



The Farm Bill: Conservation (Title II) Programs

During the Great Depression, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933—the first “Farm Bill”—to encourage conservation and raise farm incomes by paying farmers to reduce crop production, thus correcting commodity surpluses. Since then, the Farm Bill has evolved into a trillion-dollar, multi-year omnibus law that comprehensively addresses agricultural and food issues in the U.S., including agricultural and working lands conservation.¹ While the majority of Farm Bill funding goes to nutrition programs—specifically food stamps—Title II conservation programs that usually account for 6%-8% of mandatory Farm Bill spending still represent the **largest single source of federal funding for private lands conservation.**²

Methods

The Farm Bill typically follows a 5-year legislative cycle in which Congress is tasked with passing a new Farm Bill upon expiration of the previous one. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) follows the administrative rulemaking process to implement the new Farm Bill after it has become law. The Agricultural Act of 2018—the most recent Farm Bill—provides for the modification and continuation of programs through the end of Fiscal Year 2023.²

Title II of the law authorizes the Farm Bill’s conservation programs.³ These conservation programs help build public-private partnerships by providing technical assistance and cost-sharing options for landowners wishing to voluntarily improve habitats for fish and wildlife, reduce erosion, or address other natural resource concerns on their working land. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) are the primary federal agencies responsible for implementing Title II conservation programs.³ Some of these programs include:

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) - FSA & NRCS - Provides financial and technical assistance to enrolled farmers who remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant approved species that will improve environmental quality. The 2018 Farm Bill set the CRP acreage cap at 27 million acres by 2023, far below the peak enrollment of 37 million acres in 2007.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) - NRCS - Provides financial and technical assistance to conserve land and wetlands through two types of easements: *agricultural land easements* that limit non-agricultural uses on productive farm or grass lands, and *wetland reserve easements* that protect and restore wetlands.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for working lands - NRCS - Provides financial and technical assistance to enrolled producers on working lands who meet resource stewardship and conservation requirements.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for working lands - NRCS - Provides financial and technical assistance to producers and land owners to plan and install structural, vegetative, and land management practices on eligible working lands to alleviate natural resource problems.

Results

Cumulative enrollment in Title II conservation programs reached 466 million acres in 2018—roughly equivalent to the land area managed by the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management combined.⁴ The Congressional Budget Office estimates that Farm Bill conservation spending from 2018 to 2028 will reach \$59.8 billion — approximately 7 percent of the estimated \$867 billion enacted to fund the entire Farm Bill over that period.⁵

Implications for Wildlife Professionals

Private lands provide for a strong agriculture and forest sector in the U.S. and supply habitat that support fish and wildlife. **With nearly 70% of land in the contiguous United States under private ownership,**⁶ **effective conservation of the nation’s wildlife depends on the type of voluntary, private-land conservation programs included in the Farm Bill.** Title II of the Farm Bill provides unparalleled opportunity for wildlife professionals to provide technical assistance through conservation programs that deliver on-the-ground benefits to a diverse array of fish and wildlife species present on private lands. Still, these programs—and overarching agricultural policy—can also generate negative responses in different species over various spatio-temporal scales. Fortunately, since Congress revisits Farm Bill programs every five years, wildlife professionals, through the consistent development of conservation-relevant science, can provide input to policy-makers to enhance private lands conservation through a more informed understanding of in-practice conservation outcomes.



The Farm Bill: Spotlight



Conservation Technical Assistance⁷

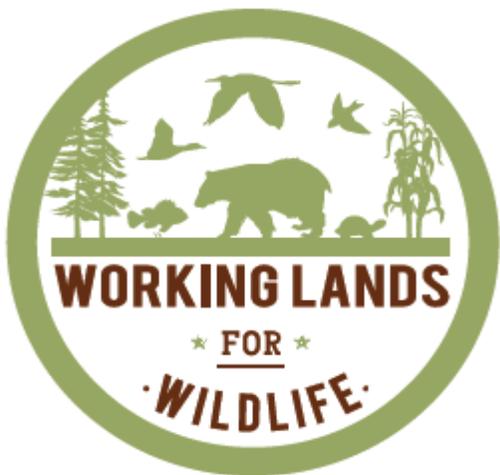
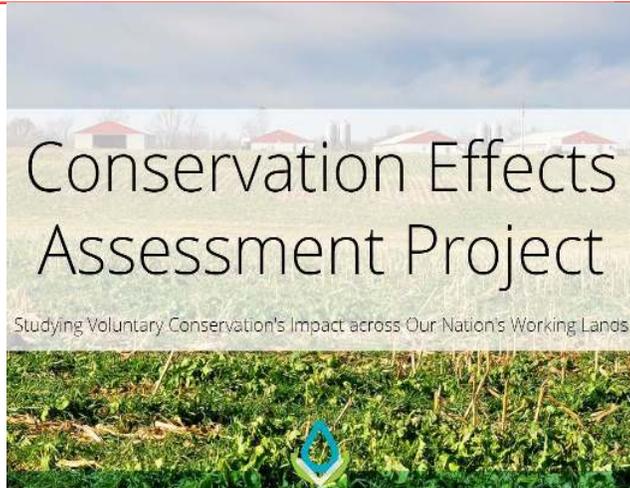
The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, administered by NRCS and partners, provides private landowners, conservation districts, tribes, and other organizations with technical expertise to make sound resource decisions through guidance on activities like resource assessment, practice design, and outcome monitoring. CTA is available to any group or individual interested in conserving natural resources and often serves as a springboard for participating in other Title II conservation programs. Moreover, the CTA program continuously fosters new science-based technologies and tools that facilitate multi-faceted benefits to working lands. For example, through technological advancements in precision agriculture such as GPS guidance and yield monitoring, CTA can help support the continued economic development of producers while advancing natural resource conservation objectives.

Conservation Technical Assistance in action (Credit: NRCS)

Conservation Effects Assessment Project⁸

Given the need for effective planning for future private lands conservation and the massive geographic and financial scope of Farm Bill conservation programs, adequate understanding of the impacts of current Farm Bill programs is essential. The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) began in 2003 as a multi-agency effort to quantify the effectiveness of conservation programs and to develop the science base that will support future conservation decisions. Since 2003, CEAP synthesis studies have helped inform effective Title II conservation delivery through assessments of programs related to croplands, grazing lands, wetlands, wildlife, and watersheds. However, substantial monitoring needs remain. By continuing to explore wildlife responses to Farm Bill programming through efforts like CEAP, policy-makers can better understand how to more effectively and efficiently safeguard and enhance working lands conservation.

CEAP Story Map (Credit: NRCS)



Working Lands for Wildlife⁹

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), a partnership between NRCS and USFWS, collaborates with conservation partners and private landowners to focus voluntary, working-lands conservation efforts on specific declining wildlife species that have needs compatible with agricultural practices and that can benefit from conservation on private lands. Target species include: greater sage-grouse, lesser prairie-chicken, gopher tortoise, New England cottontail, golden-winged warbler, Southwestern willow flycatcher, bog turtle, and monarch butterfly. By working with diverse partners, WLFW is able to multiply conservation investments on priority landscapes and direct resources where biological returns are the highest. To date, WLFW has restored and protected 7.1 million acres of much-needed habitat for a variety of wildlife, leading to the rebound and recovery of many species.

Working Lands for Wildlife logo (Credit: NRCS)

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