2014 Farm Bill Field Guide

to Fish and Wildlife Conservation




Acknowledgements


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Cover photos left to right Hannah Ryan, Rana Tucker, Pete Berthelsen, Larry Kruckenberg. Background photo: Larry Kruckenberg.

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Hannah Ryan

The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal funding for private lands conservation. As a result, it provides tremendous opportunities for the conservation of habitat for fish and wildlife species.

Ben Davis

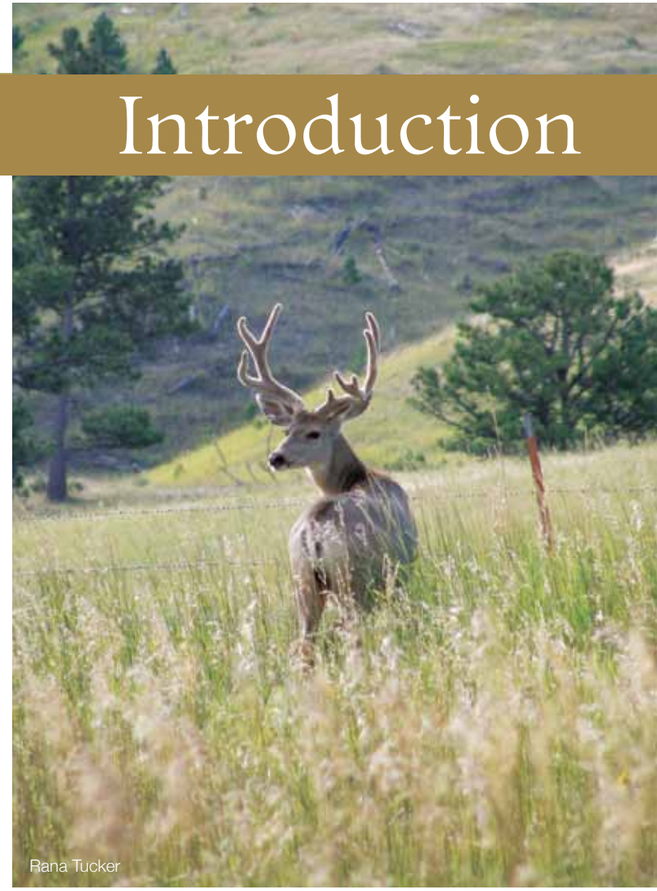
Introduction

More than two-thirds of the land area in the United States is privately owned, with 914 million acres in farms or ranches and approximately 300 million acres in private forest. These working lands, which represent much of the country's remaining open space and habitat, are vitally important to the conservation of soil, water, and fish and wildlife resources.

For decades, the voluntary conservation efforts of farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, and other private landowners have been supported by a series of federal laws collectively known as the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill is the most important tool enacted by Congress for conserving habitat on private lands. Farm Bill conservation programs fund easements to protect agricultural lands, efforts to protect at-risk species on working lands, technical advisors to help landowners improve their operations while conserving natural resources, and much more.

While individual programs and overall funding levels have changed, Congress continues to show support for conservation on private lands. The Agricultural Act of 2014, the most recently enacted Farm Bill, dedicates about $28 billion dollars until 2018 for conservation in four main areas: working lands programs, the Conservation Reserve Program, conservation easements, and partnerships.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture administers Farm Bill programs, primarily through the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. These agencies work closely with partners including conservation districts, state fish and wildlife agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, agriculture organizations, and conservation groups. The most important partners are the agricultural producers and other private landowners who participate in Farm Bill conservation programs.



Rana Tucker

This guide was prepared as an introduction for fish and wildlife conservation providers – the on-the-ground biologists and technical service providers who help deliver Farm Bill conservation programs to landowners. The goal is to give them a tool to better understand the Farm Bill and how its programs can help landowners conserve fish and wildlife habitat.

What is the Farm Bill?

What is known today as the "Farm Bill" is a compilation of many different laws passed by Congress to enhance agricultural productivity, rural economies, food security, and conservation on private lands. The Farm Bill began with the Agricultural Adjustment Act passed in 1933 in response to one of the greatest human-caused environmental catastrophes in U.S. history: the Dust Bowl. Periodically the Farm Bill is re-authorized with evolving policies addressing food, farms, and rural America.

Natural resource conservation has been a component of Farm Bills, to varying degrees, from the very beginning. The Soil Conservation Service (the predecessor to today's Natural Resources Conservation Service) was created in 1935. Over the years, provisions like the Soil Bank and the Great Plains Conservation Program were developed. These original programs had mixed success, but provided lessons on how conservation efforts could be most effective.


Illinois DNR


Bridget Collins


George Andrejko


Pete Berthelsen


Bill Stripling

The Food Security Act of 1985 was the first Farm Bill to include a conservation title. It created financial incentives for agricultural producers through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), as well as disincentives through conservation compliance eligibility requirements on highly erodible lands and wetlands. Since 1985, Farm Bill conservation programs have evolved and changed substantially. However, the voluntary, incentive-based program model of the conservation title remains constant.

The Farm Bill is a dynamic series of Acts revised over the past eight decades, but in this Field Guide we use the term Farm Bill to encompass all of these Acts. In addition, there are many types of working agricultural lands; this guide generally refers to all eligible participants as landowners or producers.

2014

The Agricultural Act of 2014

- Relinks conservation compliance with eligibility for crop insurance premium assistance and establishes regional Sodsaver to discourage production on native sod in six upper-Midwest states.
- Continues the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program.
- Merges Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program into EQIP with at least 5 percent of EQIP funds for wildlife habitat-related practices.
- Creates Regional Conservation Partnership Program that consolidates and expands upon the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, Agricultural Water Enhancement Program and Great Lakes Basin Program and other landscape-based efforts.
- Combines the Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program into the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

1933 First Farm Bill

1935 USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and Farm Security Administration created

1936 Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) created in the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act

1954 SCS given permanent watershed planning authority

1957 Great Plains Conservation Program created

1975 Forestry Incentives Program (FIP) created

1985 Food Security Act creates the first conservation title including Conservation Reserve Program and conservation compliance

1990 Wetlands Reserve Program and the Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP) created

1994 SCS renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service to reflect broader management mandate

1996 Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation of Private Grazing Land Program and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program created; EQIP replaces ACP

2002 Grasslands Reserve Program and the Conservation Security Program created; FIP and SIP become Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP)

2008 Conservation Security Program becomes the Conservation Stewardship Program; FLEP ends and forestry practices allowed under CSP and EQIP; tax incentives for conservation, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program created

Fish and Wildlife Benefits of the Farm Bill

The amount and quality of habitat plays a primary role in determining the population size and distribution of most fish and wildlife species. Farms, ranches, and working forests make up a large portion of the U.S., so the conservation practices that private landowners put on the ground can have a tremendous impact on habitat. This is why the conservation programs administered by USDA under the Farm Bill are so important for fish and wildlife.

After building a relationship with a landowner, Farm Bill practitioners can identify programs that help the landowner meet their agricultural objectives and provide the technical assistance to accommodate fish and wildlife needs. When used together, and in the context of the priority landscapes, watersheds, and species, technical assistance and conservation programs can produce significant benefits for fish and wildlife species.

Farm Bill Conservation Supports the Outdoor Recreation Economy

Pete Berthelsen

Wildlife-associated recreation contributes over $145 billion dollars to the nation's economy, and these outdoor activities depend on the quality habitat provided by Farm Bill conservation programs. Good habitat supports abundant fish and wildlife populations, which in turn support local economies across the country.

From 2006 to 2009, an average of 1.1 million hunters harvested nearly 6.1 million wild pheasants annually in 25 states across the pheasant range. While in pursuit of ring-necks, hunters participated in 6.1 million days afield and spent an estimated $502 million. This money comes in each year to the towns and communities where farmers' good agricultural practices translate into high wild bird populations.

In the Driftless Area of northeast Iowa, southwest Wisconsin and southeast Minnesota, Trout Unlimited estimated that recreational angling generates $1.1 billion in annual economic benefit to the local economy. This is made possible in part by 25 years of investment by state natural resource departments, NRCS, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, county conservation agencies, and others that have invested more than $45 million into improving the water quality in the 450 miles of streams in the region.

Successes for Wildlife

- **In 2012, nearly 636,000 land units covering over 52.8 million acres used at least one conservation program. This included 16.8 million acres that specifically focused on fish and wildlife habitat conservation.**
- **From 1992–2003, the presence of upland nesting cover provided by the Conservation Reserve Program resulted in the production of 25.7 million additional ducks in the Prairie Pothole Region.**
- **In the 20 years of the Wetlands Reserve Program, more than 11,000 private landowners enrolled over 2.3 million acres.**
- **Nearly 514,000 acres of wetlands were created, restored, or enhanced by NRCS programs in 2012 alone.**
- **Regional spring counts of Henslow's Sparrows are now about 25 times higher than 30 years ago, prior to the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program.**
- **Over 4,200 permanent conservation easements on more than 1.1 million acres have been secured using the Farm Bill's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.**

Don Paul

Delivering Farm Bill Programs

U.S. Department of Agriculture

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for implementation of the Farm Bill, primarily through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Both agencies have established trust with the agricultural community allowing them to effectively communicate conservation values with landowners and operators. They, along with landowners, conservation districts and other partners, are the key for delivering conservation practices on the ground.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS provides free technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners as well as financial assistance through a number of Farm Bill conservation programs. It also assists the FSA with on-the-ground technical support for the Conservation Reserve Program. Nationally, NRCS has other major functions including the mapping of soils, natural resource conservation technology and plant materials development, the Natural Resource Inventory, wetlands science, engineering support, and forestry, grazing, and land technology development.

NRCS has divided the country into four regions, each with a regional conservationist. Each state has a state conservationist who oversees conservation programs within their area. The state conservationist has a staff of technical, program, and administrative personnel to guide and direct conservation delivery. The next lower administrative level found in some states is an area office that oversees the field offices located in counties. NRCS field offices are the primary level of the agency that works directly with landowners. NRCS field office staff is composed of the district conservationist who typically has a staff of several technical specialists (e.g. soil conservationists, engineering technicians, etc.).

Approximately 140 staff biologists carry out the fish and wildlife technical discipline within the agency. In addition, there are over 200 partnership positions across the country focused on fish and wildlife that are funded cooperatively by state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation districts, and NGOs and are housed in NRCS offices.

Farm Service Agency

FSA administers and manages farm commodity, credit, disaster, and loan programs. FSA's primary role for conservation falls within its long-standing administration of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

There are FSA field offices in most counties, and these offices certify farmer eligibility for farm programs, pay out farm program benefits and disaster payments, and administer CRP sign-ups and contracts. Each state has a state executive director as well as a county executive director for each county office.

More than 8,000 farmers are elected to serve on FSA county committees nationwide. Committee members are the local authorities responsible for fairly and equitably resolving local issues while remaining accountable to the Secretary of Agriculture and local producers. They operate within official regulations designed to carry out state laws and provide a necessary and important voice in decisions affecting their counties and communities. Committee members make decisions affecting how FSA programs are implemented county-wide, including: the establishment of allotment and yields; commodity price support loans and payments; conservation programs; indemnity and disaster payments for commodities; and other farm disaster assistance.

State Technical Committees

State Technical Committees are an advisory body to the NRCS state conservationists and have no implementation or enforcement authority. However, they do provide guidance on conservation practices, identifying priority areas and resource concerns, ranking criteria for program participation, cost-share and incentive rates, and recommendations for achieving program balance within the state. State Technical Committees are chaired by the NRCS state conservationist and include representatives from other federal and state resource agencies, agriculture associations, landowners, and more. State Technical Committee meetings provide an effective venue to recommend ideas and priorities for implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs.

