

Conservation Community's Principles and Recommendations for Strengthening Conservation in the 2018 Farm Bill

As we move toward reauthorization of the next farm bill, the Conservation Title programs, funding, and authorities are more critical now than ever. The farm conservation community, representing agriculture, wildlife, sportsmen, conservation, and environmental organizations, stands united in calling for a strengthened and expanded Conservation Title in the 2018 Farm Bill. The next farm bill must ensure that farmers and ranchers have access to a variety of tools they can choose from to conserve, manage, and enhance shared natural resources, while simultaneously promoting increased productivity and sustainability of their operations. We urge Congress to provide a much needed increase in conservation funding while improving program flexibility, conservation benefits, and accountability through an emphasis on program outcomes.

Increase Funding: The voluntary conservation programs, partnership opportunities, and conservation compliance provisions in the farm bill continue to make great strides toward improving water quality and soil health, reducing erosion, and conserving wildlife habitat. Despite the proven benefits of these programs - and the enormous natural resource challenges we face today - the Conservation Title experienced major cuts in the 2014 Farm Bill, as well as repeated annual cuts to programs through sequestration and through the appropriations process.

The next farm bill should include a substantial increase in funding for Title II conservation programs to address critical natural resource problems and growing producer and landowner demand. We stand united in saying that cuts to farm bill conservation programs must come to an end, and that we now must reverse these cuts and bring conservation investments in line with resource need and producer demand. We also stand united on the fundamental point that no increases to specific conservation programs should come at the expense of any other Title II programs, nor compromise the conservation mission of these programs.* We oppose cuts to overall conservation title funding as well as any cuts to one conservation program in favor of another.

Improve Program Delivery, Flexibility, and Accessibility: The successful implementation of conservation programs depends not only upon the availability of funding, but also ensuring that farmers, ranchers, foresters, and beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers can effectively access these programs. Access to and implementation of conservation programs also depends upon robust, publicly-funded technical assistance to help producers identify resource concerns and strategies to address them, as well as access to relevant financial assistance programs. We urge Congress to reaffirm the importance of conservation technical assistance in the 2018 Farm Bill. Finally, strategically improving easement, working lands, partnership, and land conservation programs can increase flexibility and reduce administrative burdens on landowners and producers.

Strengthen Program Impact and Conservation Benefits: Farm bill conservation programs not only serve participants and partner organizations, but they also bring enormous public benefits

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through improved water and air quality, carbon sequestration, wildlife and pollinator habitat, and public access to private lands for hunting, fishing, or other wildlife-dependent recreational activities. The next farm bill should target conservation programs to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent as effectively as possible to achieve the greatest conservation benefit, including through opportunities for long-term conservation, coordination between programs, a preference for planting native species when appropriate, and the adoption of high level conservation activities. Additionally, to ensure that taxpayer dollars are not causing harm to the public, it is critical that the conservation compliance compact between farmers and the public continues and effectively enforced, and that the crop insurance program supports rather than hinders the adoption of conservation practices.

Monitor and Report on Program Outcomes: In order to ensure that farm bill conservation programs achieve landscape scale outcomes, the next farm bill should provide the resources and authority for USDA to measure, evaluate, and report on conservation outcomes, including for soil health, water quality, and fish and wildlife. While USDA has already taken important steps to assess conservation at the national, regional, and landscape level, a statutory requirement for measuring, evaluating, and reporting on program outcomes will help ensure that all the good work focusing on producing outcomes that is underway will continue, and funding would enable the furthering of these efforts and address resource constraints.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Partnership projects address problems that no single entity could tackle alone. The 2014 Farm Bill established RCPP to support locally-led conservation that engages producers in a collaborative and entrepreneurial way to tackle landscape-scale problems. While RCPP has furthered critical efforts to address resource concerns, additional funding, flexibility, and key changes are needed in the next farm bill to advance these goals. We urge Congress to:

- Provide an increase in RCPP funding.*
- Allow NRCS to establish more flexible partnership contracts that do not directly use the covered programs, as long as they achieve the purposes of RCPP, and the overall program maintains a proportionate breakdown of cost share, easements, and comprehensive conservation assistance to reflect the donor programs.
- Ensure that RCPP projects use the covered programs' eligible activities, or if partners opt to promote the use of new and innovating conservation activities beyond eligible activities, NRCS must determine that such activities meet or exceed appropriate quality criteria and standards.
- Improve program administration by clarifying and simplifying the application process and allowing for streamlined signups.

