

The Healthy Fields and Farm Economies Act of 2018 (H.R.4751)

Sponsored by Representatives John Faso (R-NY) and Marcia Fudge (D-OH)

Bill Summary

The **Healthy Fields and Farm Economies Act (H.R.4751)** addresses the need to measure, report on, and evaluate the conservation outcomes of USDA's conservation programs. By providing USDA with the tools necessary to develop a process for collecting, reporting on, and utilizing data associated with conservation program implementation, this bill will help ensure that taxpayer dollars are being used efficiently and effectively, and that farmers and ranchers are getting the financial and technical help that they need.

The Need:

1. Measurement, evaluation, and reporting requirements on conservation outcomes are needed for all conservation programs and initiatives, including a description of all the many approaches, methods, and metrics the agency is developing or already has in place. This information is necessary in order to define, evaluate, and communicate outcomes and justify taxpayer return on conservation investments.
2. While USDA currently is able to measure conservation effects on a national, regional, and landscape scale through the Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP), CEAP is not able to assess the effects of individual USDA conservation programs and initiatives. Furthermore, CEAP is not currently authorized in statute, and thus is limited in the framework it can provide for expanding measurement, evaluation, and reporting on USDA conservation programs.
3. In order to build the necessary partnerships, infrastructure, and capacity to measure, evaluate, and report on the effects of conservation programs and initiatives, USDA will need a targeted source of funding.

The Solution:

EXPANSION of and COORDINATION with existing tools and measurement infrastructure:

- Authorize CEAP in coordination with the natural resource appraisal already required under the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA).
- Establish a process through which USDA can measure, evaluate, and report on conservation program outcomes, in coordination with CEAP, in order to improve the efficacy of conservation practices, programs, and initiatives.

OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENTS

- Direct USDA to identify and periodically revise the natural resource and environmental objectives and anticipated conservation outcomes for farm bill conservation programs
- Direct USDA to track changes in the condition of natural resources that result from the application of conservation activities supported directly by farm bill conservation programs.
- Direct USDA to establish a coordinated process of measurement and program evaluation in order to assess progress towards the identified objectives and make changes as needed.
- Ensure the program evaluation process accounts for the complexity of measurement challenges, including differing impact horizons and interactions between practices.

FUNDING to establish and implement a measurement and evaluation process:

- Direct USDA to use up to one percent of total annual funding available for new enrollments of farm bill conservation programs to support the measurement and reporting system

REPORTING:

- Direct USDA to issue a plan for the monitoring and evaluation process, as well as for coordinating the system with the natural resource evaluation authorized under RCA, within two years following the passage of the legislation
- Authorize USDA to make conservation activity and program data available to cooperators and researchers, in order to facilitate the monitoring and evaluation process, as long as personally identifiable information is protected.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE and PARTNERSHIPS:

- Direct the Secretary to establish a National Technical Committee to assist USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in developing and administering the measurement and evaluation process –composed of individuals with relevant expertise.
- Ensure the analysis and recommendations from the National Technical Committee are made available to the public.
- Authorize USDA to implement cooperative agreements with federal, state, and local agencies, universities and colleges, and NGOs – with relevant experience to support the implementation of the monitoring and evaluation process

INFORMATION AVAILABILITY:

- Direct USDA to submit to Congress, and to make publicly available, a report that includes the outcomes that will be measures, as well as the tools and methods that will be used to measure or model those outcomes
- Direct USDA to provide a report on the progress made towards achieving conservation program objectives and outcomes, an evaluation of the programs' cost effectiveness, and recommendations to improve program implementation
- Ensure that resulting research or information made publicly available is in a form that protects all personally identifiable information