPP funds for restoration and management work on lands that have been in an ACEP easement for at least 10 years.

21. To spread available funding for the CSP, EQIP, and RCPP among more farmers and

ranchers, contracts should be limited to \$200,000 per farmer over the 5-year Farm Bill.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was designed to focus federal, state and private dollars to meet the conservation



Chesapeake Bay Program

Chesapeake Bay RCPP projects fund fences that keep livestock out of creeks, and farm plans that reduce runoff into trout streams.

challenges of a particular watershed or region. Progress has been slowed by a cumbersome USDA process for approving RCPP partnership agreements.

The RCPP provides flexibility for project sponsors to use any of the suite of conservation payments provided through the ACEP, CRP, CSP, or EQIP. RCPP initiatives could be useful on lands that have been in Agriculture Conservation Easement Program agreements long enough to need additional restoration and management work not contemplated under the original ACEP agreement.

With demand for conservation programs far exceeding available dollars, Congress should let more farmers and ranchers obtain contracts by reducing the maximum amount of CSP, EQIP, or RCPP funds a farmer or rancher can obtain.

Conserve Grazing Lands

22. The Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative should be provided at least \$50 million per year in mandatory funding.

The Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative provides funding to help establish and maintain state grazing organizations, organize grazing conferences and support rancher-to-rancher networks for sharing information. The program fills an important need, and dedicated funding would ensure every region of the country is covered.



Galvanize Rural America

Building a more sustainable, resilient food system will re-energize rural communities. Federal investments in critical rural infrastructure will help farmers adopt better production systems and help consumers tap into local markets for high quality food.

23. Congress should increase funding for the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) program which funds on-farm research to develop and test best farming practices.

As our nation strives to reduce greenhouse gas pollution and slow climate change, farms and rural communities can play a critical role. Many producers are interested in adopting climate-friendly farming practices but they need better information on which practices work best in their soils, climate, and farming systems. SARE can help farmers provide those answers.

24. Congress should reauthorize the Voluntary Public Access & Habitat Incentive Program and provide at least \$50 million in mandatory funding for the program.

The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program encourages owners of farm, ranch, and forest land to make their land available for hunting, fishing, wildlife watching and other wildlife-dependent recreation. The program offers competitive grants to states and tribes to build and expand voluntary access programs.

Rural communities benefit economically from the hunters, anglers, and others brought to their areas, and they benefit from the wildlife habitat improvements that are part of the deal.

25. The Local Agriculture Market Program should be extended and expanded to provide much-needed funds to establish and support local and regional markets, create food hubs, and re-energize rural communities.

Edwin Remsberg USDA SARE



The USDA SARE program funds farmer-driven practical research and education.

The COVID pandemic, war in Ukraine and supply chain disruptions have all highlighted the need for a more resilient food system, but the problem is not new. Decades of consolidation in meatpacking and food

processing and growing reliance by farmers on chemical inputs from far away suppliers have devastated rural communities.

The 2018 Farm Bill created the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), providing dedicated funds to help promote farmers markets and local/regional food systems and to help producers create and

market value-added products.

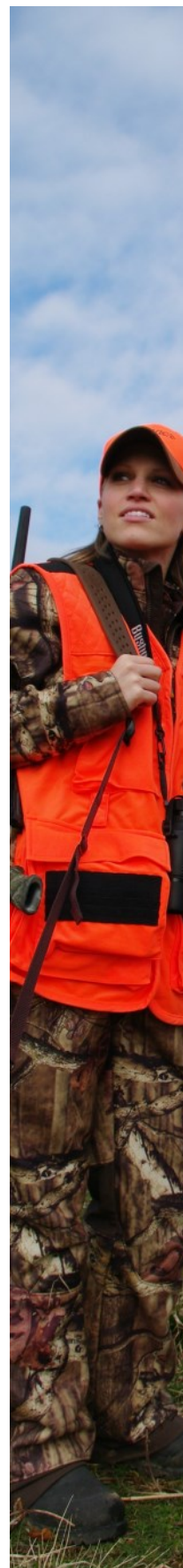
Rural communities have used the funds to rebuild their food system infrastructure, supporting local farmers, consumers, and institutions like schools and hospitals. The funds have also helped farming communities prosper by meeting the food needs of larger urban communities in the region.

26. Congress should build on recent efforts by increasing funds for loans and grants to build and expand local meat processing plants, giving consumers and livestock producers more options.

The widespread loss of local meat processing plants has made it difficult for grass-finished, organic and small livestock producers to succeed.

27. The 2023 Farm Bill should expand and strengthen the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) to provide loans and grants to install renewable energy on farms and ranches.

Farmers and ranchers can benefit financially from wind, solar and other renewable energy sources where thoughtfully integrated into their operations, but the technologies require substantial up-front investment.



NRCS

Hope for a New Generation

Over the next 20 years, hundreds of millions of acres of farmland in America are likely to change hands,²⁹ and that could create a huge opportunity.