Local Working Groups

Local Working Groups are subcommittees of the State Technical Committees and are composed of conservation district officials, agricultural producers representing the variety of crops and livestock, non-industrial private forestland owners, and other agricultural and conservation interests. Local Working Groups offer recommendations to the State Technical Committee and NRCS as to how Farm Bill programs should be implemented in their area. As with State Technical Committees, it is important that advocates of fish and wildlife resources be active in Local Working Groups.

Conservation Districts

Conservation districts are local units of government that work to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Conservation districts are known in various parts of the country as "soil and water conservation districts," "resource conservation districts," "natural resource districts," "land conservation committees" or similar names. However, they all have the same mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources in an effort to develop locally driven solutions to natural resource concerns.

Today, there are nearly 3,000 conservation districts and each has a volunteer board of directors representing local landowners that provide guidance on local conservation priorities. Local conservation districts are aggregated into state associations, which in turn are members of the National Association of Conservation Districts. The long relationship between NRCS and conservation districts is important and has been essential in determining conservation priorities.

Larry Kruckenberg

Partnerships Optimize Fish and Wildlife Benefits

Partners working with the NRCS and FSA can be the key to delivering fish and wildlife conservation through Farm Bill programs.

Lori Reed

Farm Bill conservation programs are most successful for wildlife where there are boots on the ground in the form of biological technical assistance capacity. However, since 1985, Farm Bill funding for on-the-ground conservation projects has generally increased while NRCS technical assistance staffing, especially with biological or ecological specialties, has generally decreased. Local service centers typically have staff with primary expertise in agronomy, soils, or range management but often lack specific training in fish and wildlife conservation.

Achieving fish and wildlife habitat conservation is a multi-step process that includes marketing projects to landowners, understanding program requirements, assisting USDA with administrative paperwork, ranking projects, obligating dollars, designing conservation practices, and guiding implementation. Each step is critical, but each one can become a bottleneck if there is limited staff capacity with a strong foundation in wildlife management.

In addition, many programs require the landowner to provide part of the cost of implementing practices. This can be difficult for many participants and further delay on-the-ground conservation achievements. In recent years, state fish and wildlife agencies, fish and wildlife conservation organizations, and migratory bird joint ventures have helped fill some of these gaps.

"Partnering with USDA, we can complete high-quality wildlife conservation projects with farmers and ranchers and help improve producers' bottom lines."

~Howard Vincent, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever President and CEO

Ben Lardy

The Value of Fish and Wildlife Conservation Partnerships

- **Science:** Develop, catalyze, and cost-share **science-based planning tools** and outcome-based evaluations that facilitate targeted conservation delivery and assess the conservation effects of Farm Bill programs, respectively.

- **Field Capacity:** Provide and leverage funding to help build field delivery technical assistance capacity **("boots on the ground")** through cost-shared partner positions in NRCS field offices.

- **Fund Leveraging:** Secure contributions for producer financial incentives and communications capacity from state fish and wildlife agencies, nongovernmental conservation organizations, corporations, and other partners to facilitate implementation of national and state USDA conservation initiatives. Supplemental funding can demonstrate partners' commitment to landscape initiatives and the initiatives' importance.

Farm Bill Partnership Positions

Conservation partners can have the most impact by identifying interested landowners, assisting with enrollment in voluntary conservation programs, and aiding in practice implementation to meet quality habitat objectives. Pictured are North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission Technical Assistance Biologist John Isenhour; property owner John Bishop; and farm manager Lee Efird. Photo by Melissa McGaw, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

To address staffing capacity issues in delivery of the Farm Bill, Congress allows for agreements with third parties referred to as Technical Service Providers (TSPs). Individuals or businesses with technical conservation expertise can become certified through NRCS' registration system and can then be hired by agricultural producers to provide services on behalf of NRCS. TSPs can either develop Conservation Activity Plans or be responsible for the design, installation, and site checks of conservation practices.

In addition to the TSP model, NRCS can address capacity bottlenecks through Farm Bill partnership positions. These positions are typically funded through contribution agreements between NRCS and some combination of state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation districts, nongovernmental organizations, and some migratory bird joint ventures. These positions are usually located in USDA Service Centers to assist agricultural producers and NRCS staff with developing required conservation plans and processing program applications. These positions are critical to ensure an emphasis on fish and wildlife conservation and many of these partnership positions are strategically located to address significant fish and wildlife concerns within key landscape conservation initiatives.

Cooperative providers of Farm Bill conservation program technical assistance can be known by many titles, including partnership biologist, forester, or range specialist. For consistency, this guide will simply refer to them as partnership positions or providers.

Farm Bill partnership providers must have a good understanding of species-specific habitat requirements and ecological processes. They must also have a working knowledge of the conservation programs and practices, agricultural systems, and landowner needs and eligibility requirements. Their help with comprehensive planning and implementation of Farm Bill programs at the farm scale translates into changes on the landscape that benefit agricultural producers as well as fish and wildlife and their habitats.

Typical Tasks of a Farm Bill Partnership Position

- Marketing Farm Bill conservation programs to private landowners and building relationships with these landowners to help them find solutions that integrate biological sciences and production agriculture.
- Providing technical assistance and guidance on wildlife biology, range management, or other natural resource disciplines to landowners, government agencies, non-government organizations and others.
- Completing conservation plans and maps, contracts, applications and other required documentation for Farm Bill conservation programs.
- Designing and implementing Farm Bill conservation programs in cooperation with USDA Agencies, conservation districts, state fish and wildlife agencies, nonprofit organizations and other partners.
- Providing the extra time during follow-ups with the landowners needed to ensure that the practices are installed properly and maintained in a way that continues to benefit the targeted wildlife species.

Working with Agricultural Producers

Farm Bill partnership providers work closely with individuals who are part of a community of landowners, so be aware that initial impressions are important to work effectively over time. Realize also that most landowners make decisions by considering a combination of economic, ecological, and community or family concerns. Conservation may not be at the top of the list everyday, but it will be on the list everyday. To be effective, partnership providers should master the following:

Building Relationships: A producer's land is a valuable asset – both personally and economically. To create a successful partnership, earn a producer's trust by investing the time to understand the landowner's needs and concerns, and assist them in making their own informed decisions. Always be professional, respectful, empathetic, and gracious.

Communication: Partnership providers must truly listen to a producer's land management goals. Aim to become a trusted advisor who helps achieve the producer's objectives in a way that is consistent with natural resource sustainability. Some producers will have fish and wildlife as primary objectives; many will not. Clearly understand the producer's needs, and communicate the type of assistance that can be provided to address areas of mutual concern.

Technical Skills: Tailor conservation planning to an operation's soil capability and resource potential, landscape context, financial resources, and the producer's willingness and ability to try new practices or management systems. Build a broad working knowledge of the agricultural systems and natural resources in the region. Be honest about not knowing something, build a network of fellow professionals to learn from, and seek mentors among both producers and resource managers.

Setting Priorities for Farm Bill Conservation

The NRCS and FSA must set conservation priorities when determining how to spend Farm Bill conservation programs funds. Generally, individual applications for program participation are subject to ranking criteria that reflect these priorities, so understanding the process for how priorities are set can be beneficial.

National priorities are developed during the congressional reauthorization and agency rulemaking processes, and then through internal agency prioritization. CRP priorities are set through the Environmental Benefits Index or through acreage allocation to various continuous CRP initiatives. NRCS national priorities are shared with the State Technical Committees or implemented through landscape initiatives. At the national level, partner organizations work actively with the USDA agencies as they develop their priorities and implementation rules to ensure that conservation programs adequately address key conservation needs.

At the state level, NRCS priorities are set through recommendations developed by the State Technical Committees and FSA conservation priority areas are set by the FSA State Committee. Local Work Groups select and rank conservation needs at the county level. Participating in State Technical Committee and subcommittee meetings and building relationships with committee members is essential for incorporating fish and wildlife priorities into Farm Bill conservation program delivery.

Applications to receive Farm Bill conservation funding are most successful when they address a number of the priority conservation concerns identified by the Local Work Group and State Technical Committee. Points are rewarded for each targeted resource concern that the project will tackle, then applications are ranked based upon their total score and funding descends down the prioritized list until exhausted. Project lists can be reprioritized in subsequent years as new applications are submitted.

A State Technical Committee meeting in Pierre, South Dakota. Photo by USDA NRCS.

NRCS Landscape Initiatives

NRCS has developed landscape-level conservation initiatives to focus their resources and achieve measurable soil, water, and wildlife outcomes. These conservation initiatives enhance the locally driven process by targeting funds to address nationally and regionally important conservation goals. The initiatives are funded through a relatively small portion of existing Farm Bill conservation programs.

Though the list is periodically revised and updated, conservation providers should be familiar with all initiatives in their region as well as major national initiatives like the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, and the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative. Many of the initiatives contribute substantially to fish and wildlife conservation. In addition, there are several initiatives focused on species and their habitats, including the Lesser Prairie Chicken, Sage Grouse, and Longleaf Pine Initiatives.

NRCS has creatively and effectively utilized a partnership-driven model over the last decade to help deliver these initiatives. Partnerships help increase the science, conservation planning, and administrative capacity to deliver focused and science-based conservation.

Partner Planning Supports Priorities

To ensure that the best available science is used in setting priorities, State Technical Committees can benefit from incorporating several key fish and wildlife conservation resources during the process. Every state has a State Wildlife Action Plan that identifies conservation issues, needs, and priorities that can serve as a tool for developing ranking criteria or establishing special fund pools to meet critical fish and wildlife needs. Likewise, migratory bird joint ventures have developed implementation plans that identify habitat priorities and objectives for bird habitat conservation on private lands. Other plans that provide specific fish and wildlife conservation priorities include the fish habitat partnerships of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, strategic plans of key nongovernmental conservation organization partners, and endangered species recovery plans.

A lesser prairie chicken displays on booming grounds in the southern Great Plains. Photo by Nick Richter.

Staff and a partner of the Intermountain West Joint Venture talk about habitat restoration with Wyoming rancher, Pat O'Toole. Photo by Ali Duvall.

Conservation Planning

To ensure the most effective use of Farm Bill conservation program dollars, the NRCS encourages conservation planning before a landowner applies for funding. Understanding the NRCS conservation planning process is important so partners can both communicate with NRCS staff and help develop conservation plans.

All conservation plans are compilations of NRCS conservation practices, and every project must meet national conservation practice standards to be eligible for financial assistance. Standards are reviewed every three to five years by teams of technical specialists and then published in the Federal Register for public comment. Once finalized, the standards are distributed to the state NRCS offices that can further refine the practice to fit their specific situation.

NRCS Conservation Planning Process

Phase I – Collection & Analysis

- Step 1: Identify Problems and Opportunities
- Step 2: Determine Objectives
- Step 3: Inventory Resources
- Step 4: Analyze Resource Data

Phase II – Decision Support

- Step 5: Formulate Alternatives
- Step 6: Evaluate Alternatives
- Step 7: Make Decisions

Phase III – Application & Evaluation

- Step 8: Implement the Plan
- Step 9: Evaluate the Plan

USDA NRCS

Regulatory Predictability

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and NRCS have developed an innovative partnership offering producers regulatory predictability under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The approach, named Working Lands for Wildlife, allows producers to keep their operations viable and productive while voluntarily benefitting at-risk, candidate, or listed species.

Working Lands for Wildlife gives producers a guarantee that if they implement specific conservation practices on their lands according to NRCS and FWS standards, and maintain those practices, they will remain compliant with ESA regulatory responsibilities for those activities for up to 30 years. For example, a forest landowner in the gopher tortoise range of Georgia can continue harvesting timber without fear of ESA impacts by obtaining a forest management plan from NRCS and harvesting in accordance with the plan's conservation practices. Although there are some technical differences, this approach is similar to Safe Harbor Agreements from the producer's point of view.

