

DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE



A Guide to the Farm Bill Conservation Programs





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Defenders of Wildlife is a national, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities.

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Cover images, clockwise from top left: Beaver dam along Bear Creek in Story County, Iowa. Red-eared turtles in a wetland. Landowner in a wildflower planting in Mecosta, Michigan. Image on next page: Riparian buffer along Bear Creek in Story County, Iowa. All photos by Lynn Betts. Courtesy NRCS.

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The Farm Bill authorizes a wide array of programs that provide technical and financial assistance to agriculture and forest producers who are interested in improving soil, water, air and habitat quality on their land. The major programs can be divided into two overall categories: the “reserve” programs that offer easements or rental contracts for long-term to permanent land retirements, and “incentives” programs that provide cost-share to improve practices on working lands. In addition, there are several programs that encourage multiple producers in a state or region to work together to accomplish priority conservation goals. The Farm Bill signed into law by President Obama on February 7, 2014 makes a number of important changes to these programs.



Program (Pre-2014)	Importance for Conservation	Changes in 2014 Farm Bill	Challenges & Opportunities
Conservation Reserve Program	Farmers have taken millions of acres of erodible soils out of row-crop production and into perennial grass & legume cover, providing mid- to high-quality habitat for grassland birds and waterfowl, while also improving soil and water quality.	Acreage reduced to a maximum of 24 million acres, from 32 million acres	Millions of acres of perennial cover will likely be converted back to row crops. Acres in expiring contracts get priority for enrollment in some other programs.
Wetlands Reserve Program	WRP has protected and restored 2.3 million acres of wetlands, including habitat for listed species.	These three programs are repealed and replaced with a new “Agricultural Conservation Easement Program,” offering wetland reserve easements and agricultural land easements	It is unclear how acreage will be allocated between easement types under the combined program.
Grasslands Reserve Program	GRP has protected 1.6 million acres of one of our most imperiled habitat types, through easements and rental contracts.		If fully funded, the ACEP actually represents an increase in conservation investment, one of the only programs to receive additional funds this Farm Bill.
Farm and Ranchland Protection Program	FRPP has prevented the loss of open space to suburban sprawl.		Combined program should offer streamlined enrollment and may help landowners protect complexes of wetland and grassland habitat.
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program	The only program with wildlife habitat as its sole purpose. Used extensively to target listed and candidate species.		Wildlife habitat projects will receive at least 5% per year, or at least \$67.5 million. It is unclear whether targeting for imperiled species will remain a priority.
Conservation Stewardship Program	Rewards producers that optimize environmental performance across their operation.	Reduced acreage cap and higher eligibility requirements	Fewer acres will be enrolled, but each will have advanced conservation practices addressing more priority resource concerns.
Chesapeake Bay Program	Reducing nutrient and sediment pollution to the Chesapeake Bay.	All of these are repealed as independent programs, with purposes and some provisions rolled into a new nationwide Regional Conservation Partnership Program.	Will be funded at \$100 million per year and with 7% of funds from several other programs.
Great Lakes Basin Program	Reducing sediment and nutrient pollution to the Great Lakes.		Unclear to what extent the previous priorities will be funded.
Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative	Directs a percentage of other programs to initiatives being addressed in partnerships between states, tribes, and other entities.		May offer new opportunities for innovative conservation partnerships addressing previously underserved communities and priorities.
Agricultural Water Enhancement Program	Funds partnerships directed specifically toward ground and surface water conservation initiatives.		

Easement and Land Retirement Programs

The Farm Bill offers easement programs for a number of different purposes, from temporary or permanent retirement of lands that are subject to erosion or flooding, to protection from threats of conversion. The 2014 Farm Bill proposes consolidation of a number of these programs.

Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the largest and oldest of the Farm Bill conservation programs, dating back to the 1985 Farm Bill (P.L. 99-198). CRP provides a rental payment to producers who take highly erodible or otherwise sensitive lands out of crop production for a period of 10 to 15 years and instead plant perennial, resource-conserving cover species “such as pasture, permanent grass, legumes, forbs, shrubs, or trees” (P.L. 99-198). CRP’s statutory purpose is “to assist owners and operators of highly erodible cropland in conserving and improving the soil and water resources of their farms or ranches.” CRP overall has been credited for gains in wildlife habitat, particularly nesting habitat for grassland birds and waterfowl (Johnson 2000, Reynolds 2000).