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- Direct NRCS to allow partners to request funding for technical assistance (TA), project outreach and monitoring activities, and watershed or natural resource planning as part of their RCPP proposals
- Provide guidance to help conservation partners and NRCS quantify and report on outcomes associated with conservation practices.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides farmers, ranchers, and foresters with financial cost-share assistance and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on working agricultural land. The next farm bill should better target conservation dollars to maximize conservation and environmental outcomes through improved coordination between EQIP and CSP, robust support for wildlife habitat, grazing, and organic transition, and an emphasis on the most cost-effective practices with significant conservation benefits. We urge Congress to:

- Provide an increase in funding for EQIP*
- Adopt the coordination features and special initiatives for EQIP and CSP as noted below in the CSP recommendations.
- Focus EQIP on state or locally determined priority resource concerns, including the most cost-effective practices to address the priorities and maximize conservation benefits.
- Increase the minimum percentage of funds required to be used for wildlife conservation practices and their numerous co-benefits, including water quality, soil health, pollinator habitat, carbon sequestration, and compliance with state and federal regulations, through practices such as corridors, riparian filter strips, and conservation cover.
- Establish Organic Initiatives within EQIP and CSP, with an emphasis on conservation support for organic transition, and with the same payment limit as the general programs.
- Encourage greater levels of rancher participation, higher levels of grazing stewardship, and the adoption of prescribed grazing.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP is the nation's largest conservation program, supporting farmers in actively managing existing conservation systems as well as implementing additional conservation on their working lands. Unfortunately, the 2014 Farm Bill cut CSP by more than 20 percent. The next farm bill should not only maintain the current enrollment level, but also do more to incentivize higher level conservation through coordination with EQIP, an increase in the average payment rate to support critical activities, and a more robust ranking process focused on environmental benefits. We urge Congress to:

- Retain CSP at current acreage levels.

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- Strengthen coordination between the management component of EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to encourage continual improvement and better coordination across programs, including initiatives to support wildlife practices, soil health, and an organic initiative.
 - Increase the average per acre payment rate to ensure NRCS can properly incentivize high-level conservation activities, including the prioritization of CSP “bundles” (targeted suites of conservation activities)*
 - Increase the supplemental payment rate for resource-conserving crop rotations, and authorize new supplemental payments for management-intensive rotational grazing, and comprehensive conservation planning.*
- Modify the CSP ranking process, including new screening tools, to appropriately reward and incentivize conservation activities with high conservation value.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides matching federal funds both to protect agricultural land and related conservation values by limiting nonagricultural uses of that land and by restoring, protecting, and enhancing grasslands and wetlands. The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated all easement programs into ACEP, but in the process reduced easement funding from an average of over \$700 million per year to \$250 million in FY 2018. The next farm bill should greatly increase mandatory funding and improve flexibility and accessibility, and to reduce administrative burdens to ensure that farmers, ranchers, and foresters can restore, protect, and enhance their agricultural land, grasslands, forests, and wetlands. We urge Congress to:

- Increase funding for ACEP in line with historic norms for its three component programs.*
- Improve program flexibility, including allowing innovative program tools such as “buy-protect-sell” transactions – facilitated by temporary NGO ownership – and prioritize farmland affordability provisions in order to increase program access – especially for beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers and ranchers. Specific in particular to “buy-protect-sell” transactions, allow an Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limit waiver for NGOs in order to facilitate these transactions.
- Improve the program's process and efficiencies by allowing co-eligible entities, whereby one can lead on the application and the other can be the long-term easement holder
- Affirm that silviculture is an important aspect of working agricultural landscapes; working forests are eligible for protection under ACEP Agricultural Land Easements and should not be precluded by rule from that allowed by statute.
- Allow willing farmers and ranchers to donate the entire match requirement for grasslands of special environmental significance, as adequate resources are not always available in the rural communities where land is at risk.

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Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

The primary purpose of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is to conserve and improve soil, improve water quality, and create and maintain wildlife habitat by providing cost-share and rental payments for farmers to establish long-term resource-conserving cover, primarily grasses and trees, on highly erodible or environmentally sensitive land that has typically previously been in row crop production. The 2014 Farm Bill cut the acreage cap from 32 million acres to 24 million acres in response to market conditions and arbitrary budget constraints. The 2018 Farm Bill should increase the acreage cap, bolster program implementation to maximize environmental benefits, and provide for greater flexibility. We urge Congress to:

- Increase the CRP acreage cap.*
- Increase funding for the CRP Transition Incentives Program* to encourage the transfer of land returning to production to new farmers adopting and implementing comprehensive conservation plans, and provide critical support for technical assistance.
- Increase CRP acres devoted to high-value practices that reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, and provide wildlife and pollinator habitat through a wide variety of enrollment options and initiatives through the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP), including Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) enrollments.
- Maximize environmental benefits of the program through a restructured environmental benefits index, updated mid-contract management that encourages the use of prescribed grazing and prescribed fire, and expanded grazing options within CRP in accordance with the best available science and in consultation with state wildlife agencies.
- Raise the CRP Grasslands program cap proportional to an increase to the overall CRP cap, and prioritize enrollment of high-quality grasslands of ecological significance as well as acres at risk of conversion for agriculture, energy, or other types of development, in order to retain the full ecological function of landscape-scale rangeland systems.