It is important to note that regulatory predictability is tied to a conservation plan (which can be long term), and not a contract for financial assistance from one of the Farm Bill programs (which are typically short term). Also, NRCS and FWS have recently expanded on this single-species approach to an ecosystem model by providing predictability for 83 other riparian species within the range of the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

Regulatory predictability is becoming an increasingly important tool for water quality as well. Several states – including Minnesota, Texas, and Virginia – have launched locally led efforts to improve water quality by giving producers credit for good stewardship.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Photo by Jim Rorabaugh.

Greater Sage Grouse. Photo by USDA NRCS.

New England Cottontail. Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Conservation Evaluation

Chuck Kowaleski, TPWD

Conservation Effects Assessment Project

The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) was established to measure the impact of Farm Bill conservation practices and to support the science base for conservation. The CEAP Wildlife Component is focused on quantifying effects of conservation practices and programs on fish and wildlife, and enabling use of findings to inform and improve conservation delivery. CEAP Wildlife assessments rely on collaboration with various science partners and focus on regionally important species or groups, including Working Lands for Wildlife featured species.

By the end of 2014, over 40 regional CEAP Wildlife assessments had been initiated. Findings from these assessments are being used to continuously adapt and improve conservation practices and program delivery. Reports from completed assessments and CEAP conservation insights that summarize findings are available on the CEAP Wildlife website.

Measuring Conservation Outcomes

With money comes the responsibility of accountability. It is critical that natural resource professionals engage and invest in real outcome monitoring when implementing Farm Bill conservation practices. In a 2008 report compiled for the Soil and Water Conservation Society, a "blue ribbon" panel of natural resource experts made the following recommendations:

"Uncertainties and error introduced by broad practice definitions, missing quantitative links between variability in practice application(s) and environmental effects, and the difficulty of simulating real world interactions among conservation practices in process models, will seriously impair the scientific credibility of simulated quantitative estimates of environmental effects being produced by conservation programs. Simulations and extrapolations cannot – and must not – substitute for on-the-ground monitoring and inventory systems designed to determine if anticipated conservation and environmental benefits are being achieved."

Good data are critical to the use of adaptive management and adaptive management is critical to the advancement of conservation programs. It ensures that taxpayer dollars are being used in the best and most efficient means possible. Clearly documenting the goals and performance assessments of conservation activities is essential.

Ross Fogle of the McLean County Soil and Water Conservation District in Illinois and Maria Lemke of The Nature Conservancy evaluate soil health benefits from cover crops. Cover crops build organic matter and remove nitrogen from groundwater. Photo by Lynn Betts for The Nature Conservancy.

Conservation in the 2014 Farm Bill

By acquiring a solid foundation of knowledge about the 2014 Farm Bill's conservation provisions, partnership providers can help landowners meet their conservation goals.

USDA NRCS

The conservation title of the 2014 Farm Bill continues to be based on the principles that have been central to it for decades – providing cost-sharing for improved farming practices, conserving environmentally sensitive lands, securing easements to protect agricultural lands and wetlands, and encouraging conservation partnerships. These principles can be thought of as the four "buckets" of the conservation title. In addition, although the Farm Bill's financial incentive programs are often more familiar, disincentive policies remained an important component of the conservation title.

Because of program funding reductions and consolidation of core programs, partnerships for private land conservation will be even more important. Working closely with USDA and landowners, cost-shared partnership positions can help landowners assess their goals and challenges on their property. By acquiring a solid foundation of knowledge about the 2014 Farm Bill's conservation provisions, partnership providers can help landowners meet their conservation goals.

Colleen Moulton

Conservation Compliance and Sodsaver

Prairie potholes embedded within an agricultural field. Photo by Prairie Pothole Joint Venture.

Strengthening Conservation Compliance

A high priority for much of the conservation community in the 2014 Farm Bill was re-establishing conservation compliance as an eligibility requirement for crop insurance premium assistance to ensure that 30 years of conservation compliance benefits were not lost. A coalition of both conservation and agriculture groups rallied around a strong crop insurance program linked to conservation compliance. In what was a major win for conservation in the 2014 Farm Bill, the coalition's recommendations were included in the final law.

Only USDA agencies implement and enforce conservation compliance provisions. Partnership providers should be aware of conservation compliance provisions in order to direct producers' questions to the appropriate agency.

Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation Compliance

The Highly Erodible Land Conservation (HELC) and Wetland Conservation (WC) compliance provisions, often known as sodbuster and swampbuster respectively, are eligibility requirements. Farmers agree to apply basic conservation practices – following a conservation plan if growing annual crops on highly erodible lands, and maintaining wetlands – in order to be eligible to receive certain farm program benefits. The result has been a longstanding "conservation compact" between agricultural producers and taxpayers reducing soil erosion by 295 million tons year and protecting between 1.5 million and 3.3 million acres of vulnerable wetlands.

Conservation compliance under the 2014 Farm Bill will operate essentially the same as it has for decades, however compliance is once again linked to crop insurance premiums. NRCS evaluates a producer's operation to determine if there are highly erodible soils and wetlands present, and then provides technical assistance on how to protect the soil or wetland resources. Producers are required to have a HELC and WC Certification form (AD-1026) on file. Producers subject to conservation compliance for the first time as a result of the 2014 Farm Bill's re-linkage of compliance and crop insurance (primarily specialty crop growers) will have two reinsurance years to remedy or mitigate a wetland violation and five reinsurance years to develop and comply with a HELC plan. Those producers new to compliance will also be given priority when requesting technical assistance from NRCS.

Grasslands that have been sodbusted. Photo by Pheasants Forever.

Non-compliance to HELC and WC may affect USDA program benefits including FSA loans and disaster assistance payments, NRCS and FSA conservation program benefits, as well as federal crop insurance premium assistance. Participants can have benefits reinstated once they are back in compliance with conservation plans.

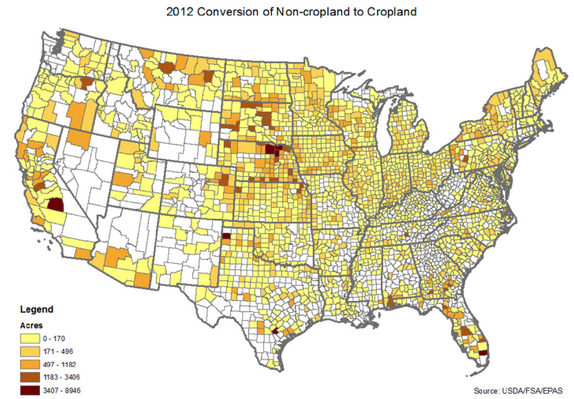
Sodsaver

Grasslands are essential for both ranching communities and wildlife populations, but over 70 percent of our nation's grasslands have been lost. Both the Government Accountability Office and USDA concluded that federal farm program benefits play a significant role in increasing grassland conversion so finding a solution to help reduce those unintended consequences was a priority.

The 2014 Farm Bill includes a geographically limited "Sodsaver" provision to discourage producers from converting native prairies and grasslands to annually tilled crops. Producers who break out new agricultural land from native grasslands after February 7, 2014 will be eligible only for reduced benefits on the broken out acres from the federal crop insurance and non-insured crop disaster assistance programs for four years. Although not nationally applicable, the provision does apply to the Prairie Pothole Region states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Montana, as well as Nebraska, the state with the greatest acreage of grassland conversion according to a 2012 USDA report.

Conservation Compliance Resources *(see page 56)*

NRCS Conservation Compliance Site
FSA Conservation Compliance Site
AD-1026 Form



FSA defines conversions to cropland (sometimes called "land broken out" or "new breakings") as land on the farm that was not classified "cropland" in the prior year. These estimates could include conversion of native sod, pasture, or forest to cropland, but could also include the demolition of old farm houses. While not a perfect estimate, these FSA summaries provide a good approximation of grassland conversion in prairie states. Map prepared by FSA.

The Four "Buckets" of Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Working Lands


Dave Smith

Working lands programs provide cost-sharing and financial assistance options for landowners to improve habitat, reduce erosion and runoff, and address other resource concerns on their lands that are in active crop production, grazing, and forestry. Targeted at increasing the sustainability of working lands, these programs can help landowners improve their bottom line while also increasing the conservation benefits on their property.

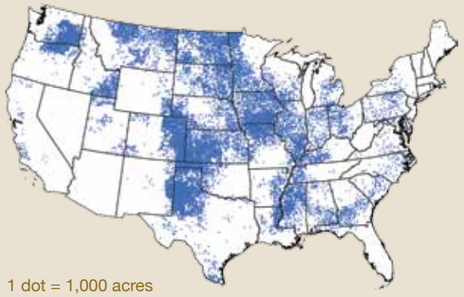
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program – Annual funding authorized between $1.35 and $1.75 billion, and includes:
  - At least 5 percent of funding for wildlife habitat.
  - Conservation Innovation Grants – $25 million per year.
- Conservation Stewardship Program – Authorized at up to 10 million acres per year.

Conservation Reserve Program


Pete Berthelsen

CRP is the original Farm Bill conservation program that provides annual rental payments to producers to establish conservation cover on ecologically significant cropland and pastureland adjacent to water. CRP has long been known as a key tool for providing wildlife habitat, erosion reduction, and water quality improvement. The 2014 Farm Bill set enrollment at 24 million acres by 2017 and allows for enrollment of up to two million acres of working grasslands in the CRP – similar to previous Farm Bills' contract option under the Grassland Reserve Program. The overall program budget is estimated around $1.9 billion each year.

CRP Enrollment - December 31, 2014



1 dot = 1,000 acres
Total: 24.3 million acres

Prepared by FSA/EPAS/NRA

Easements


USDA NRCS

The 2014 Farm Bill creates a new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to support voluntary easements on working lands. The ACEP program is authorized annually between $250 and $500 million.

- ACEP - Wetland Reserve Easements restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in 30-year or permanent easements (similar to the former Wetlands Reserve Program).
- ACEP - Agricultural Land Easements protect agricultural lands from development including conversion of grasslands to non-grazing uses (incorporates the former Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and Grassland Reserve Program).
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program helps landowners restore, enhance, and protect forestland resources on private lands to promote biodiversity, carbon sequestration, or the recovery of species. The HFRP is authorized at $12 million for each year between 2014 and 2018, but annual funding levels are set by Congress.

Partnerships


Ali Duvall

The 2014 Farm Bill embraces partnerships as effective ways to enhance conservation program delivery through the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP).

- RCPP is a competitive opportunity for locally led, partnership-based conservation efforts on regional or watershed scales that leverage USDA funding of EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and HFRP to accomplish project goals. Funded at $100 million per year plus 7 percent of the funding from the covered conservation programs, USDA anticipates approximately $1.2 billion for RCPP over five years.
- VPA-HIP provides block grants to state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies to fund recreational access and habitat improvement programs. Total funding for VPA-HIP is authorized at $40 million.

Working Lands

Between 2009 and 2012, 1.5 million acres were planted with cover crops and prescribed grazing techniques were implemented on over 21 million acres using EQIP funding.

USDA NRCS

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. The goal of the program is to enhance natural resources, particularly through improvements to soil health, conservation of water resources, improving air and water quality, enhancing habitat, and more. Through EQIP, landowners receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices or conduct conservation planning. A core purpose of EQIP is to help landowners comply with or avoid the need for environmental regulations.

In the 2014 Farm Bill, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) was consolidated into EQIP. As a result, a minimum of 5 percent of overall EQIP funding must be used for improving or creating wildlife habitat in each fiscal year. Due to this consolidation and EQIP's consistently higher funding levels, EQIP has become one of the most important Farm Bill programs for fish and wildlife conservation.

EQIP is one of the largest funded Farm Bill programs with a congressional authorization of $8 billion through 2018. However, Congress can cap funding levels within annual appropriations bills at less than the authorized level.

To ensure that it meets its EQIP target of 5 percent for wildlife, NRCS will be tracking the 16 EQIP practices that have wildlife habitat as a primary purpose, obligations made under state EQIP wildlife subaccounts, and practices implemented in its wildlife-focused Landscape Conservation Initiatives.