In practice, CRP has had an equally important aim of stabilizing crop prices, which due to excessive production were declining during the mid-1980s, by reducing the number of farmed acres (Cowan 2010). Unlike most conservation programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the administrative and financial aspects of CRP are handled through the commodity agency, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), with NRCS providing technical support.

The 1990 Farm Bill authorized the USDA to determine the “acceptability” of acres offered for CRP enrollment by taking “into consideration the extent to which enrollment of the land that is the subject of the contract offer would improve soil resources, water quality, wildlife habitat, or provide other environmental benefits” (P.L. 101-624). The resultant “Environmental Benefits Index” is used to score and rank applications during the periodic general signups, and has been modified over the years to reflect changes in USDA and congressional priorities (FSA 2013a).

Another major change came in 1996 when FSA created a subprogram called Continuous Signup (or Continuous CRP), which allowed for certain enrollments outside of the periodic, competitive, general signups, in order to meet priority conservation goals. Continuous signup is aimed at lands and practices that have particular potential to reduce wind or water erosion: riparian and wetland buffers, filter strips and grass waterways, and the planting of vegetation to serve as windbreaks, and snow fences (FSA 2013a, Cowan 2010, SWCS & EDF 2008). Since the purpose of the program is to target high-priority lands and practices, producers enrolling in continuous sign-up do not have to wait for a general enrollment period, nor do they have to compete with other producers. Additionally, many enrollees are eligible for incentive payments. USDA has also expanded the priorities eligible for enrollment to establishment of bottomland forest trees and upland habitat for bobwhite quail (SWCS & EDF 2008).

In 1998, FSA expanded on the continuous signup with the development of another CRP sub-program, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) (Cowan & Johnson 2008). One of the first formal efforts to target conservation funding to states’ environmental priorities, it is administered through agreements between USDA and states, and outlines the purpose and objectives, targeted areas, and covered practices (FSA 2013c). Producers that enroll can receive rental payments for a 10-15 year period, as well as an additional incentive payment not available under the general CRP program. Thirty-three states currently have CREP agreements with USDA; eleven of these have two or more agreements in place (FSA 2013d). Priorities addressed in these agreements include improving the water quality of major watersheds, enhancing habitats for key species like salmon, and maintaining safe drinking water supplies (see our Targeting paper for detailed examples).

An ongoing challenge for the Conservation Reserve Program is maintaining enrollment levels in the face of rising commodity prices. As shown in Figure 1, using average corn price as an example, increases in commodity prices are followed by declines in CRP enrollment, as producers with expiring acreage determine that it would be more profitable to resume crop production rather than re-enroll. The statutory cap on CRP acreage peaked in the 2002 Farm Bill (a time of low commodity prices) at 39.2 million acres (PL 107-171). The 2008 Farm Bill, crafted at a time of rising prices and declining CRP enrollments, reduced the acreage cap to 32 million acres (PL 110-246). The 2014 Farm Bill further ratchets

down the program over the next five years, to 24 million acres. Nine million acres of enrollments (general and continuous) are scheduled to expire over the years 2014 to 2018 (FSA 2013b).

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

One of the major changes in the 2014 Farm Bill is consolidation of three easement programs into a single “Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).” The ACEP offers “Wetlands Reserve Easement,” covering the purposes of the Wetlands Reserve Program or an “Agricultural Land Easement,” which combines the Farmland Protection Program and the Grasslands Reserve Program. The new program is administered with a joint pool of funding (ramping from \$400 to \$500 million over 2014-17, then down to \$250 million for 2018) for easements for wetlands, grasslands, and farmland protection, and there are no specific acreage requirements or goals, so it is unclear what the balance of enrollments will be between the three. A review of the purposes and history of each of the three programs follows, along with other new changes in the 2014 bill.

