



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

April 20, 2017

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
1100 First Street NE, Suite 825
Washington, DC

Dear President Nick Wiley,

Founded in 1937, The Wildlife Society (TWS; wildlife.org) inspires, empowers, and enables wildlife professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitats through science-based management and conservation. The Farm Bill, as the nation's largest investment in voluntary conservation, provides unparalleled opportunity to advance this mission through an adaptive management framework that encourages collaborative conservation efforts between private landowners and wildlife professionals. On behalf of our nearly 10,000 members—and in the interest of enhancing private lands conservation—TWS endorses the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Policy Priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill.

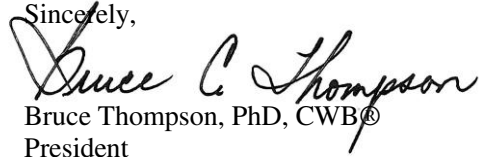
TWS commends the Association for their leadership in developing these policy priorities through a year-long collaborative process that elicited input from not only state/federal agencies, but also from a diverse array of partners and professional societies—including TWS members and staff. While current Farm Bill conservation programs provide an array of benefits for fish and wildlife, these benefits can be increased, improved upon, or made more efficient in the 2018 Farm Bill. As included in the Association's recommendations, TWS emphasizes the need for:

- **Increasing overall Conservation Title funding** to meet the needs of fish and wildlife habitat and other natural resource concerns in an ecologically-appropriate manner, including but not limited to:
 - *Increasing the capacity to effectively and efficiently implement, deliver, and monitor Farm Bill programs—and outcomes—through conservation technical assistance; and*
 - *Increasing the minimum amount of EQIP funds required to be used for wildlife conservation.*
- **Providing greater focus on priority fish and wildlife species and their habitat** at local/landscape scales, including Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in State Wildlife Action Plans.
- **Ensuring that fish and wildlife conservation remains as a co-equal priority** with soil and water conservation in authorizing and implementing all Farm Bill conservation programs.
- **Increasing synergy among all Farm Bill programs and titles**, thus enhancing wildlife benefits while avoiding unintended consequences resulting from working at cross-purposes.
- **Recognizing the role of Certified Wildlife Biologists®** in developing management plans and providing other technical assistance to address wildlife habitat objectives on private lands.

TWS regularly expresses the importance of wildlife habitat on a mosaic of public and private lands. With nearly 70% of land in the contiguous United States under private ownership, effective conservation of the nation's wildlife depends on the type of voluntary, private-lands conservation programs included in the Farm Bill. Therefore, TWS encourages the 115th Congress to maintain/enhance Farm Bill Conservation (Title II) Programs that support quality wildlife stewardship using science-informed decision-making processes as outlined in the Association's recommendations.

For further information, please contact Keith Norris, AWB®, TWS Director of Government Affairs & Partnerships, at keith.norris@wildlife.org. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,


Bruce Thompson, PhD, CWB®
President

cc: Ron Regan, Jen Mock Schaeffer, Andrew Schmidt



ASSOCIATION *of*
FISH & WILDLIFE
AGENCIES

**POLICY PRIORITIES FOR THE
2018 FARM BILL**

With seventy percent of the land in the contiguous United States under private ownership, the Farm Bill has a broad-reaching effect on fish and wildlife populations and conservation of their habitats, and collaborative efforts between state fish and wildlife agencies, private landowners, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are essential to achieving local, state, regional, and national priority fish and wildlife conservation goals. State fish and wildlife agencies, together with non-governmental conservation organization partners, provide valuable knowledge, expertise, and resources to federal partners and private landowners participating in voluntary, incentive-based Farm Bill conservation programs. Effective implementation of these programs generates multiple benefits for society, providing clean air, improved water quality, and healthier soil, and protecting and enhancing habitat quality for wildlife and pollinators, all while keeping farmers, ranchers, and forest owners on the land and sustaining rural communities.

We know far more today than we ever have about the habitat requirements of wildlife and how to manage that habitat in a way that maximizes the benefits to wildlife, producers, and society and minimizes costs to the taxpayer. The 2018 Farm Bill presents an opportunity to improve the design and implementation of current programs, increasing the benefits to farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and taxpayers. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association) is committed to working with Congress and the Administration to pass a 2018 Farm Bill that delivers strong conservation programs that promote healthy fish, wildlife, and habitats from which all Americans benefit.