Using EQIP funding, this fish ladder installed in the Big Hole Valley of southwest Montana benefits arctic grayling. Farm Bill funding for projects like this helped preclude the need to list the fish under the Endangered Species Act in 2014. Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

State EQIP Wildlife Subaccounts

The Farm Bill requires annual consultation with State Technical Committees when choosing targeted practices for EQIP wildlife funds. NRCS policy for fiscal year 2015 encourages states to create dedicated subaccounts within their EQIP budgets targeting funds towards appropriate practices and geographic areas to meet the needs of priority wildlife species and their habitats. Wildlife conservationists should initiate these collaborative discussions with their NRCS State Conservationist and become active members of their State Technical Committee to help create these subaccounts.

Wildlife Conservation in EQIP - Case Studies

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the primary funding source for the Sage Grouse Initiative, Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative, other Working Lands for Wildlife priority species, a host of native fisheries habitat restoration efforts, and several forestry-oriented wildlife conservation initiatives. As implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill moves forward, EQIP will continue to evolve as a large contributor to fish and wildlife conservation on working lands.

Priority Areas for Texas Pronghorn

A pronghorn antelope shown next to a livestock fence that is a barrier to wildlife movement. EQIP funds can modify fences so that pronghorns can move freely, but livestock are still secure. Photo by Chuck Kowaleski, TPWD.

A herd of pronghorn after passing through a new pronghorn-friendly fence on property that did not have pronghorn before the installation. Photo by USDA NRCS.

Since 2003, NRCS has partnered with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and other organizations to create innovative EQIP priority areas benefitting wildlife and agricultural producers. The Trans-Pecos Pronghorn Antelope EQIP area was created in 2008 in response to Texas pronghorn numbers reaching an all-time low of fewer than 3,000 individuals. Between 2008 and 2013, NRCS invested nearly $3.5 million in grazing and brush management, improving water resources, and modifying fences on more than half a million acres of grazing lands. TPWD and the Borderland Research Institute have contributed more than $500,000 to the effort through technical assistance and outreach, research, monitoring, and antelope restocking efforts. So far more than 300 antelope have been reintroduced into this focus area.

As little as 4 percent tree cover near a lek (breeding area), causes sage grouse to abandon the lek, so removing junipers in sagebrush habitat is a key priority for the Sage Grouse Initiative. Photo by Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media.

Helping Restore Sage Grouse Habitat

EQIP is the primary Farm Bill program for the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), the most advanced and successful of the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife priorities. SGI provides EQIP funding for conservation practices that are specifically intended to remove habitat threats to sage grouse. Consistent with EQIP's mandate to assist agricultural producers in addressing regulatory requirements, SGI has been implemented at a massive scale to conserve sage grouse habitat and help avoid the need for a listing under the Endangered Species Act.

SGI participants utilize EQIP funds to install new grazing systems, specifically rest-rotation systems that increase nesting cover; remove conifers that have encroached into key sagebrush habitats; and mark or remove high-risk fences. From 2010-2014, EQIP helped restore a staggering 4.4 million acres of sagebrush habitat through SGI across 11 states. EQIP-funded SGI conservation practices were driven by cutting-edge science and planning tools, spatially targeted to high-density sage grouse population centers.

Young Forests for Golden-Winged Warblers

The Golden-winged Warbler is a neotropical migratory songbird that breeds throughout the Appalachian and Upper Great Lakes regions of the U.S. and north into southern Ontario and Manitoba, Canada. The species is dependent on young forests and shrublands for nesting, however due to habitat loss it has experienced drastic population declines. Much of the species' breeding range consists of private lands, adding to the complexity of population recovery.

In 2012, as part of a Working Lands for Wildlife partnership, habitat restoration funding and technical assistance were made available to private non-industrial forest landowners for improving the bird's habitat. During the first three years, 12,000 acres of private forestland throughout the Appalachians were enrolled in the program. In 2013, habitat efforts began in the Great Lakes region targeting 64,000 acres of habitat for the next five years. In addition, the conservation efforts are expected to benefit approximately 20 other at-risk species such as American woodcock, ruffed grouse, moose, Canada lynx, northern long-eared bat, and black-billed cuckoo.

The key to successful voluntary habitat projects is the collaboration among private landowners and partners with the right resource management expertise. Here, forestry contractor Todd Clark (Indiana University of Pennsylvania-Research Institute), consulting forester Slater Hafner, and property owner Mike Jackson discuss young forest habitat management for a Golden-winged Warbler project. Photo by Laura Jackson.

Golden-winged warblers depend on thick, shrubby habitat. Photo by Greg Lavaty, USDA NRCS.

Conservation Innovation Grants

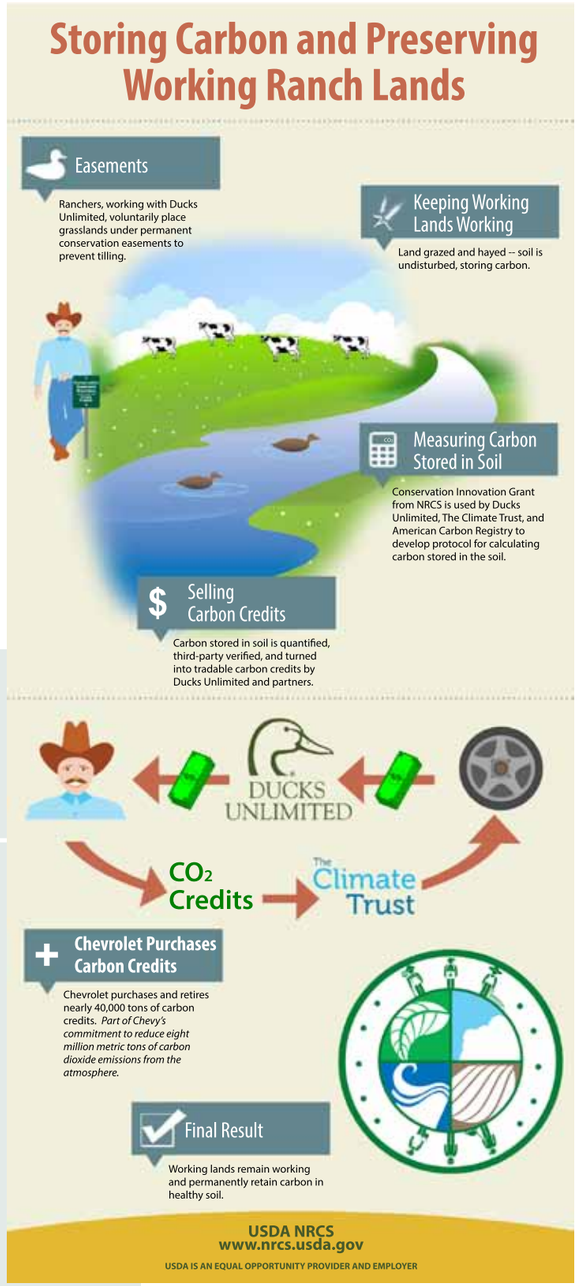
EQIP's Conservation Innovation Grants

The Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program within EQIP is funded up to $25 million per year between 2014 and 2018. The purpose of CIG is to stimulate the development of innovative conservation approaches and technologies in forestry or agricultural production. Funds are competitively awarded to tribal governments, nongovernmental organizations, or individuals for national and state CIG projects. CIG provides agricultural producers new options for environmental enhancement and compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. Selected applicants receive grants of up to 50 percent of the project cost and require non-federal match and producer involvement.

Case Study

Ducks Unlimited uses CIG to Negotiate Carbon Credit Sale to Chevrolet

In 2011, Ducks Unlimited (DU), the Climate Trust, and American Carbon Registry received CIG funding to develop a methodology to quantify the carbon stored in soil by avoiding grassland conversions. DU then coordinated voluntary, permanent grassland easements in the Prairie Pothole Region and verified the amount of carbon stored in those undisturbed soils to develop tradable carbon credits. In late 2014, USDA and DU announced that Chevrolet was purchasing 40,000 carbon dioxide reduction tons generated on those lands, a voluntary effort that they calculate will reduce eight million metric tons of carbon dioxide from being emitted into the atmosphere.



EQIP Details

NRCS provides EQIP assistance to landowners through practice and foregone income payments with rates established for specific practices. The overall payment limitation is $450,000 per person or legal entity for all EQIP contracts entered into between 2014 and 2018, and the maximum payment limit can no longer be waived. EQIP contract lengths vary and can last up to ten years.

Eligibility

- Participant must be an agricultural producer or owner of non-industrial private forestland, or an Indian tribe. They must own or control the land for the length of the EQIP contract and comply with the adjusted gross income limitations of $900,000 per year or less.
- Producers must be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions.
- Producers work with NRCS to develop and implement an EQIP plan of operations, including specific conservation and environmental objectives.
- Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, rangeland, pasture, wetlands, non-industrial private forestland, and other agricultural land on which agricultural or forest-related products or livestock are produced.
- Socially disadvantaged, beginning and limited resource farmers, as well as Indian tribes and veterans are eligible for an increased payment rate and may receive advanced payments of up to 50 percent to purchase the materials and services needed to implement an EQIP contract.

How to Apply

NRCS is responsible for the technical assistance and administration of the program. Applications can be obtained at local NRCS Service Centers. Each state's EQIP page includes application ranking criteria for the state, priority resource concerns, lists of eligible practices, payment rates, information about where you can submit applications, eligibility requirements, and other program requirements.

Applications for national Conservation Innovation Grants are submitted through the NRCS National Office. Those states offering state CIG opportunities will announce their sign-up period and objectives independently of the national announcement.

EQIP Resources *(see page 56)*

EQIP Site
CIG Program Site
EQIP Application by State
Conservation Activity Plan
List of Conservation Practices

In 2011, Minnesota Trout Unlimited completed a stream restoration project on Pickwick Creek in Winona County, Minnesota. The project was partially funded through EQIP and a grant from the state's Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund. The project was over a mile long and included habitat for both game and nongame species. Photo by Gary Sobotta.

Conservation Stewardship Program

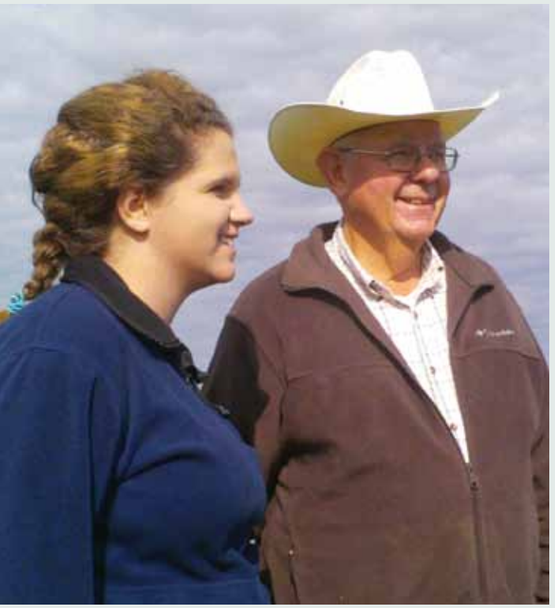
The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) encourages producers to maintain and improve existing conservation practices while implementing additional activities that address priority resource concerns. CSP was designed to support landowners that improve soil, water, air, and wildlife habitat quality as well as energy and water use on their working lands.

Participants in CSP receive annual land use payments for the environmental benefits that they produce across the operation – the higher the operational performance the higher the payment. Lands that are in their final year of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollment can be enrolled in CSP allowing continued stewardship on these environmentally sensitive lands. In addition, lands that are protected under Agricultural Land Easements in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) can enroll in CSP.

The program is authorized to enroll up to 10 million acres each fiscal year until 2018 and expected CSP outlays between 2014 and 2018 are over $2 billion.

Case Study

Improving Drought Resilience on Grazing Lands



Dave Steffen looks over his ranch with his granddaughter, Brittany. Photo by USDA NRCS, South Dakota.

Some of the greatest wildlife benefits of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) may be from the grassland habitat it supports. Between 2009 and 2013, producers enrolled at least 14 million acres of rangeland and pasture in CSP, and Grazing Management for Wildlife was among the top ten enhancements chosen by producers. South Dakota had the nation's largest enrollment in fiscal year 2014 with over 1.2 million acres enrolled.

Dave Steffen, a rancher in Gregory County, SD, is a retired NRCS District Conservationist and Range Management Specialist, co-founder of the South Dakota Grazing School, and an exemplary participant in CSP. Mr. Steffen has focused on improving habitat and soil health in his CSP contract, introducing prescribed fire and deferred grazing enhancements. During extremely dry conditions in 2012, Mr. Steffen says that, "CSP support is what carried me through with my yearlings. They performed outstanding and I had plenty of grass and production for them." CSP can be an important tool to keep grazing operations in business, reducing the risk of grassland conversion.

CSP Details

CSP provides two types of payments through five-year contracts: annual payments for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing practices, and supplemental payments for adopting a resource-conserving crop rotation. The contracts and accompanying conservation plans cover the entire agricultural operation and can last for a period of five years. Contracts have the option to renew for another five years if the original terms are met and the producer agrees to meet the stewardship threshold of at least two additional priority resource concerns or exceed the threshold on two existing resource concerns. Compensation cannot exceed $200,000 for all contracts entered during any five-year period.

Eligibility

- Eligible lands include private and tribal cropland, grasslands, pasture, rangelands, non-industrial private forestlands, and other private agricultural land (including cropped woodland, marshes, and agricultural land used for the production of livestock) on which resource concerns related to agricultural production could be addressed.
- Producers must demonstrate that they are meeting the stewardship threshold for at least two resource concerns such as soil, water, or wildlife.
- Producers must address at least one additional priority resource concern by the end of the conservation stewardship contract.
- Offer must include all eligible lands within operation.

Pete Berthelsen

How to Apply

Producers answer operational baseline data questions to start the CSP application process. They then work with NRCS field staff to do a resource inventory using a Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT) to assess the existing conservation performance and opportunity for additional conservation activities on the operation. NRCS uses the CMT to evaluate CSP applications through a point-based system to estimate environmental benefits.

CSP sign-up is continuous throughout the year so producers can apply at any time; however, state NRCS offices rank applications and offer contracts once a year. Contact the state office to find out when the ranking period will occur.

Conservation Stewardship Resources

(see page 56)

CSP Site
CSP Self-screening Checklist
CSP Enhancement Activity Job Sheets

Nearly 60 million acres of crop, forest, pasture, and rangeland are currently enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program – accounting for nearly 7 percent of farm and ranch land nationwide.

Conservation Reserve Program

CRP has restored more than two million acres of wetlands and associated buffers and reduces soil erosion by more than 300 million tons per year.

Prairie Pothole Joint Venture

Conservation Reserve Program

CRP encourages agricultural landowners to establish conservation cover on sensitive agricultural lands to reduce erosion, improve water quality, and establish wildlife habitat. It has been the backbone of natural resources conservation across a wide swath of the nation's agricultural landscapes and has yielded immense soil and water conservation benefits by securing topsoil and filtering agricultural runoff. CRP also gives landowners economic stability through dramatic shifts in agricultural markets allowing them to achieve many farming and conservation goals.

The wildlife benefits of CRP became apparent shortly after it was created in 1985. Subsequent Farm Bills modified the program to further specific fish and wildlife conservation objectives, especially in 1996 when wildlife became a co-equal objective with soil and water. Extensive research on the impacts of CRP has indicated that this program has dramatic positive impacts on many species of wildlife, especially grassland-associated species including pheasants and waterfowl.

Producers enrolling in CRP can choose from a variety of CRP Conservation Practices (which are different from the NRCS National Conservation Practice Standards) and participate in special programs including the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement program. The 2014 Farm Bill sets the national cap for CRP at 24 million acres by 2017.

Pete Berthelsen

The 2014 Farm Bill eliminated the contract option under the Grassland Reserve Program, but added authority for up to 2 million acres of working grasslands in CRP. These enrollments do not require a cropping history and allow haying and grazing as part of the original conservation plan. Additional ranking and implementation details were still pending at press time for this guide.

CRP Options

CRP General Sign-up

Participants can offer land for CRP general sign-up enrollment only during designated sign-up periods announced by the Secretary of Agriculture. Historically this has occurred on an annual basis, but acreage cap reductions may impact sign-up opportunities in the coming years. The general sign-up is focused on larger tracts and, depending upon ecological site conditions, may be established to grass, forbs, shrubs, or trees. Three-quarters of the acres currently in CRP are enrolled under the general sign-up, and applications during the general sign-up are competitive. To be eligible, the offered land must be in a national or state priority area or have highly erodible cropland with an erosion index (EI) of 8 or greater, and be land that has been cropped for four of six years between 2008 and 2013.

Ranking CRP General Sign-up Offers

Offers for CRP contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). FSA collects data for each of the EBI factors such as wildlife habitat, water quality, and air quality based on the relative environmental benefits from the land offered. Each eligible offer is ranked in comparison to all other offers nationwide, and selections are made from that ranking.

Landowners enrolled in CRP are required to conduct mid-contract management as part of their contract. Practices such as inter-seeding, and prescribed fire rejuvenate vegetative cover, and on some CRP practices, landowners are periodically allowed to hay or graze. Partner providers can help ensure that these management practices are implemented in a way that is beneficial to wildlife.

Continuous CRP (CCRP) Sign-up

Environmentally sensitive land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time under CCRP sign-up. This includes, but is not limited to, pastureland or agricultural land that borders lakes, river or stream banks; crop field margins; and cropland that can provide habitat for priority wildlife and pollinators. Certain eligibility requirements still apply, but offers are not subject to competitive bidding. Instead they are selected based on the type of conservation practice the landowner chooses to install.

Wildlife Benefits of General Sign-up CRP

Because general CRP typically enrolls larger tracts of land, it is an essential habitat tool for area-sensitive species in agricultural landscapes. Practices like native grass (CP2), wildlife habitat (CP4D), properly thinned longleaf pine (CP3A), and rare and declining habitat (CP25) often provide the highest quality habitat in general sign-ups.

Pete Berthelsen

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a CRP option that helps agricultural producers protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water. CREP projects are usually focused on conservation practices such as filter strips and forested buffers that help protect streams, lakes, and rivers from sedimentation and agricultural runoff in addition to providing wildlife habitat. This program is conducted in partnership with producers, tribal and state governments, and in some cases private groups.

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

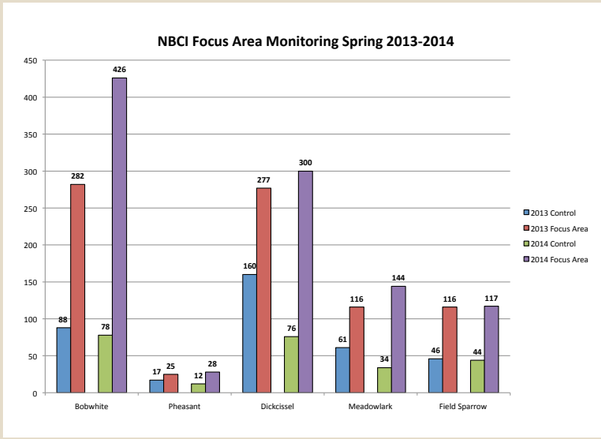
State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) is a CRP initiative to address state and regional high-priority wildlife objectives. Wildlife needs and conservation priorities vary across regions, so SAFE allows local and regional conservation groups, government agencies, agricultural producers, and others with first-hand knowledge to design SAFE projects that help address the needs of high-priority species. When enrolled in SAFE, producers establish and manage habitat according to a SAFE project's specifications.

Case Study

Bobwhite Habitat Restoration

In Northwest Missouri, quail populations have increased significantly after several years of habitat restoration on private land. The Missouri Department of Conservation, FSA, and NRCS jointly targeted resources in a 5,200-acre Quail Focus Area. Over one-third of the area is enrolled in CRP, nearly half of which is in the native grasses and forbs preferred by quail. Some of the remaining non-native enrollments will be enhanced in the near future, converting to practices like CP33 (Buffers for Upland Birds) and SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement). The partners have used EQIP and other funds to do additional management, including over eight miles of edge feathering and 40 miles of cool season grass eradication to create woody escape habitat. All of this hard work has translated into real results for bobwhites and grassland birds in the Focus Area.

Bryan Eastham



Wildlife Benefits of CCRP

Many of the CCRP practices and initiatives are specifically designed to benefit priority fish and wildlife. Here are some of the most beneficial options, including acreage allocations as of 2015, and examples of how the practices have worked in different states.


Brian Sauer, IA DNR

Floodplain Wetland Restoration Initiative

CP 23

CRP's Wetland Restoration practice (CP23) helps producers restore the functions and values of floodplain wetlands that have been converted to agriculture. Restoring wetlands and associated surrounding upland vegetation has numerous water quality and wildlife habitat benefits. Iowa has been a national enrollment leader for this popular practice, using CP23 to create habitat like this oxbow along the Turkey River in Winneshiek County.

Allocated acres: 531,400

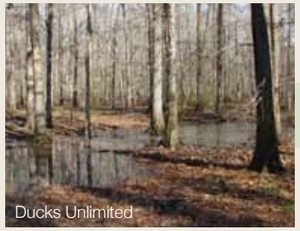

Prairie Pothole Joint Venture

Non-floodplain & Playa Wetland Restoration Initiative

CP 23a

Over 90 percent of the wetlands in South Dakota are only wet for a short time period in the spring, and approximately 58 percent of these wetlands are farmed. CP23A restores these cropped wetlands to natural hydrologic and vegetative cover along with a grassland buffer ratio up to four acres of upland to one acre of wetland. Pairing grasslands with these wetlands provides some of the most productive waterfowl nesting habitat on the continent.

Allocated acres: 418,600


Ducks Unlimited

Bottomland Hardwood Initiative

CP 31

Designed for the lower Mississippi Watershed nearly all of the more than 100,000 acres enrolled in CP31 are in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Bottomland hardwood trees and shrubs can provide wildlife habitat, prevent soil erosion, protect water quality, provide recreational opportunities, and produce wood fiber. When planned in conjunction with forested riparian buffers they can also provide critical travel corridors for wildlife.

Allocated acres: 250,000


Pete Berthelsen

Upland Bird Habitat Buffers

CP 33

Bobwhite quail and other upland wildlife use transition zones (habitat edges) between cover types such as crops, hedgerows, and woodlots. CP33 provides critical habitat by creating a "soft edge" of grasses, legumes, and wildflowers that wildlife utilize for foraging, nesting, brood rearing, and escape/winter cover. Over 14 states, breeding bobwhite densities were 70 to 75 percent greater around CP33 buffered fields than around unbuffered crop fields.

Allocated acres: 500,000


The Missouri Department of Conservation used CCRP funding for this riparian corridor planting. The landowner has since started a number of other conservation projects funded in part by Crawford County Soil and Water Conservation District, U.S. Forest Service, Fishers and Farmers Partnership, Ozark Regional Land Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and MDC. Photo by Missouri Department of Conservation.


Bridget Collins

Longleaf Pine Initiative

CP 36

CP36 has helped landowners replant longleaf pines and associated warm season grasses throughout the Southeast - over 100,000 acres in Georgia alone. Many of the conservation practices that support longleaf pine forest health also benefit the gopher tortoise, a federally listed threatened species, including: forest stand improvement, prescribed burning, restoration and management of rare or declining habitats, and tree/shrub establishment.

Allocated acres: 250,000


NDGF

Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative

CP 37

Biologists estimate that CP37 has increased duck numbers by 90,000 birds annually in the Prairie Pothole Region. In North Dakota, partners have helped enroll over 70,000 acres of CP37 – the state game & fish department provides a one-time incentive of $2 to $6 per acre and up to 50 percent cost-share for management practices, and Ducks Unlimited provides 25 percent of wetland restoration costs.

