

**LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:****March 5, 2001**

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**LAST WEEK**

**SENATE AGRICULTURE CONSERVATION HEARING – DAY ONE** – On Wednesday, February 28, 2001, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry (Chairman Richard Lugar, R-IN) conducted a hearing to examine conservation issues for the next Farm Bill, hearing testimony from governmental organizations. Witnesses at the hearing were as follows:

**Jeffrey Zinn** – Congressional Research Service

**Katherine Smith** – USDA – Economic Research Service

**Tom Weber** – NRCS, Deputy Chief for Programs

**Bob Stephenson** – USDA Farm Service Agency

Chairman Lugar kicked off the hearing by stating the importance of conservation to the Committee. He stated three questions the Committee would examine: 1) what should the goals be of voluntary incentives, 2) what are the costs/benefits to producers, and 3) what are the costs/benefits to the public?

Ms. Smith stated that there are many benefits from conservation programs but that they are difficult to quantify. She highlighted an ERS publication entitled, “Agri-Environmental Policy at the Crossroads”. She supported increased targeting of conservation programs, and stated that many new issues could be addressed in the next Farm Bill with changes to programs. Jeff Zinn outlined the history of conservation in Farm Bills. He highlighted the importance of Conservation Technical Assistance and raised many questions the Committee could consider during the reauthorization process.

Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) stated the desire to see a new approach to conservation in the Farm Bill. He said that in addition to erosion control, more needs to be done regarding runoff, and nutrient runoff. He also stated the desire to see more done in the area of concentrated feedlot operations. Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS) said that the Committee cannot underestimate the importance of conservation, and stated the significance of the Dustbowl. Senator Peter Fitzgerald (R-IL) asked if a study had been performed to show the relative success of various conservation programs, while Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) asked about possible new criteria that could be added to the CRP Environmental Benefits Index.

Tom Weber highlighted several NRCS conservation programs. He stated the importance of Conservation Technical Assistance, and cited data showing the large backlog and unfunded requests for assistance in each NRCS program. He also emphasized the mission of NRCS to help landowners be productive, and also to help them be good stewards. He concluded that conservation programs are a “win/win” for farmers and the nation. Chairman Lugar asked about how the WRP application process works and Senator Harkin asked about the status of the Farmable Wetland Pilot Program. Senator Harkin also raised concerns about multi-agency implementation of programs and stated that this was an issue he felt should be further examined. Senator Wayne Allard (R-CO) asked several questions pertaining to the Small Watershed Program and specifically rehabilitation of aging structures. Chairman Lugar concluded the hearing by re-emphasizing his interest in conservation issues as part of the next Farm Bill.

**SENATE AGRICULTURE CONSERVATION HEARING – DAY TWO** – On Thursday, March 1, 2001, the Senate Agriculture Committee conducted a hearing to examine conservation issues for the next Farm Bill, with testimony from non-governmental organizations. Witnesses at the hearing were as follows:

**Craig Cox** – Soil and Water Conservation Society

**John Hassell** – Conservation Technology Information Center

**Nathan Rudgers** – National Association of State Departments of Agriculture

**Paul Johnson** – former NRCS Chief

**Bob Stallman** – American Farm Bureau Federation

**Dan Specht** – Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

**Tom Buis** – National Farmers Union

**Rollin Sparrowe** – Wildlife Management Institute

**Gerald Cohn** – American Farmland Trust

**Dave Stawick** – Alliance for Agriculture Conservation

**Paul Faeth** – World Resources Institute

Chairman Lugar opened the hearing by stating that by having Conservation hearings early in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Committee was reflecting the importance of conservation for the next Farm Bill. Craig Cox recapped a series of SWCS workshops on conservation. He said that funding was not adequate to meeting farmers’ conservation needs. He stated the need for a \$5 billion conservation budget. He said that even with that kind of increase, conservation spending would only represent 20% of disaster and farm assistance, and 10% of total agriculture spending. He focused on the theme of technical assistance funding on working lands and also proposed \$600 million in annual EQIP funding. Mr. Rudgers discussed specific recommendations for changing EQIP, including single year contracts, and removing payment limitations. He also stated that block grants could be provided to states to provide technical assistance. Paul Johnson said that good stewards should be rewarded for their work, rather than ones who are not implementing conservation practices. He cited buffers as an example, where individuals with pre-existing practices did not qualify for funding. He stated the need for a Private Lands Conservation Act, similar to the Clean Air Act or Wilderness Act.

Chairman Lugar described the need for good conservation data and information at the local level. He emphasized soils and GIS data being utilized by NRCS in Indiana, and expressed optimism about what the agency can do. Senator Harkin proposed a table showing total Commodity Credit Corporation Funding for FY 2000 at about \$32 billion, while conservation spending only represented \$1.9 billion. All Senators in attendance stated that conservation could be a better way to get funding for farmers and a societal benefit at the same time. Chairman Lugar signaled distress at NRCS staffing in Indiana and noted that the agency had incurred significant reductions in staff since 1987.

Mr. Stallman stated that the next Farm Bill should include expanded incentives for conservation, including direct payments along the “Green Box” model. He said that CRP should be expanded with increased focus on buffers and wetlands. He also recommended several changes for EQIP including additional funding; removal of prohibitions against large livestock participation; removal of priority areas; third party technical assistance; and general simplification of the program. He also stated Farm Bureau support for the Farmland Protection Program, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, and the need to protect privacy of farmers’ conservation information. Mr. Sparrowe supported benefits that programs like WHIP provide wildlife. He also stated the desire to see funding provided to state wildlife agencies to assist with implementation of conservation programs. Chairman Lugar expressed concern with this concept and said that the anxiety level among landowners in his State could be increased by having outside organizations providing assistance on farms. Senator Harkin discussed carbon sequestration and asked for input on how that aspect of the Conservation Security Act could be strengthened. Dave Stawick, expressed concern over the availability of technical assistance in the field. He raised the issue of whether NRCS would have the capacity to implement what is really needed around the countryside. He stated support for the agency’s partnership with Conservation Districts and offered several options on how the Committee might tackle the issues for the next Farm Bill.

**SENATE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE** The Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry, Conservation and Rural Revitalization was named. This Subcommittee has jurisdiction over NRCS conservation programs. The members are:

Mike Crapo, (R-ID) Chairman	Blanche L. Lincoln, (D-AR) Ranking Member
Mitch McConnell (R-KY)	Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
Craig Thomas (R-WY)	Thomas A. Dashle (D-ND)
Wayne Allard (R-CO)	Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)
Tim Hutchinson (R-AR)	Mark Dayton (D-MN)