The Association represents North America's state fish and wildlife agencies' interests to advance sound, science-based management and conservation of fish, wildlife, and their habitats in the public interest, and assists states and territories in working towards the accomplishment of their individual fish and wildlife goals and objectives. State fish and wildlife agencies have the statutory authority and responsibility for management of fish and wildlife within their borders. As a result, implementation of the Farm Bill directly affects states' ability to manage public trust resources, and state fish and wildlife agencies are an integral part of Farm Bill conservation program delivery.



This document highlights priority fish and wildlife conservation concerns for the 2018 Farm Bill. The Association's priorities are based on current program purposes, implementation challenges, and resource needs. This document was adopted on March 10, 2017.

Principles for Reauthorization

- **Encourage state-led and partnership-driven proactive, voluntary, incentive-based conservation** to meet conservation needs, goals, and objectives and increase the economic benefits of wildlife conservation and public access through Farm Bill programs.
- **Maximize every dollar spent throughout Farm Bill conservation programs**, delivering multiple resource benefits to the landowner and the taxpayer with every project. The best soil and water conservation is fish and wildlife habitat conservation. As such, fish and wildlife conservation should continue to be a co-equal priority with soil and water conservation in authorization and implementation of all Farm Bill conservation programs.
- **Increase Conservation and Forestry Title funding** to meet the increasing needs of fish and wildlife habitat and other natural resource concerns and long-term environmentally-sustainable agricultural production while reducing regulatory burdens on producers.
- **Increase and promote synergy among Farm Bill programs and titles**, avoiding unintended consequences resulting from practices and programs working at cross-purposes. The Farm Bill should reduce long-term Federal Government costs and produce savings by eliminating incentives for environmentally-unsustainable agricultural practices that lead to conversion and degradation of habitats.
- **Focus on Priority Fish and Wildlife Species and Habitats at the local and landscape scales**, with conservation programs and practices addressing fish and wildlife species and habitats identified in state, regional, and national conservation initiatives, including Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) identified in State Wildlife Action Plans.
- **Increase capacity and enhance partnerships to effectively implement and deliver Farm Bill programs**, including technical assistance, partner capacity, and other on-the-ground expertise available to landowners and producers.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

- Reauthorize CRP and step up the acreage cap to 36-40 million acres by the end of the Farm Bill, based on the following considerations.
- Create a structure to transition continually-reenrolled CRP acres out of the program into long-term working grasslands and provide the necessary infrastructure to support the transition to grass-based agricultural production.
- Establish the cap for CRP Grasslands as a percentage of the total program acreage, contingent upon an increase of the overall CRP acreage cap, and prioritize enrollment of high-quality wildlife cover on expiring CRP acres.
- Encourage USDA to increase the practices eligible for grazing, if determined to be ecologically-appropriate by USDA in consultation with the state wildlife agency, reducing the cost of these contracts while also benefiting wildlife and pollinator habitat.
- Require management, including thinning and prescribed burning, of pine tree stands to meet wildlife habitat objectives identified in State Wildlife Action Plans prior to reenrollment for all contracts.
- Continue funding incentives for the management of existing pine, including thinning and prescribed burning, at \$10 million.
- Grazing done expressly for wildlife habitat (as determined by NRCS in consultation with the State Technical Committee) as part of mid-contract management should be exempt from the 25 percent reduction in annual rental payment, if included in a conservation plan at the start of the CRP contract.



- Exempt lands enrolled in CRP and ACEP-WRE that are engaged in agricultural production from the 25 percent county acreage cap found in 16 U.S.C. § 3844(f)(1).
- Make permanent the date-certain cropping history requirement of February 7, 2014, as it currently is in statute.
- Restrict emergency haying and grazing on the same acres to no more than once every two years.
- Increase entity limitation on annual rental payments to account for changes in land rental rates and other economic factors. The current payment limitation of \$50,000 has not been changed since the program was originally authorized in 1985.
- Continue to offer General, Continuous, and CREP enrollment options in CRP.
- Require management to establish or enhance high-value wildlife cover on reenrolled CRP or CCRP acres to ensure wildlife habitat resource concerns continue to be met on all CRP acres.
- Continue and enhance incentives for high-value wildlife cover types that are ecologically-appropriate for the site.
- Incorporate state and regional recommendations for eligible mid-contract management activities and criteria for cover management.
- Continue to prioritize enrollments in national and state Conservation Priority Areas (CPAs). Processes developed for prioritized enrollments should include national and state-level initiatives for fish and wildlife conservation. Only contracts containing management practices that benefit the priority wildlife species should receive the CPA points. Furthermore, if the total CRP acreage cap is increased, increase the percentage of cropland in a state included in a CPA from 25 percent back to 33 percent.
- Include report language encouraging USDA to create opportunities to increase early successional habitat in CRP, such as offering rest-rotation and flex-fallow-type conservation practices (e.g. Iowa's Early Successional Quail Habitat CP-38 initiative), and allowing grazing on certain practices that are currently ineligible.



