

Recommendations to Strengthen Conservation in the 2023 Farm Bill

22 March 2023

To ensure farmers, ranchers, and forest owners across the United States can adapt to our changing world, the Conservation Title and its programs, funding, and authorities are more critical than ever. We, the undersigned organizations from diverse geographies and constituencies, stand united in calling for a strong, robust Conservation Title in the next Farm Bill. This Farm Bill must ensure that farmers, ranchers, and forest owners have access to a variety of tools they can choose from to conserve, manage, and enhance natural resources, while increasing productivity, resilience, and the financial viability of their operations. Below, we offer four overall recommendations for all USDA conservation programs, followed by more specific recommendations for improving specific Conservation Title programs, conservation compliance, Sodsaver, and the Crop Insurance Title.

Overall Recommendations

Provide Adequate and Sustainable Conservation Funding. This coalition of conservation organizations stands proud with Congress, USDA, and producers across the U.S in supporting a powerful set of tools to help producers who choose to implement conservation practices on their land. These voluntary conservation programs continue to make great strides toward improving soil health and water quality, reducing erosion, conserving wildlife habitat, sequestering carbon, and increasing the resilience of our farms, ranches, and forests in the face of droughts, floods, and other extreme weather. However, these programs are oversubscribed. Recent historic investments have begun to address program backlogs, but more durable support is needed to deliver conservation at a scale sufficient for our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forest owners to achieve their conservation goals. We urge Congress to:

- Protect and build upon the conservation funding included in previous legislation to provide sustained and adequate support for producers to meet the growing demand for conservation assistance.

Harness the talents and practices of farmers, ranchers, and forest owners to face a changing climate.

The next Farm Bill needs to incentivize practices and bundles that help producers mitigate and adapt to climate change, including those that improve soil health, halt ecosystem conversion, shore up resilience against flood and drought, increase biodiversity, and conserve landscape and wildlife corridors as well as hydrologic and habitat connectivity. We urge Congress to:

- Prioritize practices that support soil health, climate mitigation and adaptation, riparian buffers, and agroforestry.
- Create a new federal match for state soil health programs. Soil health is the foundation of agricultural production and our food system, from the nutrients it cycles, the water it absorbs, the carbon it sequesters and provides to plants, the rich biological activity it supports, and the financial stability it provides for farmers and ranchers.
- Direct NRCS to prioritize native species and plantings in program implementation whenever possible.
- Strengthen organic initiatives under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) so robust support is offered to organic and organic-transitioning operations.

- Direct NRCS to prioritize federally protected species, candidate species, state-listed species, culturally significant species, and other species identified in wildlife conservation plans, like the State Wildlife Action Plans and North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Advance Equity. The next Farm Bill needs to continue the efforts of previous Farm Bills in making strides to ensure that all producers, regardless of geography, race, gender, ethnicity, income, or farm size, can access and benefit from conservation programs. We urge Congress to:

- Increase set asides under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Increase cost share and allow upfront payments for socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers and ranchers.
- Direct NRCS to support tailored and culturally appropriate technical assistance.
- Direct NRCS to elevate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in practices and programs.
- Direct NRCS to improve language accessibility, provide pre-application support such as funding and/or technical assistance, provide 100% up-front cost share, and deploy other tools to ensure more equitable program participation by historically underserved producers.
- Direct USDA to improve data collection and reporting, and evaluation by an objective third party, around access by historically underserved communities to USDA programs.

Improve the effectiveness of conservation programs. To help ensure that taxpayer investments into conservation programs yield clear benefits and promote long-term conservation activities, we must continuously improve conservation program delivery and outcomes. We urge Congress to:

- Increase technical assistance capacity within USDA and with partners.
- Streamline application, ranking, and contracting processes so they are less onerous and more efficient for producers and conservation planners alike.
- Increase coordination and connection between programs.
- Expand the resources and authority USDA has to measure, evaluate, and report on conservation outcomes and economic benefits of programs and practices in various geographies related to croplands, grazing lands, wetlands, grasslands, and wildlife.
- Direct NRCS to report aggregated data on who applies for and is awarded program dollars (including demographic information disaggregated by race and ethnicity) and which practices are awarded, and report on unmet demand by program, practice, and enhancement.

We also stand united on the fundamental point that no increases to any one conservation program should come at the expense of any other Title II program nor compromise the conservation mission of these programs.