Wetlands Reserve Program

Draining and filling of wetlands for agriculture and other uses resulted in the loss of roughly 100 million acres of wetlands in the contiguous U.S. from 1780 to 1992, with the steepest declines in the Midwest and Mississippi River basin

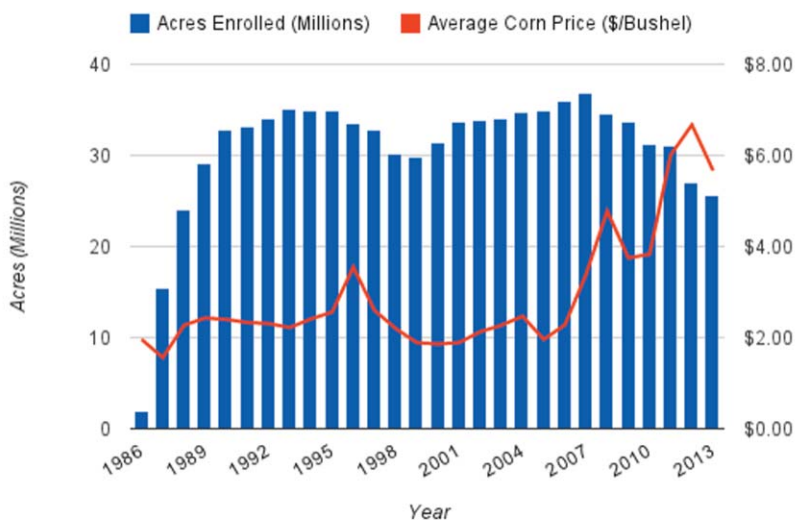


Figure 1. Total acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program each year from program inception (1986) to October 2013, and annual average corn price. (Data from FSA 2011, 2012, and 2013b, NASS)

regions (Heimlich et al. 1998). As understanding emerged of the important benefits wetlands provide toward water quality, flood protection, and wildlife habitat, policies enacted since the 1970s, such as Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and the Swampbuster provisions of the 1985 Farm Bill, have helped to slow the rate of wetland loss (Heimlich et al 1998).

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was authorized by the 1990 Farm Bill (P.L. 99-198) to complement these regulatory mechanisms by providing incentives for private landowners to restore and protect wetlands that had been converted to agricultural production in the past.

The 2014 Farm Bill’s Wetland Reserve Easement, replacing the current WRP program, offers non-Tribal landowners two enrollment options: a permanent easement, in which USDA pays 100 percent of the easement value (up to the fair market value or geographic cap value) and up to 75 to 100 percent of the cost of the wetland restoration; a 30-year (or maximum allowed by the state) Easement, in which USDA pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value and 50 to 75 percent of the restoration cost. The option for a restoration cost-share agreement without an easement that was previously part of WRP (NRCS undated-d) has been eliminated (Chite 2013). A 30-year contract option, paying 50 to 75 percent of restoration costs, remains available for tribal lands.

The new program structure retains the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program, which allows states, municipalities, tribes or non-governmental organizations to enter agreements with USDA to facilitate restoration of priority wetland areas, with the organization providing a cash or in-kind contribution covering a portion of the restoration cost (NRCS 2012a).

The 2014 Farm Bill makes some other changes to what was the WRP program. It loosens ownership restrictions that were put in place in the 2008 bill (P.L. 110-246), allowing land to be eligible in the program after two years of ownership rather than seven. The former pilot program for reservation of grazing rights is now a general option under the terms and conditions of the easement. The Secretary is still “to give priority to acquiring wetland reserve easements based on the value of the wetland reserve easement for protecting and enhancing habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife,” but the new Farm Bill removes prioritization for permanent easements and the need to consider “costs and future agriculture and food needs.”



Lesser prairie chicken in Eastern New Mexico. Photo by Gary Kramer. Courtesy NRCS.

WRP was originally authorized with a cap of 1 million acres, but this figure was expanded to 2.275 million acres in the 2002 Farm Bill (P.L. 107-171) and to 3.041 million acres in the 2008 Farm Bill. As of the program's 20-year anniversary in 2012, 2.3 million acres had been enrolled in WRP, with individual easements ranging from 2 acres to 26,000 acres in size, including habitat for federally listed threatened and endangered species including whooping cranes, wood storks, and bog turtles, as well as scores of species of migratory waterfowl, wetland-specific plants, and other species (NRCS 2012b). The 2014 Farm Bill does not explicitly stipulate an acreage cap, but instead sets a funding limitation for the entire easement program as described above.

