

Field Guide to Fish and Wildlife Conservation in the Farm Bill

2018-2023 Edition



Acknowledgements



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Introduction

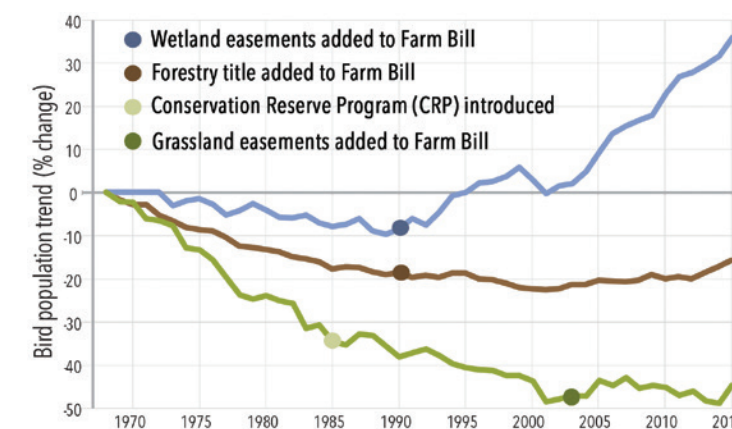
As the largest source of federal funding for private lands conservation, the Farm Bill is a critical tool in the management and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat.

Private lands are essential to the conservation of soil, water, and fish and wildlife resources. In the United States, more than 900 million acres of land is held in farms or ranches and approximately 441 million acres in private forest. These working lands represent much of the country's remaining open space and habitat, and voluntary conservation efforts will help keep these operations profitable while also ensuring clean air, clean water, and abundant fish and wildlife.

These efforts could not be more critical than they are right now. In 2019, it was reported that nearly 30% of North American birds—almost 3 billion individuals—have disappeared in the last 50 years. Grassland birds are in the steepest decline (53% loss) and forest birds declined by 22% since 1970. Private land conservation and habitat restoration can make a significant difference in addressing these declines.

For decades, private land conservation efforts have been supported by a series of federal laws collectively known as the “Farm Bill.” The Farm Bill began with the Agricultural Adjustment Act passed in 1933 in response to the Dust Bowl. Since that time, the Farm Bill has been re-authorized many times with evolving policies addressing food, farms, and rural America. The Food Security Act of 1985 was the first to include a conservation title, and since that time, conservation has been a critical component of the Farm Bill in each authorization process.

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, the most recently enacted Farm Bill, dedicates about \$29 billion dollars annually through 2023 for conservation in four main areas: working lands programs, the Conservation Reserve Program, conservation easements, and partnerships. To implement these programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service



Dots on the graph indicate start dates for key Farm Bill conservation programs, showing the change in populations of wetland, forest, and grassland birds after these programs were implemented. Note: The North American Wetlands Conservation Act also began in 1989 and played a key role in improving bird populations.

(NRCS) work closely with a wide variety of partners—the most important of which are the agricultural producers and other private landowners who participate in Farm Bill conservation programs.

Ensuring that Farm Bill conservation programs support fish and wildlife as well as the livelihoods of America's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners depends on the providers who work directly with producers. By building relationships with farmers, ranchers, and landowners, Farm Bill practitioners identify the programs that can help the landowners meet their agricultural objectives while providing the technical assistance that accommodates biological needs in the ecosystem.

This guide was prepared for the natural resource professionals and technical service providers who help deliver Farm Bill conservation programs. The goal is to give them a tool to better understand the Farm Bill and how it helps landowners conserve fish and wildlife habitat.