Recommendations for Conservation Title Programs

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides farmers, ranchers, and foresters with financial cost share and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on working agricultural land. The next Farm Bill should better target conservation dollars to maximize environmental outcomes with robust support for climate friendly and resilient practices, wildlife habitat, and improved grazing management. We urge Congress to:

- Direct USDA to track and report annually which practices are supported through set asides.
- Increase the share of the EQIP livestock set aside going towards climate friendly and advanced grazing management practices.

- Maintain the wildlife set aside at 10% at least and ensure that all of the practices that count towards this set aside are delivering meaningful benefits for wildlife.
- Increase funding for the Soil Health Demonstration Trials under EQIP's Conservation Innovation Grants.
- Direct NRCS to fund and create more wildlife connectivity and non-lethal predator deterrence practices.
- Reauthorize five-year payment limits from the 2018 Farm Bill and increase the five-year payment limit for organic producers to match that of conventional producers.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP rewards farmers for actively managing existing conservation systems as well as seeking continuous improvement and innovation. The 2014 Farm Bill cut CSP by more than 20 percent, and the 2018 Farm Bill reduced program enrollment. Given CSP's ability to use farmers' ingenuity to advance tailored conservation activities across a host of benefits, and to incentivize continuous improvement, CSP should be maintained and supported, not limited and reduced. We urge Congress to:

- Strengthen coordination between EQIP and CSP so together they encourage continual improvement to soil health; wildlife habitat; organic systems; and climate change mitigation, resilience, and adaptation.
- Include climate change as a one of five CSP Priority Resource Concerns for all states.
- Reauthorize five-year payment limits from the 2018 Farm Bill.
- Reinstate automatic renewals for farmers that commit to addressing additional resource concerns.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

RCPP projects support coordination to address problems and enable innovations that no single entity can tackle alone. RCPP supports locally led conservation that engages producers in a collaborative and entrepreneurial way to tackle regional and landscape-scale challenges. RCPP has proven popular and has advanced both critical efforts and innovations, but needs more streamlining, greater access for organizations that serve historically underserved farmers and ranchers, and additional support for evaluation and monitoring. We urge Congress to:

- Build on changes made in the last Farm Bill to streamline RCPP implementation by directing NRCS to improve the administration and effectiveness of RCPP at the proposal planning, contract execution, and project implementation phases and throughout the life of the project.
- Direct NRCS to develop a new funding and application model that increases program access for small organizations and organizations serving historically underserved producers.
- Recognize the challenges posed by RCPP's mandate that partners be responsible for measuring and reporting on project outcomes, and direct NRCS to support partners through guidance, training, and funding to help conservation partners and NRCS staff fulfill this directive.
- Extend ACEP certification to RCPP, enabling entities that are certified under ACEP to use their approved conservation easement templates for RCPP to increase project closing efficiency.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

ACEP provides federal matching funds to help producers voluntarily and permanently protect agricultural and high-conservation value land. The 2014 Farm Bill reduced ACEP funding from an average of over \$700 million per year down to just \$250 million by FY2018. While the 2018 Farm Bill partially

restored that funding to \$450 million in FY2019, this funding remains below historic levels, made even worse in recent years by inflation of land prices in many parts of the country. We urge Congress to:

- Reduce administrative burdens on experienced land trusts and public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement programs through a more robust certification process that empowers experienced actors to permanently protect land with less direct day-to-day federal oversight to streamline program implementation and reduce farmer wait times.
- Prioritize EQIP, CSP, and other conservation support to lands enrolled in ACEP and predecessor programs, recognizing that planning and cost share investments in these permanently protected lands represent highly durable conservation investments.
- Address challenges in Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) implementation to enable more use of BPS projects and to facilitate affordable farmland access for historically underserved farmers and ranchers.
- Add habitat connectivity to the ranking criteria for the Wetlands Reserve Easements component of ACEP to prioritize easements to projects that would benefit both wildlife and climate adaptation and resilience.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

CRP provides cost share and rental payments to farmers to take marginal land out of production; establish resource-conserving cover; and conserve and improve soil, water quality, and wildlife habitat. The 2014 Farm Bill cut the acreage cap from 32 million to 24 million acres while the 2018 Farm Bill only partially restored the cap to 27 million acres. We urge Congress to:

- Increase the CRP acreage cap above 2018 levels.
- Adjust rental rates during the contract to fairly compensate producers.
- Increase the annual CRP payment limitation from \$50,000, which was established in 1985, to account for inflation and rising land values.
- Continue and enhance CRP incentives, including by increasing Practice Incentive Payments¹ to at least 50 percent of the cost of practice implementation.
- Improve Grassland CRP through increased support for sustainable grazing, longer contracts, and enhanced targeting of acres that benefit wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and vulnerable and critical intact grassland areas.
- Ensure agroforestry practices are eligible under CRP, where ecologically appropriate, to support practice adoption on marginal cropland and pastureland.
- Direct Farm Service Agency (FSA) to increase outreach, and ensure there is adequate funding for this purpose, to successfully promote the CRP Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) to support land access.
- Direct FSA to track the demographics of producers buying or renting expiring CRP acres through CRP-TIP and the kinds, quality, and productivity of the land.
- Codify the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program and require that it continue to be part of Continuous CRP

¹ Practice Incentive Payments are a one-time incentive payment for participants who enroll in Continuous CRP, which supports practices that benefit wildlife, water, and climate on environmentally sensitive lands.

Recommendations for Conservation Compliance and Sodsaver

Conservation compliance provisions require producers to undertake a basic level of soil and wetland conservation on vulnerable lands in exchange for USDA program benefits. Sodsaver is a highly valued provision because it helps conserve unbroken sod and maintains high value components of the land, including native vegetation, stored carbon, biodiversity, and ecosystem integrity, among increasingly limited remains of native sod. We urge Congress to:

- Maintain existing requirements as a prerequisite to receiving crop insurance, conservation, and commodity program subsidies and other covered benefits on Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and wetlands.
- Direct USDA to collect and annually report aggregated county-level data on wetland and HEL determinations, including numbers of acres in and out of compliance, and total amount of benefits being withheld, while protecting producer privacy.
- Improve tracking and reporting of conversion and require publicly available reporting of data on native grassland and wetland loss, while protecting producer privacy.
- Provide non-punitive remedies and support to farmers who are not yet in compliance, for example, fast tracking access to conservation planning and technical assistance before determining non-compliance.
- Increase funding for activities that improve implementation, such as spot checks.
- Strengthen and expand Sodsaver, preferably nationwide.

Recommendations for Crop Insurance Title

Conserving and improving soil health and water resources are critical aspects of risk management. USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) should align programs to promote adoption of conservation practices that decrease risk of yield loss and improve farm and ranch viability, especially in the face of increased extreme weather and climate volatility. The Farm Bill should ensure crop insurance programs support and encourage, and especially do not hinder, conservation activities. We urge Congress to:

- Direct RMA to offer actuarially sound crop insurance rebates for soil health practices that demonstrably reduce risk (e.g., cover crops, conservation crop rotation).
- Codify the Pandemic Cover Crop Program² to provide \$5 per-acre premium discounts inside the crop insurance program for producers planting cover crops and expand it to other regionally appropriate conservation practices.
- Remove existing barriers to adopting conservation practices by recognizing NRCS practices, enhancements, and management measures in the RMA Good Farming Practices (GFP).
- Shift cover crop termination rules from eligibility requirements to the 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 collect data on other conservation practices (e.g., cover cropping, conservation crop rotation, conservation tillage) to determine to what extent each practice decreases risk.

To conclude, this Farm Bill must ensure that farmers, ranchers, and forest owners have access to a variety of tools they can choose from to conserve, manage, and enhance natural resources, while increasing productivity, resilience, and the financial viability of their operations. This Congress can do so

² The 2021 Pandemic Cover Crop Program provided nearly \$60 million to support cover crops on over 12 million acres.

by providing adequate and sustainable conservation funding; harnessing the talents and practices of farmers, ranchers, and forest owners to face a changing climate; advancing equitable program access for historically underserved producers; and improving the effectiveness of the conservation programs that USDA delivers.

We the undersigned look forward to working with Congress to achieve these goals in the next Farm Bill.

Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley
American Bird Conservancy
American Farmland Trust
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy
Carbon180
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Cultivate KC
Defenders of Wildlife
Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)
Illinois Environmental Council
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Izaak Walton League of America
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Organic Farming Research Foundation
Pasa Sustainable Agriculture
PennFuture
Pollinator Partnership
Practical Farmers of Iowa
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Sweet Springs Resort Park Foundation Inc
The Wildlife Society
Trust for Public Land
Union of Concerned Scientists
Virginia Association for Biological Farming
Wallace Center at Winrock International
Waterkeepers Chesapeake - Fair Farms Initiative
World Wildlife Fund
Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation