



GENERAL CONSERVATION

Background

From 1985 to the present, farm bill conservation titles have represented an ever-increasing level of prominence among food and agricultural policy. From soil erosion prevention, to wetland restoration, to water quality improvements, to wildlife and energy conservation efforts, USDA conservation activities affect lands across the entire United States.

U.S. agricultural conservation policy, programs, and institutions were formed in the 1930s in response to the Dust Bowl. In 1928, a USDA circular entitled “Soil Erosion: A National Menace” was published. In 1935, Congress passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act that established the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as a permanent agency of the Federal Government. The new agency focused the soil conservation work on direct assistance to farmers. The creation of local soil conservation districts was through model State legislation distributed to all States by President Roosevelt in 1937.

SCS and the conservation districts combined to deliver technical assistance on soil conservation in nearly every county in the United States. The conservation assistance focused on vegetative, engineering, and crop and livestock management measures to control erosion. Strip cropping, terracing, drainage, crop rotation, contouring, pasture improvement, controlled grazing, tree planting, and other measures became part of farm conservation plans.

In 1936, Congress amended the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act to provide payments to farmers through the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) to shift acreage from surplus crops to soil-conserving legumes and grasses. In addition, payments could also be made for soil-building and productivity-enhancing practices on land that remained in production.

The 1985 farm bill established the Conservation Reserve Program and included two major components that tied receipt of Federal farm program payments to measures of conservation compliance performance—Sodbuster and Swampbuster.

The 1990 farm bill took Swampbuster one step further by creating a major Federal program to restore wetlands—the Wetlands Reserve Program. The 1990 Act also created the Water Quality Incentives Program (WQIP) that signaled the emergence of water quality as a primary environmental objective of agricultural conservation programs.

The 1996 farm bill created the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by consolidating ACP, WQIP, the Colorado Salinity Program, and the Great Plains Conservation Program. In addition,

the 1996 Act created the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program.

The 2002 farm bill tied the purposes of financial assistance programs to environmental objectives. In addition, the 2002 Act created the first stewardship payment programs, the Conservation Security Program, and established the Grassland Reserve Program for the long-term protection and restoration of grassland.

General Opinions Expressed

- Some commenters mentioned that acreage and payment limits need to be increased or eliminated to reflect the reality of American Indian/Alaska Native-held property.
- USDA was encouraged to relinquish control over programs and enter into Federal Government-to-sovereign government compacts with the American Indian nations.
- Commenters request greater outreach to Indian nations to ensure that members know what USDA programs are available.
- Some commenters encouraged USDA to ensure that Alaskan agriculture and natural resources are included in the upcoming farm bill.
- There is general support for conservation of natural resources and the conservation benefits farmers produce.
- Many commenters stated support for fully funding conservation programs and reauthorizing conservation programs in the 2007 farm bill.
- Some commenters suggested that USDA provide higher farm program payments for those meeting enhanced conservation goals.
- Some commenters encouraged the planting of crops on lands not currently under cultivation for ethanol and biodiesel production.
- Some commenters suggested streamlining and consolidating NRCS conservation programs.
- A few commenters promoted carbon credit banking.
- There is general support for the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program.
- Many commenters stated support for rewarding good farmers who take care of their resources.
- A few commenters stated that USDA should implement new technology, improve plant genetics, promote more efficient equipment, and support weed control.
- A few commenters wanted USDA to help farmers who take active roles in promoting healthy, environmentally responsible methods by giving them tax incentives.
- Some commenters suggested that USDA require more strict conservation compliance in the new farm bill before anyone can receive farm program benefits. Pay for conservation, not commodities.
- Some commenters suggested supporting producers who conserve water and apply water conservation technology.
- Some commenters suggested including native grassland conservation.
- A few commenters wanted USDA to eliminate loopholes and simplify, streamline, consolidate, and coordinate programs, and they noted confusion with various acronyms.
- Encourage policy that helps small farms for crop diversity, local market proximity, and rural community support.

- General support for local-level decisionmaking and authority, flexibility to meet local needs, and cooperative conservation.
- Support was expressed for on-farm energy conservation and management, on-site energy production, and biofuels.
- Numerous people requested a mandate of buffer strips on all streams and rivers.
- Additional payments are needed for the preservation of endangered species located on farms.
- USDA should develop a better working relationship between farmers and conservationists; right now, according to some commenters, there is no middle ground on which to meet.
- Numerous commenters supported the use of conservation practices as a means to mitigate natural disasters in areas that might not be covered under Federal crop insurance.
- Several people mentioned they would like to see the farm bill take a more “common sense” approach to conservation rather than doing everything by the book.
- Many commenters wanted to see landowners who practice long-term environmental sustainability rewarded.
- Reward farmers and ranchers who use wastes as resources (composting) to return to the soil rather than consolidating them and creating even more pollutants.
- A few commenters desired a tax credit to be made available to any landowner for a properly constructed water impoundment.
- Increase taxes on toxic farm chemicals, and use that money to clean up the surrounding environment.
- According to more than one respondent, farmers do not participate in conservation programs because they simply cannot afford to do so under current laws, regulations, and restrictions.
- Some commenters supported enabling farm bill conservation programs to target resources towards highly threatened landscapes and watersheds with high ecological and natural resource values and provide additional funding for those efforts.
- Several commenters would like to see drip irrigation receive more attention as a water conservation measure.
- Some believe subsidies should no longer be provided for farmers who rely on fossil water (e.g., the Ogallala Aquifer).
- Some believe all farmers should have a comprehensive nutrient management plan for cropped land, which could be achieved through Technical Service Providers.
- More than one person mentioned that the NRCS Web site helped educate them on various issues and practices. They would like to see more concentration in building and maintaining the USDA Internet pages.
- Numerous people expressed concern over the Endangered Species Act and desired “safe harbor” as part of good stewardship.
- Some commenters desired a focus on developing new technologies to control invasive plants and species.
- Numerous references concerned the pollution caused by factory farms and cattle operations.
- Some commenters expressed support for the Market-based Environmental Stewardship Coordination Council.
- Provide incentives—not subsidies—for improvements to make farming operations more productive and more environmentally sound.

- Some commenters suggested that USDA improve technology to make their farming operations energy self-sufficient (wind, biodiesel, biomass, biogas).
- Consider incentives for tangible activities that directly contribute to environmental protection—moving feedlots or waste lagoons to more secure areas.
- Some commenters suggested that NRCS identify the most cost-effective conservation practices, and provide financial incentives to implement those practices with a lifetime cap per producer.
- Some commenters wanted USDA to reward biological diversity with a payment.
- Conservation program funds are only available to fix a problem. Assistance should be available to “do it right the first time” and do the least possible damage to the environment.
- Support for conservation technical assistance. Oppose regionalizing the technical staff or replacing them with a computer or the Web.
- Some commenters suggested that USDA must apply stringent rules against farm environmental polluters.
- Many commenters suggested that the U.S. needs a better knowledge base about environmental components that contribute to agriculture: soil, water, air, landscape characteristics such as topography, and interactions of hydrology, soil, and nutrient status.
- A few commenters centered on global warming. Generally, these commenters saw a need to look into the combined effects of increased carbon dioxide, changes in water availability, and changes in air temperature.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- The 2007 farm bill should provide America’s farmers and ranchers options so they can “farm the best, and conserve the rest.”
- Current conservation programs should be reorganized into three programs—land set-aside/retirement program; cost-share assistance; and green payments.
- Direct payments should be justified by conservation performance goals and a plan and be paid only to producers. Although the payments are tied to the land, a producer is the only person actively engaged in achieving goals. Conservation plans must be producer-driven.
- USDA should establish “conservation” benchmarks. These benchmarks should be of sound science, measurable, and consistent with the best management practices for each State or region of the country. The public must know that progress is being made on a set of measurable goals.
- The farm bill should consider a much higher cost share on those programs that are specifically environmental protection programs. Rather than a 50/50 match or 60/40 match, go to 80/20 or even 100 percent.
- A commenter opposes the use of the word “tribe” and designations of “tribal conservation districts.”
- Establish 100 tribal district coordinator positions with tribal conservation districts.
- Twelve Alaskan regions under the Alaska Native Claim Settlement Act should be recognized by the farm bill.
- The definition of “limited-resource producer” should be amended to state “shall also be any tribal member operating on trust land,” allowing all tribal trust land to qualify for 90 percent cost share.

- A Navajo Nation and a Chippewa-Cree Tribe commenter stated NRCS provides five scholarships under a pilot program, but more are needed.
- Design expanded market-based water programs, which provide direct rewards to farms for improvements in both water quality and quantity. Proactively create tangible rewards for agriculturally based reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.
- Continue existing “conservation” programs and expand them to allow enrollment of additional environmentally sensitive acres.
- Increase farm program payments to those producers willing to increase their own expenses to employ land-conserving practices.
- Cost-sharing programs to establish grass strips along the boundaries of cropland, fields, and waterways to control soil erosion and runoff should be extended in the new legislation.
- Conservation programs must be tailored to keep farming profitable while installing and maintaining conservation projects.
- Transition CRP acres into some type of energy conservation reserve program or a pilot project to encourage farmers to produce a biomass energy project.
- Build farm policy around the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts.
- There needs to be some form of protection from urbanization in the farm bill. Seriously consider strategically planning agricultural zones in this country that would sustain farming in case of a bioterrorism attack.
- Define “sustainability” to reduce ambiguity.
- Compared to your Federal counterparts at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Army Corps of Engineers, NRCS-implemented programs need to coordinate much better with voluntary and community-based organizations.
- Oppose the total adjusted gross income payment limit.
- Eliminate payments based on production and base the payments on conservation.
- Provide high-quality consulting, engineering, and planning services at low or no cost to keep farmers up to date on the constantly evolving best management practices.
- The Government should not focus “on the conservation of Federal funds, but rather on the vitality of funding conservation.”
- Some persons advocated funding reductions.
- Conservation programs should offer tax reductions for producers who conduct special conservation practices, not via direct cash outlay payments.
- Pay \$100 to \$200 per acre for every 1-percent increase in organic matter.
- Concern that conservation programs are not compensating the landowner high enough to compete with the daily pressure of farmland operations and development.
- Encourage the Federal and State Governments to work more closely together on environmental issues.
- Support basic and applied research in development of long-range weather forecasting capabilities; development and application of regional and watershed-scale models; evaluation and development of weather modification technologies; development of cost-effective treatment (including pretreatment) technologies for agricultural drainage water; and development of cost-effective agricultural water conservation technologies.
- Promote research activities that lead to better environmental decisionmaking such as understanding the bacteria in our soils and the relationship between chemical use and crop blights and diseases and human health effects.