Fish and Wildlife Benefits in the 2018 Farm Bill

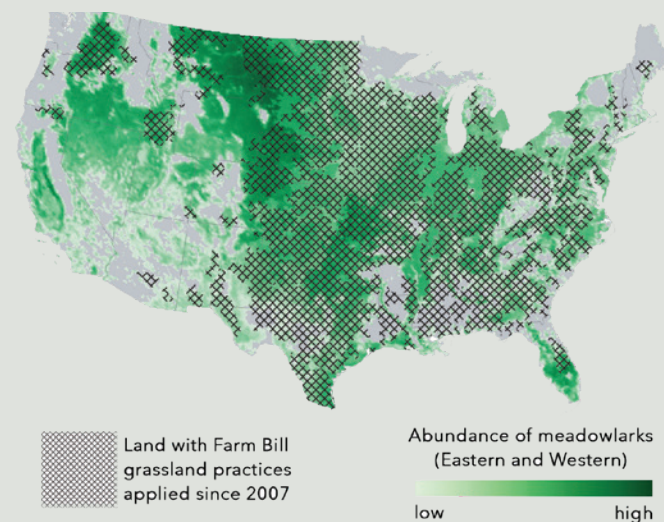
Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018

The Agriculture Improvement Act was signed into law on December 20, 2018, and the rulemaking governing implementation was completed in 2020. The bill included strong conservation and forestry provisions by continuing program funding and increasing the flexibility and resources for conservation partnerships. Specific changes in the 2018 Farm Bill that affect the delivery of conservation on private lands include:

- Establishing the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) as a standalone program with its own rules and budget authority
- Codifying the Working Lands for Wildlife conservation model
- Raising the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage cap to 27 million acres and reducing rental rate incentives, while creating new pilot programs, such as the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers initiative (CLEAR30) and the Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot (SHIPPP)
- Increasing the portion of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds set aside for wildlife to 10%
- Directing NRCS to spend at least 10% of all conservation program funds on source water protection
- Making the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) a dollar-capped, rather than acre-based, program
- Allowing the Secretary to waive Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations if it would help protect environmentally sensitive land of special significance

NABCI Farm Bill Special Report

In 2017, the partners in the North American Bird Conservation Initiative published their annual *State of the Birds* report that focused on how Farm Bill conservation programs help conserve bird populations. For birds, the Farm Bill secures important habitat for more than 100 bird species and is America's largest source of funding for habitat conservation on private lands. For landowners, Farm Bill conservation programs provide financial support for vital ecological services such as clean water and keep working lands working. As an example, declining grassland birds, such as Eastern and Western Meadowlark, rely on habitat provided by Farm Bill conservation programs. Private lands support 97% of the breeding range of Eastern Meadowlarks, and 73% of the range of Western Meadowlarks. Many of the priorities outlined in the NABCI report were included in the 2018 Farm Bill.

