



Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation's 2018 Farm Bill Reauthorization Priorities

Every five years, Congress passes a bundle of legislation that sets national agriculture, nutrition, forestry, and conservation policy, commonly referred to as the "Farm Bill." Conservation programs created and funded through the Farm Bill are administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's [Farm Service Agency](#) and the [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#). A long-standing priority of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, the bipartisan Farm Bill enhances and strengthens vital programs important to hunters and anglers across the United States. With the current Farm Bill due to expire in September 2018, efforts to reauthorize this important legislation are underway. Listed below are CSF's recommendations for the 2018 Farm Bill reauthorization, highlighting key programs and provisions of importance to sportsmen and women across the country.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

A voluntary, incentive-based conservation program, ACEP provides financial and technical assistance to protect, restore, and enhance agricultural lands and wetlands through the purchase of easements. Wetland easements provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife, improve water quality by filtering sediment and chemicals, reduce flooding, and recharge groundwater. Agricultural easements also provide important conservation protections on working lands, including grasslands and forests that provide habitat for fish and wildlife.

CSF Recommends:

- Set baseline funding for ACEP at \$500 million per year.
- Allow non-USDA federal funds to be used as eligible match.
- Maximize ecosystem services through targeted placement of easements and other restoration practices that support habitat restoration and water quality goals.

Conservation Compliance

The 2014 Farm Bill re-coupled conservation compliance to crop insurance, offering crop insurance subsidies and other farm program benefits to farmers in exchange for agreeing to basic soil and wetland conservation provisions. These provisions have conserved more than 3 million acres of farmed wetlands and prevented 295 million tons of soil from eroding into rivers, lakes, and streams each year.

CSF Recommends:

- Maintain linkage between conservation compliance provisions, crop insurance premium subsidies, and other farm benefits.
- Better align crop insurance and conservation compliance by removing cover crop termination guidelines and instead manage cover crop issues through the [Good Farming Practices](#) process.

- Oppose efforts to weaken [Swampbuster](#), such as limiting the types of wetlands covered or reducing penalties for non-compliance.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

The CRP is a voluntary, incentive-based program for agricultural landowners. CRP pays eligible farmers and ranchers a yearly rental rate and cost-share assistance through 10 to 15-year contracts to restore cropland to grass cover, trees, or wetlands. These contracts reduce soil erosion and sedimentation in streams and lakes, improve water quality, establish wildlife habitat, and enhance forest and wetland resources. In addition these lands provide hunting opportunities throughout the country.

CSF Recommends:

- Increase CRP acreage cap beyond the current cap of 24 million to meet demand.
- Prioritize planting and managing ecologically beneficial vegetation, including expanding and creating conservation practices and programs that incorporate frequent disturbances, such as prescribed burning, tree thinning, and grazing, that encourage early successional habitats.
- Provide a minimum of \$10 million over the life of the Farm Bill to fund incentive payments for thinning and burning management of existing pine stands.
- Encourage USDA to increase the practices eligible for grazing if it is found to be ecologically-appropriate by USDA in consultation with the state wildlife agency.
- Allow for periodic general CRP sign ups to meet demand.
- Better align CRP funding to address regional water quality priorities.

Forestry

The Farm Bill contains programs that help private forest owners conduct conservation practices to improve wildlife habitat, protect water quality, and preserve the health of forests. One of these programs, the Healthy Forest Reserve Program, helps landowners restore, enhance, and protect forest resources on their lands through easements and financial assistance.

CSF Recommends

- Reauthorize the Healthy Forest Reserve Program with baseline funding of \$12 million per year.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

RCPP encourages partner organizations to leverage their own funds, along with RCPP grant funds, to collaborate with producers and landowners to increase the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife and related natural resources on regional or watershed scales. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and its partners assist producers in installing and maintaining conservation activities in selected project areas.

CSF Recommends:

- Reauthorize and maintain or increase baseline funding at \$100 million per year.
- Provide USDA with technical assistance and administrative funds to implement programs, using a fixed percentage of RCPP funding, as opposed to the current procedure where negotiations are made after a grant is awarded.

Sodsaver

Implemented in the 2014 Farm Bill, the Sodsaver provision reduces crop insurance support by 50% on native prairie converted to cropland for the first four years within Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Native prairies provide critically important habitat for wildlife and compose much of the breeding range for many migratory bird species.

CSF Recommends:

- Maintain and fully implement existing compliance provisions nationwide.
- Close the perennial crop loophole (or “alfalfa loophole”), where farmers convert native sod to plant perennial crops (such as alfalfa), introduced grasses, or any other non-annual crop that are not federally insured for 1 – 4 years. After planting uninsured crops for 1 – 4 years, producers are then able to plant an annual crop without being subject to Sodsaver disincentives for the years the land was planted to the non-annual crop. Therefore, we recommend that any native sod that is converted to cropland should be subject to Sodsaver disincentives for the first 4 years of federally insured crop production, whenever that may occur.

[Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program \(VPA-HIP\)](#)

A competitive grant program, VPA-HIP provides state and tribal governments with funds to increase public access to private lands for hunting and fishing, as well as other wildlife-dependent forms of recreation. Grants provide incentives to participating landowners to strengthen wildlife habitat improvement efforts on their land and to enroll in new or expanded programs that enhance public access to private lands for hunting and fishing, and other outdoor recreation activities.

CSF Recommends:

- Reauthorize the program at \$150 million of total funding over 5 years.
- Re-affirm the program’s priority of hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-compatible recreational activities.

Working Lands Programs

The [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) provides agricultural producers with financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on active production lands to provide cleaner water and air, healthier soil, better wildlife habitat, and improve agricultural operations.

The [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#) provides assistance to agricultural producers to maintain and improve existing conservation practices and adopt additional activities to address priority resource concerns on working lands.

CSF Recommends:

- Maintain or increase funding for Working Lands Programs.
- Rankings and payments should reward practices and enhancements with higher conservation benefits, whether they are generated from new or ongoing conservation work.
- Provide incentives for agricultural producers to adopt and implement site specific nutrient management plans.

- Over the life of the Farm Bill, increase the minimum amount of EQIP funds required to be used for wildlife habitat conservation practices to at least 10 percent annually.