



## Policy Brief Series

### The Farm Bill: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The Conservation Title in the Farm Bill is the source of several programs designed to help landowners conserve natural resources on private land through federal financial and technical assistance. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) allows private landowners, states, and local governments to leverage federal assistance in developing conservation easements.

#### Methods

Through ACEP, private or non-federal government entities apply for cost share assistance from the federal government to create easements to protect farmland, rangeland, grasslands, and wetlands from development. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) prioritizes the applications and determines which receive funding. ACEP is a consolidation of three easements programs present in the previous Farm Bill; the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP), and the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). With ACEP, landowners can apply for either Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) which correspond to GRP and FRPP, or Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) which correspond to WRP.

ALE agreements protect productive ranches, farms, and grasslands from development. NRCS provides up to 50% of the cost of the easement to protect the land in perpetuity. To be eligible, the landowner must have an easement plan which outlines how the land will stay productive and solvent. NRCS chooses projects based on factors such as the size and location of the land, current and future developmental pressure, long term viability of the operation, and the presence of natural resources (such as habitat for sensitive species).

WRE agreements protect, enhance, and restore wetlands on agricultural land and can be either 30 year or permanent agreements. NRCS provides up to 100% of the easement cost for permanent easements and up to 75% for 30 year easements. NRCS prioritizes WRE agreements that will bring the most conservation benefits for wildlife and natural resources and that align with state conservation goals. WRE agreements often involve restoration practices such as riparian forest planting or stream habitat improvement.

#### Results

The three component programs of ACEP have protected over 4 million acres of private land including 2.6 million acres of wetlands (WRP), 1.1 million acres of farm and ranchland (FRPP), and 343,000 acres of grasslands (GRP) as of FY 2012. In FY 2014, NRCS is projected to add 52,000 acres of wetlands, 32,000 acres of farm and ranchland, and 45,000 acres of grasslands with \$328 million in easements.

#### Discussion

The wetlands and grasslands protected by ACEP are vital to conserving wildlife on private lands, but overall funding, and therefore acreage, has been severely reduced (Figure 1). Funding has decreased from an average of \$800 million each year of the previous Farm Bill (FY 2008 to 2013) to an average of \$405 million each year of the newest Farm Bill (FY 2014-2018). NRCS protected and restored 143,000 acres in FY 2014 which is considerably less than the 380,295 acres in FY 2012.

#### Implications for Wildlife Professionals

The public-private partnerships facilitated by ACEP easements empower wildlife professionals to perform science-based management of wildlife resources on private lands. More funding is needed to ensure these partnerships continue to thrive and benefit wildlife resources.

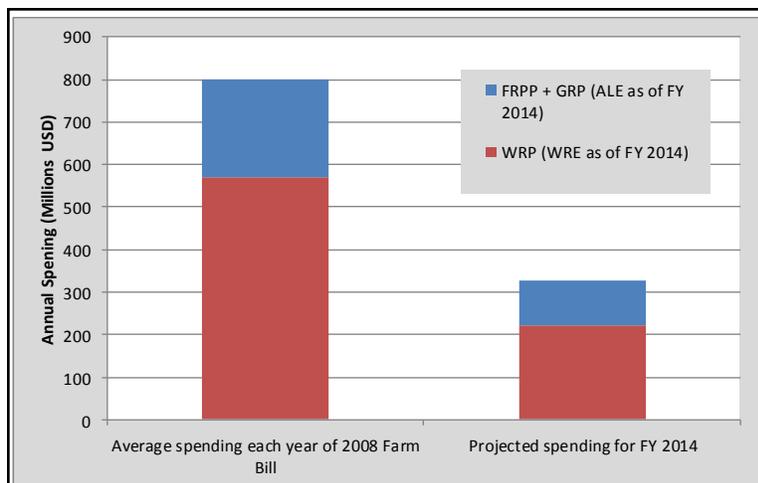


Figure 1. Spending on ACEP component programs before and after the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill (Created using data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture).

# The Farm Bill: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program: Features



Nine Pine Ranch in the Colville River Valley in Washington has been restored to wetlands (Credit: NRCS).

## Farm Bill Easement Provides a Haven for Wildlife<sup>5</sup>

ACEP easements can encourage farmers to conserve or restore natural resources on marginal land. At Nine Pine Ranch near Chewelah, Washington, landowners struggled to produce crops on the perennially flooded valley floor. An easement agreement with NRCS to restore and conserve the wetlands brought in financial and technical assistance needed to seed native grasses, control invasive species, and build ponds while allowing the landowners be financially stable. Today, the ranch is a haven for wildlife including bald eagles, migratory birds, badgers, and even elk.

## Preserving Land for Agriculture, Recreation, and Wildlife<sup>6</sup>

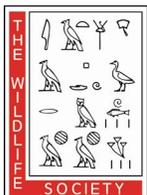
In Kaycee, Wyoming, a private ranch's plentiful and relatively wet grasslands are used by ranchers across the region as a stopover point when moving their herds. Beartrap Meadows is also a popular trout fishing spot and ideal habitat for sandhill cranes, mallards, and other bird species. To ensure the land is not developed, NRCS, local partners, and the landowners signed an easement agreement through NRCS to conserve the land in perpetuity. The easement prevents subdivision, allows ranchers and anglers to continue to use the property, and conserves the wildlife habitat.



Beartrap Meadows in Wyoming is a vital stopover point for ranchers and migratory birds (Credit: Matt Wells).

## Sources

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