Grasslands Reserve Program

While the Conservation Reserve Program is beneficial for wildlife, establishing cover on formerly row-cropped land cannot match the value of untilled native prairie (Johnson 2000). Unfortunately the loss of grasslands to cultivation continues at a rapid pace, with 18.5 million acres of pastureland and 7.4 million acres of rangeland being converted to crops from 1982-2007 (NRCS 2007). In recognition of this fact, the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) was created in the 2002 Farm Bill for the purpose of protecting grasslands and grazing lands from conversion to row crops, orchards, or vineyards. Initially authorized at 2 million acres per year, it was renewed in the 2008 Farm Bill with authority to enroll an additional 1.2 million acres. The program's priorities were to maintain grazing land, conserve areas with high biodiversity, and protect grassland or shrubland in the face of conversion pressures (P.L. 107-171, P.L. 110-246).

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program

The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) is the third program that the 2014 Farm Bill folds into the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (S. 964, H.R. 2642). Enacted in the 1996 Farm Bill, FRPP aimed to stem the loss of farmland to urban sprawl. Between 1982 and 2007, over 23 million acres of agricultural land were converted to development (FIC 2014). FRPP easements paid up to 50% of the appraised fair market value to retire the development rights on the land, allowing continuation of farming or ranching in areas of rapid growth or urban sprawl, where increasing land values and tax rates would otherwise make it difficult to retain the land in agricultural production (NRCS undated-b). The program has protected 1.1 million acres to date (USDA 2013).

The "Agricultural Land Easement" portion of the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program combines the purposes of both GRP and FRPP, directing the Secretary to "protect the agricultural use, including grazing, and related conservation values of eligible land through cost share assistance to eligible entities for purchasing agricultural land easements." USDA will provide up to 50% cost-share for the value of permanent or state-maximum duration easements, or up to 75% for "grassland of special environmental significance."

Healthy Forests Reserve Program

Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) provides habitat improvement cost-share and 30-year or permanent easements on forested landscapes. The purposes of the program are to "promote the recovery of endangered and threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA); improve plant and animal biodiversity; and enhance carbon sequestration." The program is currently available in 13 states (NRCS undated-c). The 2014 Farm Bill retains this as an independent program but replaces the \$9.75 million per year in mandatory funding with an appropriation authorization of \$12 million per year (Chite 2013).

Working Lands Conservation Programs

Unlike the easement programs, which take land out of production or place restrictions on its use for a defined period of time, the working lands programs offer assistance to make changes on lands that remain in production, for the furtherance of conservation goals. Like the easement programs, several changes and consolidations are proposed in the 2014 Farm Bill.



Native grasses and forbs in a conservation buffer along Bear Creek in central Iowa. Photo by Roger Hill. Courtesy NRCS.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill, which combined several regional and single-purpose programs into one all-encompassing working lands program. Its statutory aims were very broad, including providing farmers and ranchers with "flexible technical and financial assistance," helping producers comply with environmental laws, "addressing" the most serious threats to soil, water, and related natural resources, including grazing lands, wetlands, and wildlife habitat" by way of changes to "cropping systems, grazing management, manure, nutrient, pest, or irrigation management, land uses, or other measures needed to conserve and improve soil, water, and related natural resources" (P.L. 104-127). Since inception, program funding has grown ten-fold to nearly \$1.4 billion in Fiscal Year 2012 (NRCS 2013), and an average of \$1.6 billion over the life of the 2014 Farm Bill, making it the largest of the working lands programs (Stubbs 2009, NRCS 2013).

Farmers and ranchers can address these priorities through structural practices (installation of waste handling facilities, irrigation equipment, etc.), vegetative (planting of cover crops,

windbreaks, buffer strips or other plantings), or land management practices (nutrient management, mulching, integrated pest management, grazing management, etc). EQIP provides up to a 75% cost share, with a fairly high payment limit (formerly \$300,000, raised to \$450,000 in the 2014 Farm Bill) over a six-year contract period, allowing for implementation of large-scale projects. NRCS sets national priorities for EQIP in order to allocate funds. These priorities, since the 2008 Farm Bill (NRCS 2009), are:

- Impaired water quality: Practices are aimed at reducing nonpoint sources of nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen, as well as pesticide residue, pathogens, and erosion and sediments. Over the 2009-12 period, the most commonly used water quality practices were prescribed grazing, integrated pest management, nutrient management, and crop practices like rotations and tillage management (NRCS 2013).
- Conservation of ground and surface water resources. This priority applies to practices intended to improve irrigation efficiency, and has been most commonly used for structures for water control, irrigation water management, sprinkler systems, and irrigation pipelines (NRCS 2013).
- Improvement of air quality by reducing levels of dust and airborne pollutants through practices like planting of windbreaks and shelterbelts, fire and fuel breaks, and management of animal wastes.
- Reduction of soil erosion and sedimentation through practices like grassed waterways, streambank protection, conservation tillage, cover crops and construction of water and sediment control basins.
- Improvement or creation of wildlife habitat for at-risk species using practices like upland habitat management, forest stand improvement, and wetland creation, enhancement, and restoration.

