



Policy Brief Series

The Farm Bill: Environmental Quality Incentive 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 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) enables landowners to enhance and protect natural resources through voluntary conservation practices. A portion of EQIP funds is used to incentivize practices that directly benefit wildlife habitat.

Methods

EQIP allows private entities to apply for cost share assistance from the federal government to create or improve natural resources on agricultural land with structures, vegetation, or land management practices.¹ The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program and provides technical assistance to landowners.

NRCS works with landowners to develop the terms of the contract and conservation plan that details specific practices that will be implemented.² Contracts can last up to 10 years and be as large as \$450,000 for a single person.³

The Secretary of the Department of Agriculture establishes national and regional priorities for EQIP conservation practices that guide NRCS. Contracts that improve air and water quality, or enhance organic farming are some of the current national initiatives.³ Regional priorities include practices that improve health of the Chesapeake Bay or enhance habitat for sage grouse.³

EQIP requires that at least five percent of all payments are directed towards wildlife-focused conservation practices.² Wildlife practices were previously funded through the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), which was consolidated into EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill.² The quota is designed to ensure wildlife practices are still a significant priority of the Farm Bill.

Results

The NRCS has allocated \$5.9 billion to EQIP contracts and \$351 million to WHIP contracts since the implementation of the 2008 Farm Bill.⁴ EQIP and WHIP conservation practices were applied on an average of 15 million acres of private land throughout 2008 to 2012.⁴

Discussion

EQIP is a mandatory funding program but rarely receives the funding level specified by law due to cuts called Changes in Mandatory Spending (CHIMPS) made by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees.² EQIP and WHIP have obligated \$2.1 billion less than the \$8.3 billion mandated by law since Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 (Figure 1).^{1,4,5}

Implications for Wildlife Managers

The wildlife-focused conservation practices in EQIP create incentives to protect and restore wildlife habitat on private land. Riparian buffers, vegetation strips, and other improvements provide essential habitat and facilitate positive and rewarding relationships between private landowners and public agencies. Wildlife professionals are often called on to develop conservation plans and perform science-based management through these private-public partnerships.

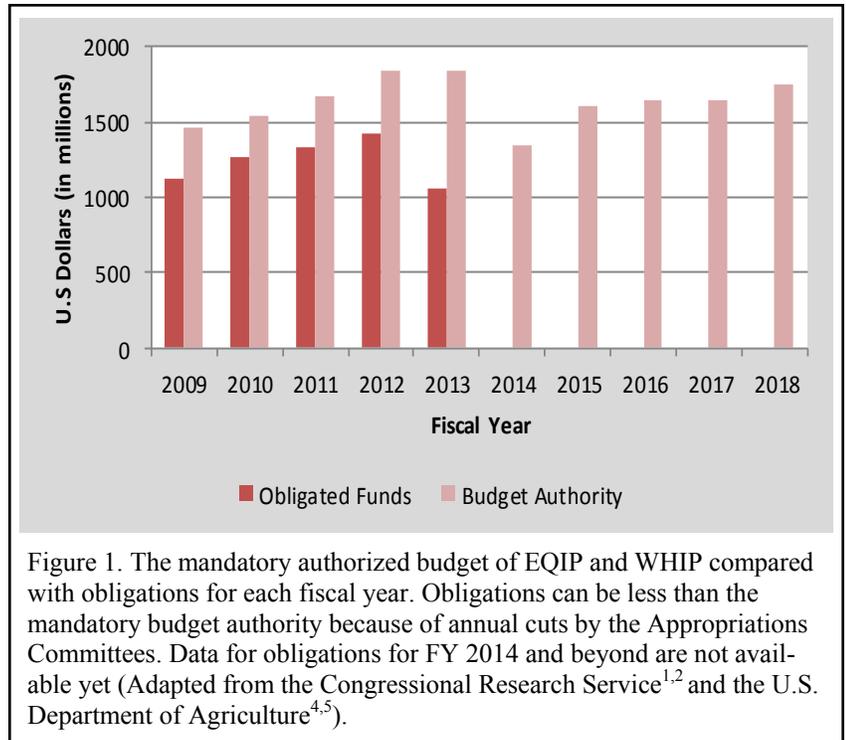


Figure 1. The mandatory authorized budget of EQIP and WHIP compared with obligations for each fiscal year. Obligations can be less than the mandatory budget authority because of annual cuts by the Appropriations Committees. Data for obligations for FY 2014 and beyond are not available yet (Adapted from the Congressional Research Service^{1,2} and the U.S. Department of Agriculture^{4,5}).

The Farm Bill: Environmental Quality Incentive Program: Features



A lesser prairie chicken on its natural mixed-grass habitat in Kansas (Credit: Greg Kramos).

EQIP and Management Intensive Grazing⁶

NRCS and the owners of the Gates Angus Ranch in the Red Hills region of south-central Kansas developed a conservation plan through EQIP that is designed to improve grazing and protect natural resources through best management practices. The ranchers employ a Management Intensive Grazing (MIG) program on the 14,700 acre ranch that allows native grasses to grow unimpeded through the growing season. The native grasses are important habitat for variety of wildlife including the lesser prairie chicken, bobcats, quail, and pheasants. Other conservation practices include prescribed burns that control the invasive eastern red cedar.

Conservation Innovation Grants⁷

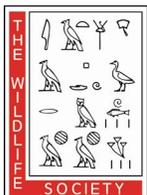
Conservation Innovative Grants (CIG) leverage federal dollars to help non-federal governments, individuals, and private firms invest in new conservation technologies. EQIP funds are awarded annually by NRCS using a competitive grant system in order to foster the development and adoption of new conservation techniques and technologies, providing more options to address natural resource concerns on agricultural land. CIG awards have been used to develop and spread the use of best management practices such as no-till soil conservation and winter cover crops.



A farmer in South Carolina shows off radishes from a multi-species cover crop pilot program funded partly by a CIG (Credit: NRCS).

Sources

- 1 Stubbs, Megan. 2014. Agricultural conservation, a guide to programs. Congressional Research Service. R40763.
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- 7 Natural Resource Conservation Service. 2010. Conservation Innovation Grant Program. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1044415.pdf>. Accessed 19 Sep 2014.



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