



The Farm Bill: Conservation (Title II) Programs

Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933—the first “Farm Bill”—to encourage conservation and raise farm incomes during the economic depression by paying farmers to reduce crop production; thus correcting commodity surpluses while “reestablishing” farmer purchasing power. Since then, the Farm Bill has evolved into a trillion-dollar, multi-year omnibus law that comprehensively addresses all agricultural and food issues in the U.S., including agricultural and working lands conservation.¹

Methods

The Farm Bill typically follows a 5-year legislative cycle. The Agricultural Act of 2014—the most recent Farm Bill—provides for the continuation of agricultural programs in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the end of Fiscal Year 2018.²

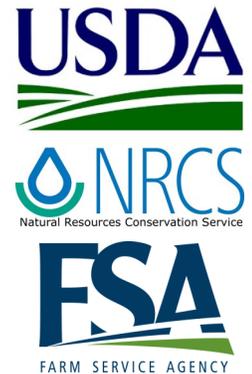
Title II of the law authorizes the Farm Bill’s agricultural and working lands conservation programs.³ These conservation programs help build public-private partnerships by providing technical assistance and cost-sharing options for landowners wishing to voluntarily improve habitats for fish and wildlife, reduce erosion, and/or address other natural resource concerns on their 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 replace crops on environmentally sensitive land with plantings that improve environmental quality.

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

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) - NRCS - Provides financial and technical assistance 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.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - 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.



New York farmstead (Credit: Wally, Wikimedia Commons)

Results

Cumulative enrollment in Title II conservation programs will reach 444 million acres in 2017—roughly equivalent to the land area managed by the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Bureau of Land Management combined.⁴ Furthermore, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates Farm Bill conservation spending will exceed \$58 billion over the next ten years—approximately 6 percent of the overall 10-year baseline of total Farm Bill funding (\$956 billion).⁵

Discussion

Private forests, farms, and ranches occupy nearly 70 percent of land in the contiguous United States—over 1.3 billion acres.⁴ These lands provide for a strong agriculture and forest sector in the U.S., but also supply habitats that support fish and wildlife, filter groundwater, regulate water flows, sequester carbon, and contribute to the nation’s cultural heritage. Conservation and sustainable use of natural resources on private lands is essential for the long-term health of the nation’s working lands, soil, water, air, plants, fish, wildlife, and ecosystems.¹

Implications for Wildlife Professionals

As the nation’s largest investment in conservation on private land, 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; but these programs—and overarching agricultural policy—can also generate negative responses by different species over various spatio-temporal scales. Since Congress revisits these programs every five years, though, wildlife professionals—through the consistent development of conservation-relevant science—can provide input to policy-makers that enhances private-lands conservation through a more informed understanding of in-practice conservation outcomes.

The Farm Bill: Spotlight



Conservation Technical Assistance⁶

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, provided through NRCS and partners, provides private landowners, conservation districts, tribes, and other organizations with the technical expertise necessary 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—GPS guidance/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)

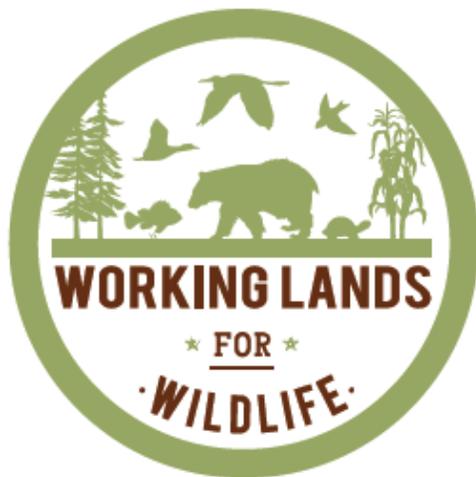
Conservation Effects Assessment Project⁷

Given the scope of the Farm Bill and complexities associated with monitoring natural resource responses, effective planning for private land conservation in the future necessitates adequate understanding of emerging natural resource issues with regards to conservation practices and how they affect the nation's farmers, ranchers, economy, and agriculture. The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) began in 2003 as a multi-agency effort to address this challenge. For over a decade, CEAP synthesis studies have helped inform effective Title II conservation delivery, but substantial monitoring needs remain. By continuing to explore our current understanding of wildlife responses to the Farm Bill, through programs like CEAP, policy-makers can better understand how to more effectively and efficiently safeguard and enhance working lands conservation in the future.

CEAP Survey Report (Credit: USDA)

2013 National Resources Inventory -
Conservation Effects Assessment Project

CEAP Survey



Working Lands for Wildlife⁸

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), a partnership between NRCS and USFWS, works 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. Through bringing together diverse partners, WLFW is able to multiply conservation investments on priority landscapes and direct resources where biological returns are the highest. Since 2012, WLFW has restored and protected 6.7 million acres of much-needed habitat for a variety of wildlife that have led to the rebound and recovery of many species.

Working Lands for Wildlife logo (Credit: NRCS)

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