- Include report language encouraging USDA to conduct and complete a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement on haying and grazing on CRP contracts, as well as grazing and prescribed burning during the primary nesting season.
- We continue to support and expect USDA to follow language from 2014 Farm Bill managers' report for CRP regarding extension and enrollment requirements, duties of the Secretary regarding the frequency of management activities, payments for incentives, updated rental rates, and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), with special focus on the following language:
 - *The Managers are concerned that USDA has not been fully utilizing CRP technical assistance authorities. The Managers expect USDA to better utilize this authority for internal support and to support outreach and partnerships with nongovernmental organizations and other qualified entities.*
 - *The Managers support ongoing USDA efforts to target the CRP through enrollment of highly-desirable practices such as buffers, ... acreage of importance to States and local communities, certain wetlands, duck and upland bird habitat buffers, highly erodible land, longleaf pine, and pollinator habitat. This widely-supported targeting effort ensures that critical acreage is protected and productive land remains available for production. The Managers intend that USDA accelerate this evolution of targeted practices to include important natural resource priorities. Examples of such priorities include: water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, and recreation purposes. The Managers encourage the Secretary to include the use of potentially larger tracts than have previously been awarded a contract in order to continue meeting wildlife habitat needs.*



Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP)

- Reauthorize the program at no less than \$150 million over 5 years.
- Reaffirm program priority of hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-compatible recreational activities.
- Retain program participation eligibility for state fish and wildlife agencies and tribal governments.
- Amend 16 U.S.C. § 3839bb-5(c)(3) to read: *“(3) to strengthen access and wildlife habitat improvement efforts on land enrolled in federal, state, and tribal conservation programs by providing incentives to increase public hunting, fishing, and other recreational access on that land;”*



Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- Increase baseline funding for EQIP.
- Over the life of the Farm Bill, increase the minimum amount of EQIP funds required to be used for wildlife conservation practices to at least 10 percent annually.
- Incorporate state input to target EQIP wildlife funds towards priority fish and wildlife species, including Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in State Wildlife Action Plans.
- Increase the availability of and emphasis on long-term incentive payments and contracts (such as up to 10 years) to encourage sustained management for wildlife and increase long-term benefits.

- Eligible land should include lands in production as well as lands capable of production. These lands were previously eligible for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), but were not carried over into the wildlife portion of EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill.
- Include as eligible land submerged and marginal lands currently associated with agricultural production, including state-owned streambeds and banks for the purpose of removal or modification of privately-owned dams and water control structures located within public waters, if the conservation practices benefit the producer and provide water quality, quantity, or priority wildlife habitat benefits.
- Amend 16 U.S.C. § 3839aa–5(a)(4) to allow forest landowners the option of following a wildlife management plan, written by a state fish and wildlife agency or a technical service provider who is a Certified Wildlife Biologist, as an alternative to a forest management plan in order to address wildlife habitat objectives on forestland. This change would enable landowners to manage their forestland specifically for wildlife habitat.
- Include report language reiterating the need for USDA to convene State Technical Committee meetings on at least an annual basis to solicit input from members on the implementation of EQIP within the state. The timing of such meetings should allow for meaningful input prior to final decisions being made on program and practice implementation for the upcoming year.
- Continue to support agency authority and flexibility to implement initiatives that address important and emerging natural resource concerns.
- Include report language encouraging USDA to explore opportunities to increase early successional habitat using rest-rotation and flex-fallow-type conservation practices.



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

- Restore funding to a minimum of \$500 million per year, with an increase to at least \$750 million over the life of the Farm Bill.
- Allow program funding to be used for restoration and management activities, enabling the Federal Government to maintain the value of taxpayer investment.
 - Prioritize restoration and management funding for grasslands of special significance within ACEP-ALE; and
 - Prioritize funding to address management issues on ACEP-WRE or existing Wetland Reserve Program contracts. Funding should target completion of restoration work, associated administrative expenses and other management issues that create additional resource concerns.



John Ranlett

ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)

- Provide greater flexibility with match requirements.
 - Allow eligible entities to use the cost of perpetual easement monitoring (up to 99 years) as match, if those costs can be documented.
 - Allow as match costs associated with securing the deed to the easement, including but not limited to, appraisals, survey, inspection, title, and other costs, as determined by the Secretary.
 - Provide an exclusion to cash match requirements for grasslands of special significance to allow the landowner donation to constitute the entire match requirement.
 - Allow non-USDA federal funding to contribute to overall project, paralleling requirements for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.
- In many states, there is a lack of eligible entities that can hold easements, resulting in the program not being available to producers in certain parts of the country. In those states where eligible entities are not available, provide USDA the capacity and flexibility to hold easements.

ACEP – Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

- Retain landownership tenure requirement of 24 months, as currently in statute.
- Restoration of native wetland and grassland vegetation and hydrology should contribute to the goals of WRE wetland functions and values and/or state, regional, and national conservation initiatives.
- Amend 16 U.S.C. § 3865c (b)(5)(D) to allow the landowner to implement a grazing management plan that is consistent with the wetland reserve easement plan and is reviewed and modified as necessary every five years. This would provide the landowner with additional flexibility and certainty while allowing for appropriate management to maintain current functional conditions of the easement.

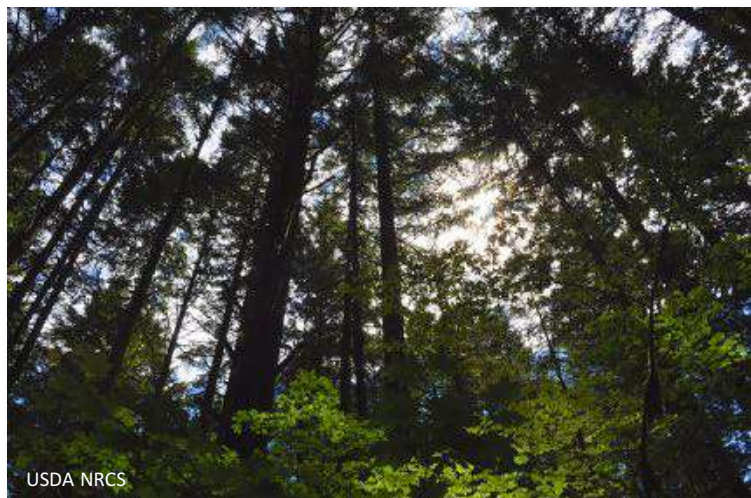
Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

- Support reauthorization and maintain funding levels for RCPP.
- Maintain EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and HFRP as eligible and financially-viable programs within RCPP.
- Allow a limited portion of partners' administrative costs to be funded through RCPP.
- Provide USDA with the necessary technical assistance and administrative funds to implement the program. This amount should be a fixed percentage of RCPP funding and not be negotiated after grants are awarded to projects, as is the case now.
- Reinforce that RCPP projects can include modification of conservation practice standards if they can be justified as ecologically-sound at the local level.



Forestry

- Authorize the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) with mandatory annual funding at \$12 million.
- Amend 16 U.S.C. § 3839aa–5(a)(4) to allow forest landowners the option of following a wildlife management plan, written by a state fish and wildlife agency or a technical service provider who is a Certified Wildlife Biologist, as an alternative to a forest management plan in order to address wildlife habitat objectives on forestland. This change would enable landowners to manage their forestland specifically for wildlife habitat.
- Forestry programs and practices must promote sustainable forest ecosystems by maintaining or restoring site-appropriate ecological processes that will support habitat conditions for native species and do not convert forests to, or manage forests as, monoculture plantings, species, and species compositions that are ecologically-uncharacteristic of the site, or encourage planting forests on non-forest sites (such as on prairie landscapes that fragment prairie wildlife habitat). Conservation programs and practices should not pursue silvopasture or other treatments that introduce non-native plant species that affect the sustainability of the forest.
- The Forest Stewardship Program should recognize fish and wildlife as integral components of healthy forested ecosystems. Fish and wildlife habitat and plant communities of conservation concern should be integrated into forest ecosystem management. Forest Stewardship Plans should utilize the State Wildlife Action Plans, National Fish Habitat Action Plans, and State Forest Action Plans to determine state forest priorities during program implementation to maximize taxpayer investment in federal conservation programs.
- Instruct USDA, through NRCS and FSA, to take advantage of the capacity available to them through state agencies and partners for forest management. Require the Secretary of Agriculture to report back to the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture on ways that USDA agencies are utilizing partner capacity for effective management of forestland.



Sodsaver and Conservation Compliance

- Maintain and fully implement existing conservation compliance and Sodsaver provisions to maintain agricultural productivity and economic security while improving and protecting water quality, wildlife habitat, and other natural resource benefits.
- Close the loophole in Sodsaver that allows a producer to continue to receive full crop insurance premium subsidies on newly-broken sod if planted to a perennial crop for four years after tillage. To remedy this and maintain the intent of the original law, any native sod acreage converted after February 7, 2014 should be subject to a reduction in crop insurance premium subsidies for the first four years of federally-insured crop production.
- The 2014 Farm Bill directed USDA to report on changes in cropland acreage. While not stated explicitly, the intent of this language was to require the collection of data on changes in native sod acreage. Simply reporting on cropland acreage rather than native sod acreage would be duplicative of other efforts within USDA and not in line with the original intent of the Farm Bill language. New breakings data are essential for reporting back to Congress on the effects of Sodsaver as well as other agricultural policies, and the requirement to produce this data should be reemphasized to USDA.



Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Historically, it has been difficult to identify the tangible fish and wildlife conservation benefits coming from the Conservation Stewardship Program. Recently, NRCS undertook a significant reinvention and overhaul of CSP, culminating in an announcement of the new iteration of the program in October 2016. We are hopeful that these changes will lead to improvements in the program, but it is still too early to make an assessment on any new benefits derived from these changes and what improvements still need to be made, whether through legislation or implementation. With this in mind, below are the Association's recommendations:

- CSP rankings and payments should reward enhancements and practices with higher conservation benefits, regardless of whether they are generated from new or ongoing conservation work. The program should be focused on sustained environmental outcomes, not on the timing of when a conservation activity was initially adopted.

- Include report language reiterating the need for USDA to convene State Technical Committee meetings on at least an annual basis to solicit input from members on the implementation of CSP within the state. The timing of such meetings should allow for meaningful input prior to final decisions being made on program implementation for the upcoming year.
- Lands expiring from CRP with low-quality wildlife cover, such as monoculture or low-diversity introduced grass cover, should not be given priority to be enrolled into CSP.
- Allow producers to extend an existing contract when it is necessary to fully realize the benefits of a wildlife enhancement.
- Consistent with previous recommendations, enhancements should not promote or encourage agricultural drainage management.



Bioenergy

- Any bioenergy and renewable energy provisions must be consistent with the purposes and programs of the conservation title and should not work at cross-purposes with conservation programs and provisions. As such, the planting of species that are invasive or have potential to be invasive should not be allowed.
- Support and encourage energy initiatives that increase energy conservation and fuel efficiencies for producers, reduce fossil fuel use on the farm and in rural communities, and promote ecologically healthy fish and wildlife populations and habitats and other natural resource conservation goals.

Other Recommendations

- Increase the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitation for conservation programs as these programs provide multiple resource benefits to society.
- Expand current payment caps to better reflect today's larger family farm budgets. Current caps create disincentives for larger conservation-minded landowners interested in participating in conservation programs.
- Fully utilize prescribed burning as an effective management tool and increase financial and technical capacity for prescribed burning on private lands to improve and enhance wildlife habitat.

- Implement conservation programs in a manner that supports the long-term health and sustainability of rural communities, agricultural production, and fish and wildlife habitat.
- Include report language reiterating the need for NRCS to post program requirements and opportunities in a timely fashion as required by agency policy in the Conservation Programs Manual, giving producers the necessary information to be able to make informed decisions regarding program signup and participation. Disseminating this information prior to signup deadlines will promote higher quality projects and reduce potential difficulties with application and contract management as participants will have a more complete understanding of the program they have applied for.
- Prioritize the use of ecologically-appropriate and diverse stands of native plants in USDA conservation programs and provisions wherever possible.
- Follow Best Management Practices (BMPs) to prevent the establishment of invasive species during restoration activities. BMPs should also be followed in management of existing habitats to minimize invasion.
- Increase emphasis on monitoring and reporting of the benefits of USDA conservation efforts to address natural resource concerns associated with federally threatened, endangered, or candidate species.
- Continue the Livestock Indemnity Program, including the 2014 Farm Bill provision that provides indemnity payments for livestock death losses due to “attacks by animals reintroduced into the wild by the Federal Government or protected by Federal law, including wolves and avian predators.” However, the current FSA process for this program is overbearing, with the requirements for producers being extremely difficult to meet when trying to file a claim for livestock losses. FSA must simplify and streamline this process and the information required to file a claim.
- Develop practices within the various programs to assist landowners with implementing strategies that reduce losses of agricultural commodities from wildlife.
- Support authorization of funds necessary to reduce threats posed by feral swine to agriculture and wildlife.
- Authorize and increase funding for monitoring and surveillance of chronic wasting disease in free-ranging cervid populations and captive cervid facilities.