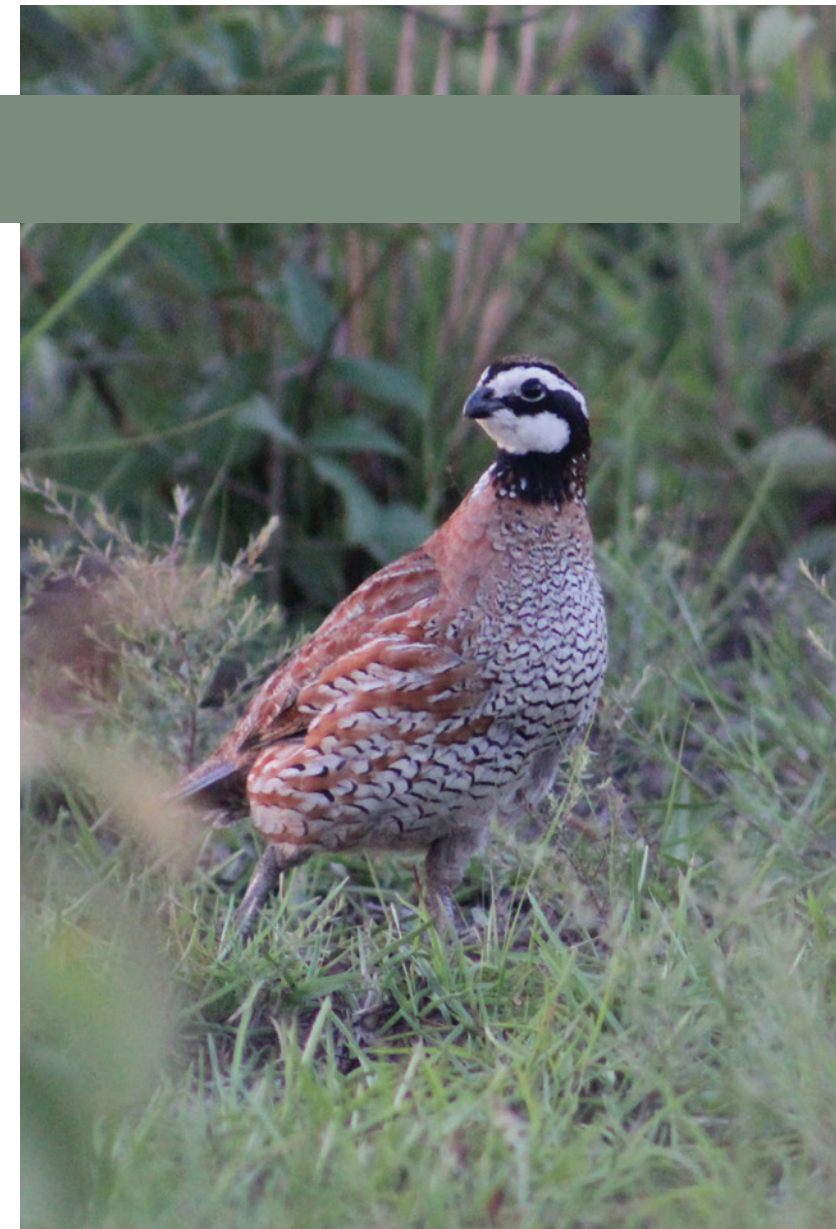


Green shading shows where Eastern and Western Meadowlarks occur. Their range overlaps areas of private land that have used Farm Bill-supported conservation practices in the last decade (shown by cross hatching). Meadowlark abundance from eBird data; Farm Bill conservation practices from USDA-NRCS data.

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 United States, 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. When used together, and in relation to the landscapes, watersheds, and species in most need of help, these programs help to improve the overall quality of the habitat for fish and wildlife species.

- In 2019, over 43.8 million acres used at least one NRCS conservation program. This included 9.2 million acres that specifically focused on fish and wildlife habitat conservation.
- In 2019, producers received conservation technical assistance on nearly 7.2 million acres to improve wildlife habitat.
- Waterfowl are one of a few bird guild groups to have increased in the last 50 years, and their recovery is due in large part to sustained investments through the federal Duck Stamp program, wetland mitigation banking, and NRCS wetland reserve easements.
- Since 2005, across all conservation programs, NRCS has implemented 2.8 million conservation practices with the primary purpose of improving fish and wildlife habitat.
- Since its inception in 2012, the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) conservation approach has helped producers conserve more than 10.2 million acres of



Northern bobwhite. Photo: Allison Colter.

wildlife habitat in 48 states, and has helped many species such as the greater sage-grouse in the West and the New England cottontail in the Northeast.

- The Agricultural Conservation Easements Wetland Reserve Easement component and its predecessor programs have conserved over 2.8 million acres of wetlands with the help of more than 15,300 private landowners.

The [2014 Farm Bill Field Guide](#) included more detailed Farm Bill history and background on how the NRCS and FSA set priorities for conservation programs; for reference, that report can still be found online.

Private Land Conservation Partnerships



Saxon Holt

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 report will simply refer to them as partnership positions or providers.

Farm Bill conservation programs are most successful for wildlife where there are boots on the ground in the form of biological technical assistance capacity. 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 to the eventual outcome of improved habitat—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

In 2019, NRCS's nonfederal partners provided approximately \$106 million of in-kind goods and services and over \$128 million in financial assistance toward addressing a variety of local resource concerns.

cost of implementing practices. This can be difficult for many participants and further delay on-the-ground conservation achievements. This is where Farm Bill partnership positions can help.

