



CONSERVATION TITLE

Sustainable Agriculture Agenda for the 2007 Farm Bill

Background:

Our conservation programs must better serve not only our farmers and ranchers but also rural communities and all citizens who want improvements in environmental performance through systems of agricultural production that are sustainable in the long-term. Though numerous, the existing farm bill conservation programs are both splintered and oversubscribed. The 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity to strengthen the entire conservation portfolio through better coordination of conservation program delivery, individual program reforms, and significant funding increases to catch up with farmer demand and environmental needs and opportunities.

Specific Policy Recommendations:

- ***Conservation Security Program*** – The CSP is considered in a separate summary.
- ***Cooperative Conservation Partnerships*** -- The Farm Bill's Partnership and Cooperation Initiative should be reauthorized as the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and significantly strengthened. The new CCPI will support special projects through which multiple producers will address specific local natural resource concerns and community development opportunities in partnership with state agencies, producer associations, non-governmental organizations, extension, and others. The full range of resource concerns should be eligible and the program should be administered primarily through the State Natural Resources Conservation Service Offices. Each state should be allowed to spend up to 30 percent of its funding allocation on these partnerships, including multi-state projects where appropriate. Outreach and technical assistance would flow through the partnership, while USDA would continue to provide the direct financial assistance to the producer.
- ***Environmental Quality Incentives Program*** -- EQIP should be amended to restore provisions that ensured that its overall effects on the environment are positive, including a reasonable payment limitation. The cap should be reduced from \$450,000 to \$150,000 in any 5-year period. Progressive conservation planning requirements should be restored and the emphasis on cost effectiveness should be strengthened. Payments should not be made to build or expand confined industrial livestock facilities. New provisions should promote conservation and farming systems that minimize energy consumption and emphasize pollution prevention. Incentives and funding allocations for ecologically-based pest management and organic farming systems should be increased. These measures will provide for a more equitable distribution of EQIP funding and increase net long-term environmental benefits.
- ***Conservation Compliance*** -- The existing conservation compliance regime should be re-linked to the crop insurance program and expanded to cover all cropland eroding at unsustainable rates. Waiver guidelines should be strengthened and waivers made subject to independent review. A "sodsaver" provision should be enacted that prohibits program benefits on all native prairie and permanent grasslands which are converted to cropping.
- ***Wetlands Reserve Program*** -- Funding for the WRP should be replenished, with an enrollment directive of not less than 250,000 acres per year nationwide and a strong priority for permanent easements. Special incentives should be offered to landowners enrolled in the WRP or other easement programs to allow public access to the land as part of community development plans for hunting, fishing, hiking, birding, and other public recreational amenities.

- **Conservation Reserve Program** -- The CRP should be retained as the major land retirement program, with improvements to the environmental benefits index including much greater weight given to below-cost bids. At least 7 million acres, or 20 percent of total CRP acreage, whichever is greater, should be reserved for conservation buffer enrollments through the continuous CRP (CCRP) or CRP enhancement program (CREP). In light of the repeated renewal of many CRP contracts, voluntary long-term and permanent conservation easements on particularly environmentally sensitive land should be added as a new CRP option. Landowners leaving the CRP should have access to transition options, including CCRP, CSP, organic transition, and transfers to beginning farmers and ranchers with special incentives.

Talking Points:

- **Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative:** A partnership approach can both increase the overall local and regional benefits from federal conservation programs and also leverage and pool conservation funds and expertise in a focused manner. By emphasizing projects that have both conservation and community amenity benefits, the program can multiply its positive contribution. The Farm Bill should direct NRCS to implement it primarily through its State Offices, in coordination with State Technical Committees, to help build the capacity of local and regional organizations to partner with farmers and to ensure full utilization of the initiative.
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program:** EQIP is over-subscribed with many farmers and ranchers turned away with unmet conservation needs. It is unfair to have a relatively few CAFO producers receiving several hundred thousand dollars for capital infrastructure expansion while others are turned away. EQIP should be refocused to emphasize agricultural systems that reduce pollution, not systems that need high cost, high energy measures to control the massive amount of pollution generated.
- **Conservation Compliance:** Our native prairies and uncropped grasslands are significant and diminishing habitats already recognized in the Farm Bill through incentives for restoration in the Grasslands Reserve Program. In addition, the Conservation Reserve Program has provided billions of dollars to restore grasslands habitats that have been cropped. It is time to add to these provisions and diminish the need for them in the future by including a “sodsaver” provision that prohibits public subsidies to landowners who convert uncropped grassland and prairie for crop production.
- **Wetlands Reserve Program:** There is no question that public investment in wetland protection pays off through increased flood control, entrapment of sediment and other pollutants, and protection of critical fish and wildlife habitat. After this year, the WRP is out of money unless Congress acts to renew in the new farm bill.
- **Conservation Reserve Program:** Our flagship program for the retirement of agricultural land from intensive use should provide for voluntary permanent protection of the most environmentally sensitive land. The targeted use of the CRP ‘buffer initiative’ components can provide greater environmental benefits at lower cost than whole field removal. Landowners removing land from CRP when their contracts expire should be encouraged through incentives to sell or lease to beginning farmers and ranchers who, in turn, should be encouraged through the CSP or other conservation programs to retain much of the environmental value gained through the CRP.

For more information about this and other 2007 Farm Bill policy priorities of the **Sustainable Agriculture Coalition**, please contact Aimee Witteman at (202) 547-5754 or visit the Farm Bill Action Center at: www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org.