EQIP has a number of additional sub-programs and initiatives, including an Air Quality Initiative, assistance with production of on-farm energy, transitioning to organic farming, a Conservation Innovation Grants to field test promising new technologies, and several regional and landscape initiatives. The 2014 Farm Bill rolls the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (below) into the EQIP program by incorporating the purposes and practices of that program and stipulating that at least 5% of EQIP funds "shall be targeted at practices benefiting wildlife habitat."

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program was first enacted in the 1996 Farm Bill (P.L. 104-127), as a cost-share program with the purpose of helping landowners “develop upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, threatened and endangered species, fish, and other types of wildlife habitat.” Program rules were finalized in 1997(62 FR 49358-68) and the program used its entire initial authorization of \$50 million in its first two years of operation, resulting in 4,600 projects on 672,000 acres in 1998 and 3,855 projects on 721,249 acres in 1999 (Hackett 2000). WHIP has been a relatively small but popular program throughout its existence, frequently funded at less than the authorized amount and often experiencing a backlog of unfunded applications. The 2002 Farm Bill (P.L. 107-171) ramped up authorized funding to \$85 million per year; though, the program has only come close to that level twice (in '10 and '11).

Initially the program language contained very little prioritization, allowing the states to use the funding according to their own priorities. From the outset, WHIP was used on a number of important projects to benefit key imperiled species, including Karner blue butterfly, Indiana bat, Atlantic salmon, and northern bobwhite quail, as well as important habitats such as coldwater streams, oak savanna, longleaf pine, and prairies (Hackett 2000).

The 2008 Farm Bill made two significant changes to WHIP, both related to targeting of program funds. The first was to limit eligibility to “private agricultural land,

nonindustrial private forest land, and tribal lands,” which, to the dismay of many conservationists, ended the ability of nonfarm landowners, land trusts, and state lands to utilize the program. The other targeting provision was more positive, giving USDA the ability to “give priority to projects that would address issues raised by State, regional, and national conservation initiatives” (Cowan and Johnson 2008). This provision has been used to great effect in the past several years to address multiple important conservation priorities.

The 2014 Farm Bill repeals WHIP entirely as an independent program, and stipulates at least 5% of EQIP funds (or at least \$80 million per year) be allocated for: “conservation practices that support the restoration, development, protection, and improvement of wildlife habitat on eligible land, including—A) upland wildlife habitat; B) wetland wildlife habitat; C) habitat for threatened and endangered species; D) fish habitat; E) habitat on pivot corners and other irregular areas of a field; and F) other types of wildlife habitat, as determined by the Secretary” with the input of the State Technical Committees.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) was originally authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill (P.L. 107-171) under the name “Conservation Security Program,” and represented a new direction in working lands conservation assistance. Whereas the EQIP program provides funds for the enactment of structures and practices to correct



Wildlife habitat farm sign in Newellton, Louisiana. Photo by Stephen Kirkpatrick. Courtesy NRCS. Right image: American black bear in Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, North Carolina. Photo by Waverley Traylor. Courtesy USFWS.



Vernal pool wetland in Northern California. Photo by Gary Kramer. Courtesy NRCS.

environmental problems, the CSP model pays enrolled producers for "conservation performance" as measured across the entire farm or forestry operation. It represents the first attempt within U.S. farm policy to implement a "green payments" program; that is, to shift agriculture support away from commodity subsidies, which have been criticized for distorting prices and thus interfering with open-market and free-trade principles (Dodd et al. 2005). Green payments are widely considered to be less inclined to challenges from the World Trade Organization than commodity payments. Legislative text specified that resources on enrolled lands were to maintain a "non-degradation standard," defined as the "level of measures required to adequately protect, and prevent degradation of" those resources.

