



Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

2023 Farm Bill Priorities

In recognition of the role the Farm Bill plays in supporting fish and wildlife habitat conservation, and, as a result, quality opportunities for sportsmen and women, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation supports the continued investments designed to create robust Conservation and Forestry Titles. Between the unprecedented investment in voluntary and incentive-based private lands conservation efforts supported through Title II and the unparalleled opportunities to support active forest management on both public and private lands authorized through Title VIII, the Farm Bill represents the single greatest opportunity to support our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners while advancing critical conservation actions beyond the farm.

CSF Farm Bill Contacts

For more information, please contact Taylor Schmitz, CSF's Director of Federal Relations at tschmitz@congressionalsportsmen.org

New Initiatives and Foundational Efforts for 2023 Priorities:

Many of the Farm Bill's most successful programs and practices are the result of innovative thinking that continues to move conservation forward. As the sporting-conservation community continues to think creatively about conservation challenges, CSF is seeking to advance the following novel priorities in 2023:

- ★ Support the establishment of a **Forest Conservation Easement Program** (FCEP) within the Conservation Title to conserve private forestlands through voluntary conservation agreements. FCEP would incentivize landowners to keep forests as forests through either (1) Forest Land Easements (modeled after the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements) or (2) Forest Reserve Easements (expanded successor to the Healthy Forests Reserve Program).
- ★ Conduct an evaluation of the impacts of the current **AGI limits** on conservation objectives and consider their removal.
- ★ Support efforts to enhance the importance of Farm Bill conservation programs for **fisheries management and aquatic health**.
- ★ Expand upon recent efforts to promote wildlife habitat conservation along **big game migration corridors and winter range**.
 - Increase incentives for landowners whose properties meet definitions for big game winter range or migration corridors.
 - Encourage landowners to recognize the benefits of enrollment in conservation practices, particularly when the practice includes planting regionally appropriate native seed mixtures, as a food source for migrating and wintering big game that may reduce big game consumption of winter feed provided for cattle.

Conservation Title:

The voluntary, incentive-based programs authorized through the Farm Bill's Conservation Title represent the largest source of private lands conservation funding in the world. Each of these programs present unique opportunities to support our nation's producers while advancing conservation efforts designed to benefit soil health and water quality, address the conservation challenges created by a changing climate, and, most importantly for sportsmen and women, provide quality habitat for fish and wildlife both on-site and "downstream." Given the voluminous nature of the Conservation Title and its various programs, CSF distilled its priorities into the following program-specific focal areas:

★ Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – The Original Conservation Program

- Increase interest in program considering current commodity prices and below market rental rates by:
 - Increasing rental payments to levels that encourage participation, primarily on marginal acres that are poorly suited to crop production or support a critical conservation need.
 - Improving Practice Incentive Payments. Improving technical assistance opportunities
 - Minimize overlap with most productive commodity acres unless environmental sensitivities prioritize program enrollment over cropping to ensure that the program remains a viable component of the overall working system.
 - Improve messaging received by landowners associated with the program. As a voluntary program, landowners are the ultimate target audience as they are the ones making the decision to enroll in CRP. Complete transparency is required to ensure that landowners have a sufficient level of comfort with CRP and similar programs, particularly when administered by the federal government.
 - Enact the provisions of the CRP Improvement Act:

If passed, the CRP Improvement Act would:

- Restore Mid-Contract Management payments.
- Increase flexibility for landowners to take advantage of CRP acres, with a particular focus on grazing.
- Increase overall payment limitations from the original \$50,000 to \$125,000, annually.
- Permanently establish the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) practice under Continuous CRP.

★ Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP)

- As one of the most important programs for sportsmen and women, VPA-HIP provides states with opportunities to offer critical access for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-related recreation on enrolled private lands.
- CSF asks Congress to increase funding from \$50 million to \$150 million and assist in efforts to promote participation among state agencies that currently lack a VPA-HIP-supported program.