Allocated acres: 300,000


Gary Wise

Pollinator Habitat Initiative

CP 42

More than one-third of our food and 80 percent of all plants require pollination. CP42 provides areas of nectar and pollen that are critically important for native pollinators and managed honey bees that are essential for agriculture. In addition, grassland birds utilize wildflower seeds and insects as food sources important for survival and reproduction.

Allocated acres: 100,000

SAFE & CREP


Sal Palazzolo

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement

SAFE-CP 38

Allocated acres: 1.35 million

Idaho supports more than 60 percent of the remaining Columbian sharp-tailed grouse population in the U.S., and about 70 percent of habitat in the state is on private land. Of the 172 new sharp-tail breeding grounds found in southeastern Idaho from 1995-1998, more than 80 percent were in CRP. To help keep habitat on the ground, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game reached out to FSA to create the Idaho Columbian sharp-tailed grouse SAFE project. The state is on track to sign up all of its 117,300 allocated acres – benefitting both producers and wildlife.

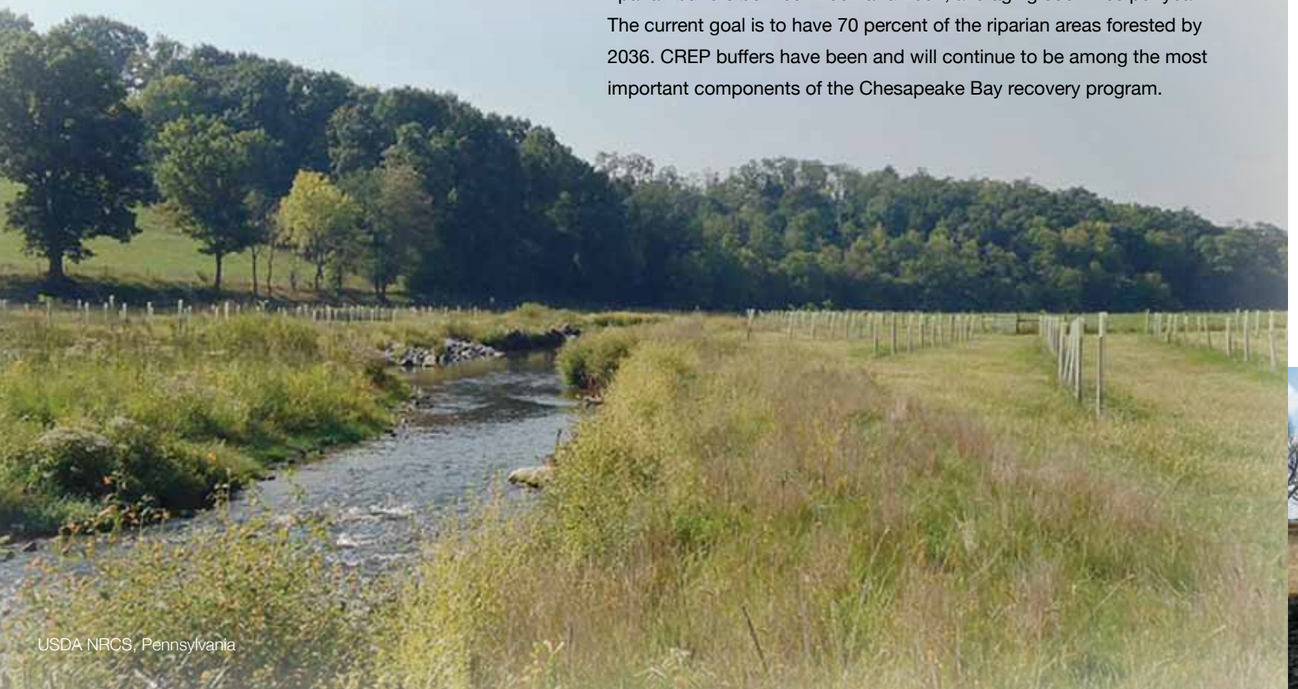

USDA NRCS

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

CREP

Allocated acres: 1.2 million

Riparian forest buffers have been a critical component of efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay, proving effective at capturing excessive nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment from farm field runoff. Since the first Chesapeake Bay recovery goals were set, over 7,000 miles of forest buffers have been planted in the Bay watershed, many with support from USDA's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Maryland's CREP project was the nation's first and was followed by similar cost-share programs in Virginia and Pennsylvania. The USDA partnership agreements and USDA cost-share assistance allowed Chesapeake Bay partners to restore over 4,000 miles of riparian buffers between 2002 and 2007, averaging 830 miles per year. The current goal is to have 70 percent of the riparian areas forested by 2036. CREP buffers have been and will continue to be among the most important components of the Chesapeake Bay recovery program.


USDA NRCS, Pennsylvania

CRP Details

- ***Annual Rental Payments*** – In return for establishing and maintaining resource conserving covers for 10-15 years, FSA provides annual rental payments to participants. FSA bases rental rates on the relative productivity of the soils found on the contract acreage and their average dryland cash rent or cash rent equivalent. The maximum CRP rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted.

- ***Cost-share Assistance*** – Participants who establish approved cover on eligible cropland can receive cost-share assistance up to 50 percent of the participant's costs. Participants also receive 50 percent cost-share for conducting required mid-contract management activities to maintain or improve plant diversity and wildlife benefits. Disturbance activities such as disking or prescribed burning can set back vegetative succession and further enhance benefits to wildlife. Increasing plant diversity and incorporating species like legumes also improve soil health by building nutrients and organic matter.

- ***Other Incentives*** – FSA may offer additional financial incentives through increased rental rates, additional cost-share, or sign-up bonus payments on many wildlife-friendly continuous CRP practices. A new tree thinning and management incentive ($10 million) could encourage habitat improvement on older CRP tree contracts. Other incentives and cost-share may be available from state or local partners.


Pete Berthelsen

Eligibility

To be eligible for CRP enrollment, a participant must have owned or operated the land for at least 12 months prior to close of the CRP sign-up period. The offered land must be either:

- Cropland (including field margins) that is planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity four of the previous six crop years from 2008-2013, and which is physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity; or

- Certain pastureland bordering lakes, streams, or rivers that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer or for similar water quality purposes.

How to Apply

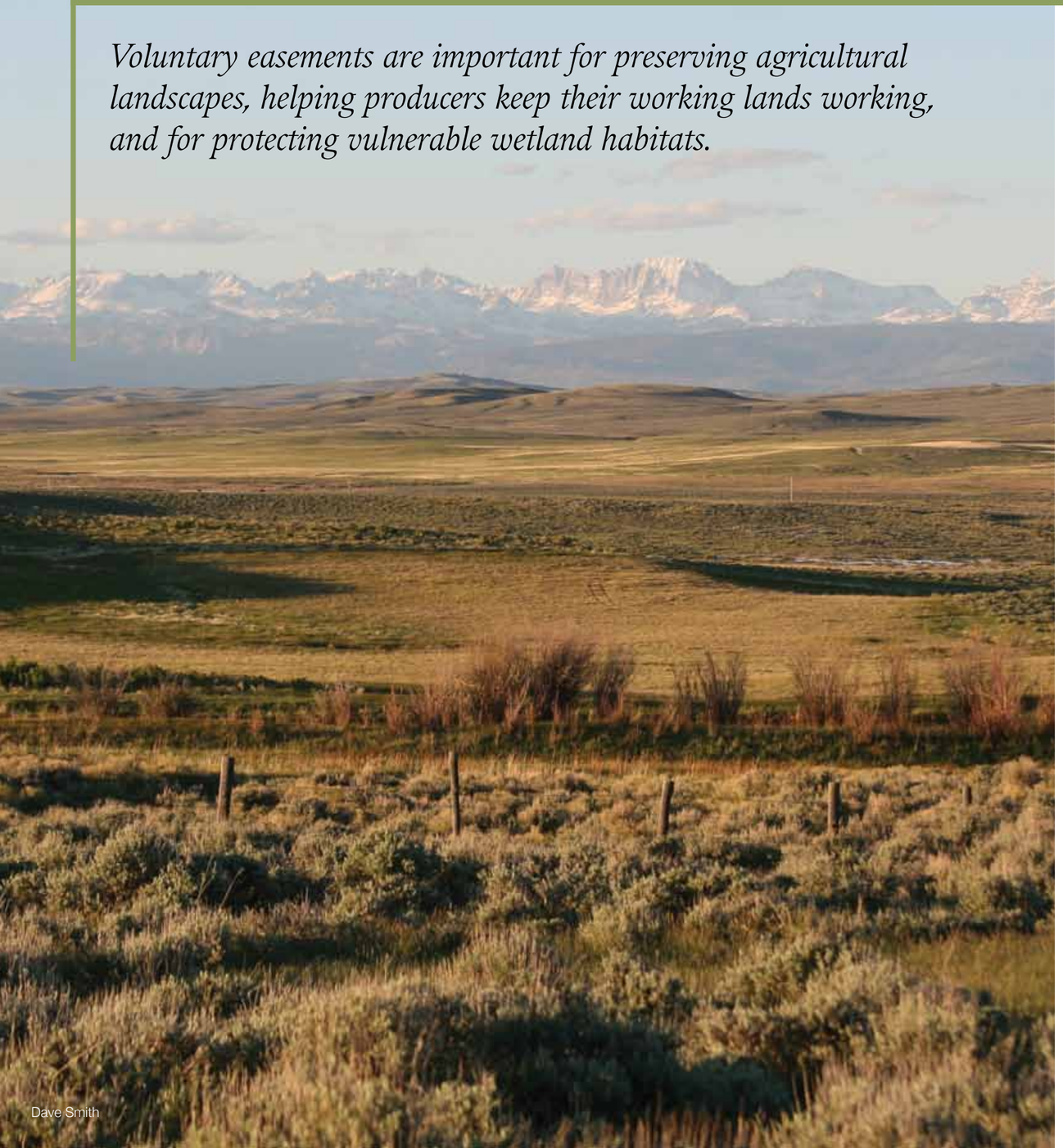
CRP is administered by FSA, though NRCS oversees land eligibility and technical aspects, and local partners assist with conservation planning and implementation on the ground. General sign-ups are announced periodically when the number of enrolled acres drops sufficiently below the congressionally authorized enrollment caps. Continuous practice sign-ups are available year round. Applications are obtained at local FSA Field Offices.

CRP Resources *(see page 56)*

CRP Site
FSA Service Center Locator
CRP Sign-Up Information
CREP Information
SAFE Information

Easements

Voluntary easements are important for preserving agricultural landscapes, helping producers keep their working lands working, and for protecting vulnerable wetland habitats.



Dave Smith

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement that restricts development and uses of a landowner's property in order to protect certain functions and resource values. Voluntary easements are important for preserving agricultural landscapes, helping producers keep their working lands working, and for protecting vulnerable wetland habitats.

The 2014 Farm Bill's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands, grasslands, and wetlands and their related benefits. Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) within ACEP fulfill the vision of the former Wetlands Reserve Program, which was eliminated in the 2014 Farm Bill. The new Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program within ACEP provides public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, and protection of wildlife habitat and open space. ALE is designed to carry on the legacy of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), easement programs that were used successfully to conserve key fish and wildlife habitats. The ACEP program is authorized annually between $250 and $500 million.

In addition to ACEP, the 2014 Farm Bill continues the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) under the Forestry title of the bill. This program helps landowners restore, enhance, and protect private forestland resources through easements and financial assistance. The purpose of HFRP is to restore and protect forest ecosystems to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species, candidate species, state-listed species or species of special concern. In the 2014 Farm Bill, the program was authorized to receive annual appropriations up to $12 million per year, and is a covered program under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Jay and his father Jim Yust worked with the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT), Great Outdoors Colorado, and the Sage Grouse Initiative to put conservation easements on their property next to the Colorado River, near Kremmling. The Yust ranch dates to 1884 and includes vital riverside land along with sagebrush uplands that harbor sage grouse. Photo by Deborah Richie, Sage Grouse Initiative.