The program was originally designed with three "tiers" for enrollment: Tier I (5 years) included addressing at least one resource of concern on a portion of the farm operation; Tier II (5-10 years) for producers addressing at least one resource of concern across the entire operation, and Tier III (5-10 years) for addressing all resources of concern for the entire operation. Rules promulgated by USDA defined soil quality and water quality as the primary resources of concern to be addressed in all contracts, with the possibility of designating other resources of concern, such as water quantity, animal habitat, air quality, and energy (70 FR 15201). The annual payment, which could be up to \$20,000 to \$45,000 depending on tier, was calculated based on four components: 1) the Base Payment or Stewardship Payment for the existing base level conservation treatment at the time of enrollment; 2) a

Maintenance Payment to help cover the cost of the continuation of existing practices; 3) a new practice payment for additional practices; and 4) An enhancement payment for additional conservation practices and efforts that go beyond the prescribed level. At all tiers, the bulk of the total annual payment was to come from new practice and enhancement payments, thus providing incentives for producers who were already doing good management (as required for entry into the program and rewarded by the base and maintenance payments) to go even further (Dodd et al. 2005).

The legislation as originally drafted envisioned nationwide enrollment; however due to funding and administrative constraints, NRCS initially implemented the program in selected watersheds only, often with brief application periods. The 2008 Farm Bill (P.L. 110-246) renamed CSP as the Conservation Stewardship Program, and simplified the program by stipulating continuous enrollment and nationwide eligibility, but with an acreage cap and ranking criteria to evaluate applications. The 2008 Farm bill also eliminated the Tier system, and set a single payment limit of \$40,000, based on acreage and level of performance. The bill replaced "non-degradation standard" with "stewardship threshold" which, as defined in the 2014 bill, is "the level of management required, as determined by the Secretary, to conserve and improve the quality and condition of a natural resource."

The 2008 Farm Bill required producers to meet the stewardship threshold for at least one priority resource concern, out of three to five selected by the State (such as soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality,

plant resources, animal resources, and energy), and to implement additional conservation measures to meet or exceed the stewardship threshold for at least one priority resource concern by the end of the contract period. The payment system was also simplified to a two-part structure: a conservation stewardship payment based on the practice costs, foregone income, and expected environmental benefits; and a supplemental payment for adopting resource-conserving crop rotations (P.L. 110-246).

The 2014 Farm Bill reauthorizes the CSP at an enrollment level of 10 million acres per year, with a few changes: all states must identify at least five priority resource concerns, and the eligibility requirements have been raised, requiring the producer to address two resource concerns at the time of application, and those renewing contracts address two additional priority resource concerns.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The 2008 Farm Bill authorized a number of regional and specialty purpose programs, particularly aimed at getting entities to work together to address long-term and seemingly intractable issues, particularly related to water quality. The 2014 Farm Bill consolidates these into a single Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Thus, where individual regions, such as the Chesapeake Bay, once had statutorily specified carve-outs, the new language allows for a broader range of projects and priorities: 25% can go to State Priorities, 40% to national priorities, and 35% to projects in up to eight USDA-designated “critical conservation areas.” These areas have to be multi-state, encompass significant agricultural

production,” have water quality issues that are subject to an existing plan or agreement, and which could benefit from improvements to water and nutrient management. Areas like the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, and Mississippi Basin will almost certainly qualify under the new program, while giving USDA the flexibility to designate other Critical Conservation Areas as well.

The RCPP is funded at \$100 million per year, plus 7 percent of the funds and acres allocated under the EQIP, ACEP, CSP and HFRP programs, though those revert to their parent programs if not allocated by April 1 of each fiscal year. The program language retains elements from the four programs being consolidated: in addition to language that should allow continued funding for priorities like Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes water quality, the RCPP includes partnership agreements such as those that were in the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and specific eligibility for practices such as conversion to dry-land farming, as was laid out in the Agricultural Watershed Enhancement Program. It is not yet clear how well this consolidated program, with its multi-pronged approach to national, regional, and state priorities, will serve to substitute for, and address the priorities of, the four programs that are being repealed, described below.

Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program

The Chesapeake Bay is 200 miles long, fed by over 50 rivers and countless small streams, and drains 64,000 square miles of land stretching from New York to Virginia (CBF, undated). Home to 17 million people and 84,000 farms, it should probably come as no surprise that the Bay has had its share of pollution problems. The watershed contains 92



A great blue heron waits for his dinner on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Photo by Tim McCabe. Courtesy NRCS.