28. Better funding for USDA programs that aid beginning farmers would provide education, training and financial support that would help smooth the coming transition and bring youth and new energy to rural communities.

The vast majority of young and beginning farmers readily embrace methods that put soil health at the center of their operations, allowing them to slash input costs, increase output and reduce their environmental footprint.³⁰

Whether we obtain the benefits of widespread adoption of soil health systems will depend in part on whether or not these innovative young farmers and ranchers can gain access to farmland.

29. Expanding the Conservation Reserve Program Transition Incentives Program would reward farmland owners with expiring CRP contracts who sell or rent their land to beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers.

Young and beginning farmers face big challenges in finding access to land and capital and affordable health care and housing. They face stiff competition from large corporate farms, investment firms, and even foreign countries in buying or renting farmland.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides a special opportunity to make land available to beginning farmers and historically underserved farmers, including farmers of color. After 10 or 15 years in a CRP contract, these lands are often well-established grasslands ideal for transition to grazing, or to

cropland management that incorporates soil health systems designed to maintain the healthy soils that have been restored.

30. Increased funding for programs that aid underserved farmers, including cooperative agreements between USDA and organizations and institutions that are trusted partners, would better meet their needs.

31. Providing Tribes and historically underserved farmers first option to purchase FSA-foreclosed farms before they go to public auction would be a small but meaningful step to address historic injustices.

USDA has a long, painful history of active discrimination and passive neglect of the needs of farmers of color, women, and Native American Tribes. Add discrimination by banks and other institutions and the farmland owned by black

farmers fell from 16 million acres in 1910 to less than 5 million acres in 2017.³¹

Congress and USDA have begun to redress the injustices, but much more needs to be done. Commodity, crop insurance, farm loan, conservation and other programs designed to support new and existing farmers must better meet the needs of these historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

32. A Healthy Soil Transition Loan Program would allow farmers with USDA loans to defer payments on those loans if the dollars are used to help finance the transition to soil health and other conservation practices.

Both beginning and experienced farmers and ranchers are challenged by the up-front investments needed to make the transition to soil health systems that would benefit farmers financially, bolster rural communities and provide environmental benefits for all of us.



NRCS

Value for Our Tax Dollars

IWLA



A farmland owner and a farmer, both IWLA members, educate Congress about Conservation Compliance, a pact between taxpayers and farmers that benefits both.

The Farm Bill provides some \$20 billion per year for federal crop insurance subsidies, commodity payments, and conservation programs, and billions more in farm loans. Taxpayers expect good value and accountability for their investments in America's farmers and ranchers.

Improve Conservation Compliance

'Conservation Compliance' is a critically important pact between taxpayers and farmers: farmers who accept Farm Bill benefits must have a conservation plan for their highly erodible cropland (Sodbuster) and must refrain from draining or filling wetlands to grow crops (Swampbuster).³²

33. Congress should create and fund a separate USDA Office of Compliance to give responsibility for spot-checks, investigations and enforcement to a designated group with expertise in these matters.

NRCS employees charged with helping farmers improve their conservation systems are also asked to find, report and investigate Sodbuster and Swampbuster violations by their customers. That leads to lax and inconsistent enforcement and builds mistrust.

34. Sodbuster should apply to all US cropland, requiring farmers accepting Farm Bill benefits to have soil conservation plans in place for all cropland by 2030.

Sodbuster applies to about 90 million acres of cropland that are highly erodible, about one-fourth of all cropland. With progress on reducing soil erosion stalled for more than a decade, this common sense provision should be expanded to more cropland.

35. The SodSaver provision should apply nationwide to recognize that loss of prairie is a nationwide problem.

In six Prairie Pothole states (Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana) farmers who convert native prairie to cropland have their crop insurance subsidy reduced (SodSaver). The provision reduces the taxpayer-paid incentives to destroy prairies.

Better Measure Success

36. Congress should require that USDA better measure, assess, and report on the natural resource impacts of Farm Bill conservation programs. It should fund creation of an information warehouse where USDA data would be readily available to researchers and the public in ways that protect the privacy of individual farmers.

USDA has often measured conservation program success by counting contract acres and dollars spent. Those don't tell the real story of how the programs reduce polluted runoff, protect water quality, regenerate healthy soils, or aid fish and wildlife. USDA has been slow to share information it collects with researchers, including data that would help evaluate program success and track the loss of native prairie.

USDA should be required to make program data broadly available, while protecting the privacy of individuals as required by law.

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, contact us at 707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, Maryland, 20878, or visit www.IWLA.org.

Carol Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress



Notes

¹ National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, *What is the Farm Bill?* <https://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/what-is-the-farm-bill/>

² Happ, Michael, *Closed out: How U.S. farmers are denied access to conservation programs*, 9 September 2021, Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy. The report says between 2010 and 2020 just 31% of farmers who applied for EQIP funds and 42% of farmers who applied for CSP funds were awarded contracts.

³ National Academy of Sciences U.S. National Committee for Soil Science et al, *State of the Soil: Perspectives in Soil Health Across the United States*, proceedings, 22 April 2022.

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