"For us, it's always been about staying in agriculture, protecting wildlife, and restricting the development we don't want anyway." ~Jay Yust

ACEP - Wetland Reserve Easements

John Ranlett

Case Study

Easements Protect Working Wet Meadows

The Southern Oregon and Northeastern California (SONEC) region is one of the most important spring migration areas in North America, supporting 80 percent of the Pacific Flyway's northern pintails and a total of 4.9 million dabbling ducks during their journey to the breeding grounds of prairie Canada and Alaska. The birds are heavily dependent upon privately owned, flood-irrigated wet meadows that ranchers use later in the year for grazing and hay production. These "working wet meadows" are managed to mimic natural wetland dynamics and disturbance processes, providing shallow water conditions with abundant food sources.

California NRCS is effectively utilizing the ACEP Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) Reserved Grazing Rights provision to help landowners protect, restore, and manage these important habitats on their working ranches. The ALE Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) program will likely fill a similar niche on the working hay meadows of southern Oregon that provide outstanding spring migration habitat but have not fit the WRE model due to the need for landowners to hay their wet meadows each summer. SONEC is the region in which working wet meadows provide the most important migratory bird habitat, but ALE-GSS will likely also prove to be an excellent tool for conserving high-value wet meadows elsewhere in the Intermountain West, and other grasslands throughout the country.

The new ACEP - Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) option will continue to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners and tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands. Under WRE, landowners sell most of their land use rights (e.g., cropping, grazing, haying, timber harvest, subdivision, etc.) to USDA, which holds the easement, while retaining hunting, fishing, and quiet recreational use rights. In addition, they cannot place structures on the easement or otherwise impact wetland functions and values. Grazing and timber management, along with other uses, can be authorized by NRCS on a case-by-case basis if it is deemed compatible with the easement's wetland values. WRE also includes a Reserved Grazing Rights provision that allows landowners, under certain circumstances, to enroll without selling their grazing rights to those lands. This option has been successfully utilized since 2008 in portions of the Intermountain West.

Types of Wetland Reserve Easements

For wetland reserve easements, NRCS pays the value of the easement plus all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance. NRCS may enroll eligible land in WRE through:

Permanent Easements – Permanent Easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs.

Term Easements – Term easements are easements that are for the maximum duration allowed under applicable state laws that do not allow permanent easements. NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

30-year Easements – 30-year easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

30-year Contracts – 30-year contracts are only available to enroll acreage owned by Indian tribes, and program payment rates are commensurate with 30-year easements.

Agricultural Land Easements

Through ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), USDA typically provides conservation partners with 50 percent of the cost of an easement protecting a farm or ranch threatened by development or sodbusting.

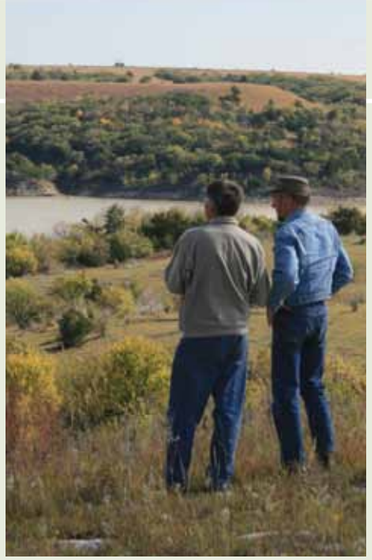
The 2014 Farm Bill created two important provisions under ACEP-ALE. First, it created an ALE Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) designation intended to continue the grassland protection previously implemented through the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). Under GSS, the USDA cost-share can increase from 50 percent to up to 75 percent. The primary difference between ALE-GSS and GRP is that all ALE deeds must be held by eligible entities whereas NRCS was authorized to hold GRP deeds.

Second, it created ALE "projects of special significance," where USDA can reduce an eligible entity's required cash contribution with a corresponding increase in landowner donation, provided the donation is voluntary and the land is in active agricultural production. Additional policy details on the implementation of these two options are available from NRCS.

Case Study

A Win-Win Partnership for Grasslands

The Haines family's 1,250-acre ranch near Tuttle Creek Reservoir in the Flint Hills of Kansas is an excellent example of using the former Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) to benefit producers and communities, as well as wildlife. The Haines family lease their land for cattle grazing and use prescribed fire to manage juniper encroachment, improve range conditions, and benefit greater prairie chicken habitat. Increasing development in the area has made prescribed burns more complicated each year, threatening the long-term survival of this tallgrass prairie ecosystem. Fort Riley, a 100,000-acre Army installation nearby, shared the Haines' concerns over development pressures, and has aimed to establish a 50,000-acre buffer zone and wildlife migration corridor. In a win-win collaboration, the Kansas Land Trust helped the Haines family secure a perpetual easement on their ranch with funding from FRPP and the Army Compatible Use Buffer program. Similar collaborative easements are anticipated under the new ALE program.



Kansas NRCS Staff, Lynn Thurlow and landowner Bob Haines look over his property in the Flint Hills. Photo by Jerry Jost, Kansas Land Trust.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program

NRCS and other partners in Maine have used HFRP to make significant progress in protecting Canada lynx habitat. Over 500,000 acres of working forest are being managed for the benefit of the lynx, through contracts or easements. In addition, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are conducting lynx surveys to determine lynx distribution, population estimates, and productivity in the state including the pictured research project on lynx kittens. Photo by James Weliver, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) specifically targets projects to protect or improve habitat for state or federally listed threatened and endangered species. Additional consideration for enrollment can be given to eligible land that will improve biodiversity and increase carbon sequestration. Safe Harbor provisions of the Endangered Species Act or Candidate Conservation Agreements are sought for participants enrolled in the HFRP who agree, for a specified period, to restore or improve their land for threatened or endangered species habitat. In exchange, they avoid future regulatory restrictions on the use of that land.

HFRP provides landowners with 10-year restoration agreements and permanent easements for specific conservation actions. For acreage owned by an Indian tribe, there is an additional enrollment option of a 30-year contract. Some landowners may avoid regulatory restrictions under the Endangered Species Act by restoring or improving habitat on their land for a specified period of time. Not more than 40 percent of program funding can be used for cost-share agreements, and not more than 60 percent may be used for easements.

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program falls under Title VIII (Forestry) of the Farm Bill, not the conservation title. The program is authorized at $12 million for each year until 2018, but Congress controls the specific funding level each year. HFRP is a covered program under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, however, and its functions may be carried out under an RCPP project, even if the program overall does not have funding.

Easement Program Details

ACEP-WRE Eligibility

- Lands eligible for wetland reserve easements consist of farmed wetlands or wetlands converted before December 23, 1985; croplands flooded by the natural overflow of a closed basin lake or pothole; expiring CRP with high wetland values that is likely to return to production; riparian areas linking wetlands, and other incidental wetlands; and upland areas needed to improve wetland function or efficient administration of the easement, and that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored. NRCS will prioritize applications based on the easement's potential for protecting and enhancing habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife.

- To enroll land through wetland reserve easements, NRCS enters into purchase agreements with eligible private landowners or Indian tribes that include the right for NRCS to develop and implement a wetland reserve restoration easement plan. This plan restores, protects, and enhances the wetland's functions and values.

ACEP-ALE Eligibility

- Land eligible for agricultural land easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland, and non-industrial private forestland. These lands must either: contain prime, unique or productive soil; historical or archeological resources; protect grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring or conserving the land including expiring CRP; or further a state or local policy consistent with the purposes of this program. NRCS will prioritize applications that protect agricultural uses and related conservation values of the land and those that maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to agricultural use.

- To enroll land through agricultural land easements, NRCS enters into agreements with eligible partners. Each easement is required to have an agricultural land easement plan that promotes the long-term viability of the land.

- The value of agricultural land easements is determined by an appraisal using an industry-approved method, selected by the eligible entity and approved by the USDA. In general under ALE, USDA will provide 50 percent of the value of the easement and the entities facilitating the conservation easement must provide the remainder. The cooperating entity can include a landowner's donation as part of their 50 percent share as long as the entity's remaining cash contribution is at least half of the USDA share. Agricultural land easements are either permanent or the maximum length allowed by state law.

HFRP Eligibility

- Lands offered must be privately owned or owned by Indian tribes and restore, enhance, or otherwise measurably improve the well being of a federally listed threatened or endangered species or other special concern species; improve biological diversity; or increase carbon sequestration.

USDA NRCS


Prairie Pothole Joint Venture

How to Apply

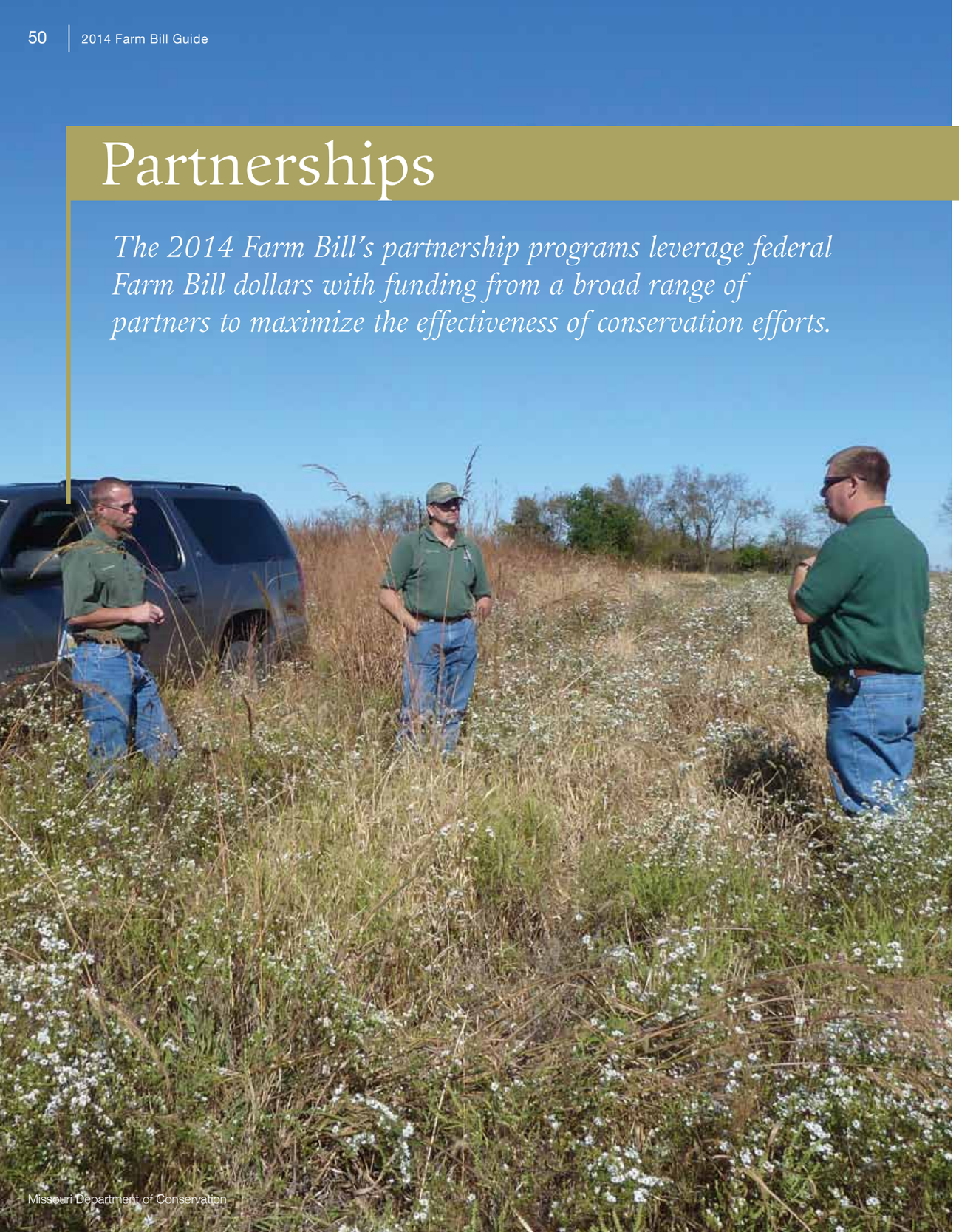
NRCS administers all of the easement programs so assistance and enrollment information can be obtained through local USDA Service Centers. For Agricultural Land Easements, landowners work with eligible partners who submit easement proposals to NRCS.

Easement Program Resources *(see page 56)*

ACEP Site
HFRP Site

Partnerships

The 2014 Farm Bill's partnership programs leverage federal Farm Bill dollars with funding from a broad range of partners to maximize the effectiveness of conservation efforts.



Missouri Department of Conservation

Investments for Partnerships

The 2014 Farm Bill recognizes the potential of partnerships to drive successful private land conservation efforts. The 2014 Farm Bill's partnership programs leverage federal Farm Bill dollars with funding from a broad range of partners to maximize the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a new program that consolidates the authorities from four former conservation programs – the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, and the Great Lakes Basin Program. It also directs a percentage of funding from other working lands and easement programs toward these partnership efforts. RCPP is intended to leverage work and funding from partners across the country to maximize conservation impacts at the regional or watershed scale.

Private lands can provide outstanding hunting and fishing opportunities – but often these lands aren't available to the public. To encourage private landowners to allow public access, many states have developed walk-in access programs that provide payments, habitat enhancements, or other assistance to landowners that allow access. The 2014 Farm Bill reauthorized the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program, to support these state efforts – an investment that is paying dividends as states offer more recreational access.

Several RCPP funded projects in the Pacific Northwest will focus on water quality and quantity, habitat conservation, irrigation efficiency, and other efforts to support restoration of native salmon and steelhead populations. Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"As venture capitalists provide financial resources to burgeoning, high-potential growth startups, USDA must lead in a new venture conservationist movement that empowers and launches new, high-opportunity startup partnerships that deliver locally-led conservation solutions." ~NRCS Chief Jason Weller

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Nature Conservancy's Shield Ranch near Camp Verde, Arizona. TNC and its partners in the Verde River Valley were selected to receive RCPP funding for their efforts to improve irrigation water management and delivery, enhance riparian habitat, and protect agricultural lands through conservation easements. Photo by Chris Bertrand, The Nature Conservancy.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is administered by NRCS, but delivers assistance through project-specific partnerships designed around RCPP's four covered programs (EQIP, CSP, ACEP and HFRP). The program is authorized to receive $100 million per year in addition to 7 percent of the covered programs' funding. Over the five years that the Farm Bill is authorized, this is anticipated to be about $1.2 billion in federal funding for RCPP. While there is no specific match requirement, partners are expected to make a "significant contribution" to the overall cost of the project. USDA anticipates that their investment will be doubled to a total of $2.4 billion through matching funds.

Funding is offered through a competitive application process with proposals evaluated based on four criteria: solutions, contributions, innovation, and participation.

However, RCPP is not a grants program. In most cases, funding is provided to landowners through the normal process of Farm Bill program contracts. RCPP provides partners the flexibility to suggest programmatic adjustments needed to attain desired outcomes and encourages the innovative meshing of multiple programs to produce solutions to natural resource concerns.

RCPP is a new, comprehensive and flexible program that uses partnerships to stretch and multiply conservation investments and reach conservation goals on a regional or watershed scale.

RCPP Projects are Considered within Three Different Funding Pools

Critical Conservation Areas – the Secretary of Agriculture has outlined eight critical conservation areas. These regions represent an opportunity for many stakeholders to come together at the regional level to address natural resource goals while maintaining or improving agricultural productivity; 35 percent of RCPP funding will be targeted towards these areas:

- Chesapeake Bay Watershed
- Great Lakes Region
- Mississippi River Basin
- Colorado River Basin
- Longleaf Pine Range
- Columbia River Basin
- Prairie Grasslands Region
- California Bay Delta

National – 40 percent of RCPP funding will be directed towards projects that address multi-state or national conservation priorities including:

- Water Quantity
- Water Quality
- Soil Health
- At-risk species habitat
- Air Quality

State – 25 percent of funds will be dedicated for state-identified conservation concerns. NRCS State Conservationists will identify state priorities, with advice from the State Technical Committees and Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils. Applications competing under the state funding pool should address these state priorities and should be located entirely within one state.

Case Study

First Round of RCPP Projects Funded

In January 2015, USDA announced that 115 projects in all 50 states and Puerto Rico were selected to receive a total of $370 million through the first funding round of RCPP, leveraging approximately $400 million more in partner contributions. Partner organizations including state fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, non-profit wildlife conservation organizations, conservation districts, and agricultural agencies and organizations will be taking the lead on RCPP projects.

Bill Hubick

The process was highly competitive with over 600 pre-proposals and 200 full proposals submitted to NRCS before the final projects were chosen. Some projects focus on drought resiliency, protecting drinking water, and improving water quality and soil health. Others focus on at-risk species such as sage grouse, cerulean warblers, and gopher tortoise as well as economically important species like pheasants, waterfowl, and many others. While specific results from the first round of projects funded by RCPP remain to be seen, the breadth of projects selected and the strong interest in the program suggest that it will be highly effective for local conservation efforts.

RCPP Details

The USA Rice Federation and Ducks Unlimited, working together in the Rice Stewardship Partnership, received RCPP funding to improve habitat for migratory birds. Winter flooding of rice fields slows runoff which decreases sedimentation and nitrification, provides habitat for a variety of migratory birds and wetland-dependent species, and helps to decompose straw mass which decreases input costs and fuel use of mechanical decomposition. Photo by Ducks Unlimited.

Partnership Agreements

Applicants of successful proposals will enter into partnership agreements with NRCS that define the scope of the project including the activities that will be implemented; the operation(s) that will be covered; the geographic area it will entail; and how outreach, planning, and assessment will be accomplished. Partnership agreements may be for a period of up to five years, though NRCS can extend an agreement one time for an additional 12 months if needed to meet the objectives of the program.

Eligibility

Eligible Partners - Agricultural or silvicultural producer associations, farmer cooperatives or other groups of producers, state or local governments, Indian tribes, municipal water treatment entities, water and irrigation districts, conservation-driven nongovernmental organizations and institutions of higher education.

Eligible Participants - Under RCPP, eligible producers and landowners of agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland may enter into conservation program contracts or easement agreements under the framework of a partnership agreement.

How to Apply

NRCS will issue an Announcement for Program Funding each year that will outline requirements for proposal applications. Eligible partners may submit applications following the framework outlined in the APF. Producers may also submit applications either directly through their USDA Service Center, or working with a partner in a selected project area.

RCPP Resources *(see page 56)*

RCPP Site
RCPP Critical Conservation Areas
RCPP State Resource Concerns
NRCS “Strengths and Opportunities” from 2014 RCPP Applications

VPA-HIP

Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

The 2014 Farm Bill continues the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) that helps states fund recreational access and habitat improvement programs. Total funding for VPA-HIP under the 2014 Farm Bill is authorized at $40 million.

States and Indian tribes may apply to use VPA-HIP grant funding to expand or create public access programs or provide incentives to improve habitat on land enrolled in their public access programs. These incentives may include providing rental payments or technical and conservation services to landowners who allow the public to hunt, fish, or participate in other compatible wildlife-dependent recreation on their land.

NRCS administers the grants on behalf of the Commodity Credit Corporation and solicits proposals in periodic announcements for program funding.

Turkey hunters in Illinois take advantage of a private land walk-in access opportunity funded in part through VPA-HIP. Photo by Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Case Study

Public Access to Private Lands – The Economic Impact of VPA-HIP

In 2012, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies assessed the economic impacts of the VPA-HIP program. Thirteen state fish and wildlife agencies received just over $9 million to secure recreational access to private lands in 2011. In total, 1,932 landowners voluntarily enrolled their property in state public access programs that year supporting over 970,000 acres for public hunting, fishing, and related recreation. In all 13 states, it is estimated that more than 24,000 recreational users took advantage of the new opportunities opened by VPA-HIP spending $18.2 million.

For example, Nebraska’s Open Fields and Waters Program, funded in part by $370,000 from VPA-HIP, enrolled an additional 74,175 acres of land and water, as well as eight miles of stream for public use. Based on user surveys, this is estimated to have generated more than $1.6 million of in-state trip- and equipment-related spending in 2011.

Resources

Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/nra/ceap/
CEAP Wildlife National Assessment - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/nra/ceap/?cid=nrcs143_014151
CEAP Analysis on CP33 Response - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs143_013397.pdf
Conservation Practice Standards - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/references/?cid=nrcsdev11_001020
FSA Agency History - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=about&subject=landing&topic=ham-ah
National Ag Law Center - http://nationalaglawcenter.org/farmbills
National Association of Conservation Districts - http://www.nacdnet.org
NRCS Agency History - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=nrcs143_021392
NRCS Conservation Practices - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/references/?cid=nrcsdev11_001020
NRCS Field Office Technical Guides - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/fotg/
NRCS Local Working Groups - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ga/home/?cid=nrcs144p2_021828
NRCS State Technical Committee - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/stc/
USDA Service Centers - http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app

Conservation Compliance Resources (page 23)

NRCS Conservation Compliance Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/?cid=stelprdb1257899
FSA Conservation Compliance Site - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/payment-eligibility/conservation_compliance/index
AD-1026 Form - http://forms.sc.egov.usda.gov/efcommon/eFileServices/eForms/AD1026.PDF

EQIP Resources (page 31)

EQIP Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=stelprdb1044009
CIG Program Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig/
EQIP Application by State - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcs143_008223
Conservation Activity Plan - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=stelprdb1262227
List of Conservation Practices - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/home/?cid=nrcs143_026849

Conservation Stewardship Resources (page 33)

CSP Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/csp/?cid=nrcs143_008316
CSP Self-screening Checklist - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSConsumption/download?cid=stelprdb1269861&ext=pdf
CSP Enhancement Activity Job Sheets - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/csp/?cid=stelprdb1265825

CRP Resources (page 41)

CRP Site - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index
CRP Sign-Up Information - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/crp-general-sign-up/index
CREP Information - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-enhancement/index
SAFE Information - http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=pfs&newstype=prfactsheet&type=detail&item=pf_20141125_consv_en_safe.html

ACEP Resources (page 49)

ACEP Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/acep/
HFRP Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/forests/

RCPP Resources (page 54)

RCPP Site - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/
RCPP Critical Conservation Areas - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1254053
RCPP State Resource Concerns - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1254189
NRCS "Strengths and Opportunities" from 2014 RCPP Applications - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1259856

Acronyms - (in alphabetical order)

ACEP Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
ALE Agricultural Land Easement
CAP Conservation Activity Plan
CEAP Conservation Effects Assessment Project
CIG Conservation Innovation Grants
CMT Conservation Measurement Tool
CP Conservation Practice
CREP Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
CRP Conservation Reserve Program
CSP Conservation Stewardship Program
CCRP Continuous Conservation Reserve Program
EQIP Environmental Quality Incentives Program
ESA Endangered Species Act
FSA Farm Service Agency
FWS Fish and Wildlife Service
GSS Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance
HFRP Healthy Forests Reserve Program
HELC Highly Erodible Land Conservation
LWG Local Working Group
NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service
NGO Nongovernmental Organizations
RCPP Regional Conservation Partnership Program
SGI Sage Grouse Initiative
SAFE State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement
STC State Technical Committee
TSP Technical Service Provider
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
VPA-HIP Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program
WC Wetland Conservation
WRE Wetland Reserve Easements

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