- ★ Working Land Programs (EQIP, CSP, RCPP, etc.)
 - In recognition of the critical conservation benefits achieved through these programs, along with their increasing popularity among landowners, CSF supports opportunities to **increase funding availability** for each of these programs. At present, both EQIP and CSP (commonly referred to as “working lands programs”) are operating well and seem to be generating wide support and interest. Despite challenges associated with the implementation of RCPP following its promotion to a standalone program in the 2018 Farm Bill, this program also has significant potential to support **locally led, partner driven** conservation.
 - With the availability of funding through the Inflation Reduction Act, actual increases in investments through the 2023 Farm Bill for these programs may not be necessary unless IRA funds are repurposed or cannot feasibly be spent.
 - Expand the **Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot** (SHIPP) to become a nationwide opportunity while moving the program from the Conservation Reserve Program to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
 - At this time, these programs are currently unable to meet landowner demand. Recognizing this, increasing funding without jeopardizing other programs (i.e., CRP) should be a focus.
- ★ Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
 - Increased investments needed to meet landowner demand and resource needs.
 - Recognize the WREs provide critical ecosystem services on-site while providing additional benefits “**downstream**.”
- ★ Additional Opportunities

While technically outside of Conservation Title, CSF supports the following initiatives in recognition of the value that they would provide for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners, particularly those enrolled in Conservation Title programs.

 - Enact the provisions of the **Agriculture Innovation Act** to allow USDA to better utilize existing and future information to help optimize American commodity production and conservation efforts.
 - Enact the provisions of the **Precision Agriculture Loan Act** to increase access to precision agriculture technologies for American farmers and ranchers.
 - Reauthorize the **Feral Swine Eradication and Control Program**, expanding the program nationwide.
 - Explore opportunities to increase investments in the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Program to meet nationwide demand.

Forestry Title:

As important as the Conservation Title’s private lands program are the various opportunities afforded through the Farm Bill’s Forestry Title. Representing some of the most effective programs to support active forest management, create quality wildlife habitat, and further build upon many of the conservation benefits generated through the Conservation Title, CSF supports the following priorities within the Farm Bill’s Forestry Title:

- ★ Permanently reauthorize and expand **Good Neighbor Authority** (GNA) by:
 - Allowing Tribes and Counties to retain GNA revenue (like states can) for conservation reinvestment.
 - Allowing states to use GNA revenue on non-federal lands.
 - Expanding GNA use to all federal land management agencies.
 - Allowing GNA to support road reconstruction, repair, and restoration on BLM (and other federal land management agencies if added).
 - Allowing GNA to support construction on USFS and BLM lands.
- ★ Reauthorize the **Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration** Program (CFLRP)
- ★ Expand Stewardship Contracting authority
 - Extend stewardship contracting to all federal lands.
 - Extend length of stewardship contracts to 20 years.
- ★ Expand Insect and Disease Hazardous Fuels authority
 - Increase categorical exclusion acreage from 3,000 to 15,000 acres.
- ★ Additional opportunities for Federal Forest Management Efficiency Improvements:
 - Include language that would override *Cottonwood* and recognize that:
 - Approved forest plans are not ongoing federal actions.
 - Programmatic consultation is not needed when new species listed, new critical habitat designated, or new information about a listed species comes to light. Analysis at the project level is sufficient.

Aquatic Priorities:

While often thought of as primarily benefiting upland wildlife and waterfowl species, many of the Farm Bill's conservation programs also provide tremendous benefits for fish and aquatic resources. CSF will work to ensure that fish and aquatic habitat conservation remain an integral part of the Farm Bill conservation programs, and explore opportunities to enhance fisheries conservation in the next Farm Bill reauthorization and its implementation, by:

- ★ Supporting efforts to enhance the importance of Farm Bill conservation programs for **fisheries management and aquatic health**.
- ★ Maximizing opportunities to include the recognition and reference of “fish” in the Farm Bill alongside “wildlife”.
- ★ Exploring opportunities to allocate a percentage of funding/acre authorizations to projects that specifically benefit fisheries habitat conservation (CERP, CRP – Continuous, RCPP, EQIP's WHIP, etc.).
- ★ Consider establishing a state block grant program for states and partnerships (i.e., the National Fish Habitat Partnership) that specifically addresses aquatic resource conservation needs with landowners.
- ★ Providing guidance in the evaluation/scoring of applicants to prioritize projects that benefit fisheries habitat through the administrative rules process that implement the provisions of the Farm Bill.