A Bonaparte's gull in flight along Lake Erie, New York. Photo by Mike Weimer. Courtesy NRCS.

different water bodies that are “impaired” by high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediments (EPA 2010). With 30% of the region's land in agriculture, practices that limit excess fertilizer and other nutrients in runoff can have a major benefit to water quality. To that purpose, the 2008 Farm Bill launched the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program (CBWP), an effort to target funding of \$188 million over 2009-12 for the purposes of: "(1) improving water quality and quantity in the Chesapeake Bay watershed; and (2) restoring, enhancing, and preserving soil, air, and related resources in the Chesapeake Bay watershed." Specifically, it directs USDA to assist producers in "controlling erosion and reducing sediment and nutrient levels in ground and surface water;" and habitat restoration and enhancement (PL 110-246). Between the allocated funding and additional program enrollments, the CBWP has invested \$235 million and has enrolled nearly 650,000 acres of farmland in practices to "control erosion and sediment; reduce nutrient loss and protect stream corridors" (NRCS 2013b). Bay health has improved somewhat in recent years, driven in part by improved scores for phosphorus and dissolved oxygen, and a smaller than usual "dead zone" in the summer of 2012 (CBF 2013).

Great Lakes Basin Program

The Great Lakes are an ecological treasure and an economic lifeline for the surrounding states and provinces. It has long been recognized that sedimentation, including topsoil erosion from farmland, is a significant source of pollution in the Great Lakes, as well as a hazard to navigation and a barrier to the effective functioning of water treatment facilities (GLBP, undated). The program started as an initiative in 1991 and was officially authorized in the 2002 (P.L. 107-171) Farm Bill and renewed in the 2008 Farm Bill (P.L. 110-246). Authorized at \$5 million per year since 2002, it is a relatively small conservation program. However, it has funded over 200 projects from Minnesota to New York, helping landowners implement best management practices such as cover cropping and no-till, and to install riparian buffers, filter strips, and streambank stabilization projects (GLBP 2012). The program estimates that every \$1,000 spent has kept 132 tons of sediment, 297 pounds of phosphorus, and 197 pounds of nitrogen out of the Great Lakes (GLBP, undated).

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) was authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill (P.L. 110-246) to help direct conservation funding from three programs to state and regional priorities. CCPI is not a stand-alone program; rather, the 2008 Farm Bill stipulated that 6 percent of the funds from EQIP and WHIP, and 6 percent of the acreage in CSP would be used for these initiatives. A key aspect of this program is that it functions through partnerships: eligible entities include state and local governments, Tribes, producer associations, farmer cooperatives, institutions of higher education, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) that have a track record of working with farmers and ranchers on conservation issues (conservation districts, technical service providers, etc). Partner entities submit proposals outlining the area and the project goals, which can involve a wide array of NRCS-approved natural resource concerns. Once projects are approved, producers within the designated area can then apply for one of the three financial assistance programs listed above, while also potentially leveraging additional assistance or non-federal matching funds from the partner organization (NRCS undated-a).

Agricultural Watershed Enhancement Program

The Agricultural Watershed Enhancement Program (AWEP), established in the 2008 Farm Bill (P.L. 110-246) and funded at \$60 million to \$74 million per year, operates under much the same system as the CCPI program, with an emphasis on project submissions by eligible partners who then work with producers and leverage non-federal funds and expertise. However, it has a narrower focus of ground and surface water conservation and improvement of water quality, and particularly emphasizes helping producers in arid areas to convert from irrigated systems to dryland farming, capture surface water runoff, or engage in other activities that preserve water quality and quantity in the face of ongoing drought.

Conclusion

The agricultural conservation programs in the Farm Bill amount to one of the largest investments that our country makes for the protection of wildlife habitat, improvement of water quality, preservation of open space, and other conservation goals. The 2014 Farm Bill attempted to simplify the confusing array of programs and will hopefully improve producer participation through streamlined program delivery. Unfortunately, declining budget allocations mean that for the foreseeable future, these programs will have to do more with less. Our companion piece, *Targeting of Farm Bill Program Funding to Advance Conservation Priorities* (<http://www.defenders.org/publications>), highlights the ways that programs have addressed important priorities, and offers implementation recommendations to further improve this process.



Landowner and NRCS conservationist working together in northeastern South Dakota. Photo by Don Poggensee. Courtesy NRCS.

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