


GAO
 Accountability Integrity Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-418](#), a report to Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Annually, over a billion tons of soil erodes from the nation's cropland, and thousands of other acres, including wetlands, are converted to new cropland. Soil erosion reduces the land's productivity and impairs water quality; drained wetlands reduce flood control. Under the 1985 Food Security Act, farmers risk losing federal farm payments if they do not apply conservation practices to reduce erosion or if they drain wetlands. Concerns about soil erosion and wetlands conversions continue, however, as do concerns about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service's implementation of these provisions. GAO reviewed field offices' and headquarters' implementation and enforcement of the 1985 act's conservation compliance provisions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA

- increase oversight of field offices' compliance reviews to improve their accuracy and completeness,
- develop a more representative sample of tracts for review,
- develop an automated system to manage the data needed for reviews, and
- ensure that noncompliance waivers are supported.

USDA reviewed a draft of this report and concurred with the recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-418.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lawrence J. Dyckman at (202) 512-3841 or dyckmanl@gao.gov.

AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION

USDA Needs to Better Ensure Protection of Highly Erodible Cropland and Wetlands

What GAO Found

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service has not consistently implemented the 1985 Food Security Act's conservation provisions. Inconsistent implementation increases the possibility that some farmers receive federal farm payments although their soil erodes at higher rates than allowed or they convert wetlands to cropland.

According to GAO's nationwide survey, almost half of the Conservation Service's field offices do not implement the conservation provisions as required because they lack staff, management does not emphasize these provisions, or they are uncomfortable with their enforcement role. For example, field offices do not always find a farmer in violation for failing to implement an important practice, such as crop rotation, and do not always see whether a farmer has corrected the problem; they also do not always check for wetlands violations.

The Conservation Service's weak oversight of its field offices further impairs implementation of the provisions. In the process of selecting samples of cropland tracts to assess farmers' compliance, the Conservation Service disproportionately emphasizes tracts with little potential for noncompliance, such as permanent rangelands. This selection process leads to inflated compliance rates. The Conservation Service also has no automated system to promptly inform its field offices of the tracts selected for compliance reviews or to enable the offices to efficiently report their review results. Therefore, the field offices cannot conduct timely reviews—during critical erosion periods—and provide headquarters with up-to-date information.

Finally, the Farm Service Agency, the USDA agency responsible for withholding benefits for violations identified by the Conservation Service, often waives these noncompliance determinations without adequate justification. Without support from the Farm Service Agency, the Conservation Service's field staff have less incentive to issue violations.

Soil Erosion of Cropland by Water in 1999



Source: USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.