Conservation Compliance

Conservation compliance provisions are basic conservation accountability provisions that require producers to undertake a basic level of soil and wetland conservation on vulnerable lands in exchange for farm program benefits. The 2014 Farm Bill re-linked these conservation compliance provisions to crop insurance premium subsidies, ensuring that the largest farm safety net program included critical requirements for soil and water conservation. The 2018 Farm Bill must maintain the statutory linkage between soil and wetland conservation and farm support programs, while also ensuring adequate enforcement of conservation compliance through mandatory funding and increased spot check rates. We urge Congress to:

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- Maintain existing conservation requirements as a prerequisite to receiving crop insurance, conservation, and commodity program subsidies and other Farm Bill benefits.
- Ensure conservation compliance provisions are appropriately implemented to prevent erosion and wetland loss through requiring that at a minimum, NRCS evaluate the efficacy of off-site wetland determinations and require that highly erodible land (HEL) conservation plans address ephemeral gullies.
- Mandate the collection and public reporting of aggregated data on wetland and HEL determinations, acres in and out of compliance and benefits being withheld, and other key pieces of information on compliance at the county level while ensuring producer anonymity.
- Improve implementation of conservation compliance by ensuring adequate, dedicated farm bill funding for enforcement, and requiring a 5 percent spot check rate for each state.

Sodsaver

The 2014 Farm Bill includes a Sodsaver provision that reduces federal subsidies for farmers who choose to convert native grasslands to cropland in six states in the Prairie Pothole Region. Under Sodsaver, if landowners choose to break native prairie, they are subject to crop insurance subsidy reductions for the first four years after conversion. The next Farm Bill should build on the good work done around Sodsaver in the last Farm Bill by strengthening and expanding Sodsaver nationwide to conserve our remaining native grasslands. We urge Congress to:

- Make the Sodsaver provision apply nationwide.
- Require publicly-available reporting of data on native grassland loss.
- Close the loophole that allows producers to convert native prairie and plant non-insured perennial crops, introduced grasses, or other non-annual crops for 1-4 years and then plant to an annual crop without being subject to Sodsaver disincentives for those years.

Crop Insurance

Conserving and improving soil and water resources is a critical aspect of risk management. USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) should align their policies with conservation practices that decrease yield risk and improve sustainable production. The 2018 Farm Bill should include a crop insurance program that supports and encourages and does not hinder conservation. We urge Congress to:

- Remove existing barriers to adopting conservation practices by recognizing NRCS practices enhancements, and management measures in the RMA Good Farming Practices (GFP) without caveats.

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- Shift cover crop termination rules from eligibility requirements to the Good Farming Practices (GFP) process, and allow producers to use local information and expertise to guide cover crop management decisions.
- Improve soil health data collection by adding conservation and soil health objectives to the existing “surveys” and “data collection” portions of the crop insurance statute, and direct RMA to introduce practice codes to allow for data collection on conservation practices (such as cover cropping, conservation crop rotation, and conservation tillage) that increase soil health and decrease yield risk.
- Direct RMA and NRCS to assess the yield variability impacts of soil type and conservation practices including crop rotation, tillage practices, and cover crops.
- Direct RMA to encourage farmers to plant a cover crop after a prevented planting situation.
- Link buy-up coverage to comprehensive conservation plans and/or fashion a separate practice for high-level conservation systems, using pilot projects where appropriate.

Forestry, Grasslands, and Public Access

In addition to the above mentioned conservation activities and goals, additional land uses and activities, including forestry, grazing, and public access to private lands for wildlife dependent recreation play a critical role in investing in our shared natural resources. The 2018 Farm Bill should provide programmatic changes and investments to ensure the continued benefits from these activities. We urge Congress to:

- Reauthorize and fund the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program at a level that reflects the economic benefits and historical demand associated with the program.*
- Amend Grazing Land Conservation Assistance to promote prescribed fire and grazing when ecologically appropriate to benefit wildlife and pollinator habitat in accordance with the best available science and in consultation with the state wildlife agency.
- Reauthorize and provide annual mandatory funding for the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) and maintain HFRP program eligibility within RCPP.*
- Amend HFRP to allow for eligibility for land that has already been restored and is providing current wildlife benefits and is at risk of conversion, include habitat conservation for species of greatest conservation need in State Wildlife Action Plans, clarify that restoration can be achieved through forest management; and allow tribes to sell permanent easements on lands they own in fee.

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ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING THESE PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

American Bird Conservancy
American Rivers
Center for Rural Affairs
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Working Group
Gulf Restoration Network
Izaak Walton League of America
Land Stewardship Project
Mississippi River Network
National Audubon Society
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Farmers Union
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Young Farmers Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
Pollinator Partnership
Soil and Water Conservation Society
The Conservation Fund
The Trust for Public Land
The Xerces Society
Union of Concerned Scientists
Water Environment Federation
World Wildlife Fund

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