Farm Bill Partnership Positions

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's registration system, TechReg, or through nonfederal entities approved by NRCS to provide certification. Agricultural producers can then hire TSPs 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. Throughout the states and territories, there are more than 1,200 individuals and 100 businesses registered as certified TSPs.

In addition to the TSP model, NRCS can address capacity bottlenecks through Farm Bill partnership positions. These positions are typically funded through

contribution or cooperative agreements between NRCS and some combination of state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation districts, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and some migratory bird joint ventures. These positions are often 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 areas.

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 conservation programs and practices, agricultural systems, as well as 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, wildlife, and their habitats.

Cooperator Agreements

Section 1619 of the 2008 Farm Bill prevents the disclosure of Personally Identifiable Information (PII) related to USDA program participants. This includes geospatial information and information about the agricultural land or its owner, such as conservation plans, wetland and highly erodible land determinations, and landowner name, address, and contact information. In order for USDA partners to access this information and provide conservation related services or perform monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of conservation benefits, third parties such as conservation districts, state agencies, and NGOs can enter into Conservation Cooperator Agreements.

Partnerships that help provide technical assistance can benefit NRCS and FSA in three important ways:

- **Science:** Develop, catalyze, and cost-share science-based planning tools that facilitate targeted conservation delivery and outcome-based evaluations to assess the conservation effects of Farm Bill programs.
- **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.
- **Leverage Funding:** Shepherd and leverage partner contributions for field delivery, science, and communications capacity from state fish and wildlife agencies, nongovernmental conservation organizations, and corporations to facilitate effective and coordinated implementation of national NRCS Conservation Initiatives (e.g., Working Lands for Wildlife) and the conservation implementation strategies of NRCS at the state level.

These agreements allow conservation cooperators and their staff, contractors, and representatives to handle and access PII on a need-to-know basis provided that they follow the requirements of Section 1619. When landowners hire TSPs or contractors to design or implement conservation practices, the landowner gives the PII directly to the contractor, so there is no need for a 1619 agreement. State resource agencies and wildlife NGOs often enter into 1619 Memoranda of Understanding so that they can work more closely with NRCS to deliver financial and technical assistance, coordinate outreach efforts, and enhance conservation monitoring.

Delivering Conservation on Private Lands

Working with Agricultural Producers

Farm Bill partnership providers work closely with a community of landowners and initial impressions are important to work effectively over time. 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 every day, but it will be on the list. 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: Listen to a producer's land management goals and 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 assistance that can be provided to address areas of mutual concern.

Technical Skills: Tailor conservation planning to an operation's soil capability, resource potential, landscape context, economic capacity, 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 of the region. Be honest and build a network of fellow professionals and seek mentors among both producers and resource managers.

There are many types of working agricultural lands. For simplicity, this report will generally refer to all of these eligible participants as "landowners" or "producers".

Typical Tasks of a Farm Bill Partnership Position

- Promoting 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, nongovernmental 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-up visits with the landowners to ensure that the practices are installed properly and maintained in a way that continues to benefit the targeted wildlife species.



Bonnie Eyestone/Point Blue

Conservation Planning

To ensure the most effective use of Farm Bill conservation program dollars, the NRCS requires 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 provide assistance in developing conservation plans where appropriate.

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 at least every five years by teams of technical specialists and then published in the Federal Register for public comment. Once finalized, the standards are distributed to state NRCS offices that can further refine the practice to fit their specific situation.

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.

Establishing dedicated funding pools around these priorities could be a highly effective way to deliver wildlife habitat. However, to have these priorities integrated into Farm Bill program delivery, people must advocate for them at State Technical Committee meetings and bring resources to help NRCS implement strategic habitat conservation.

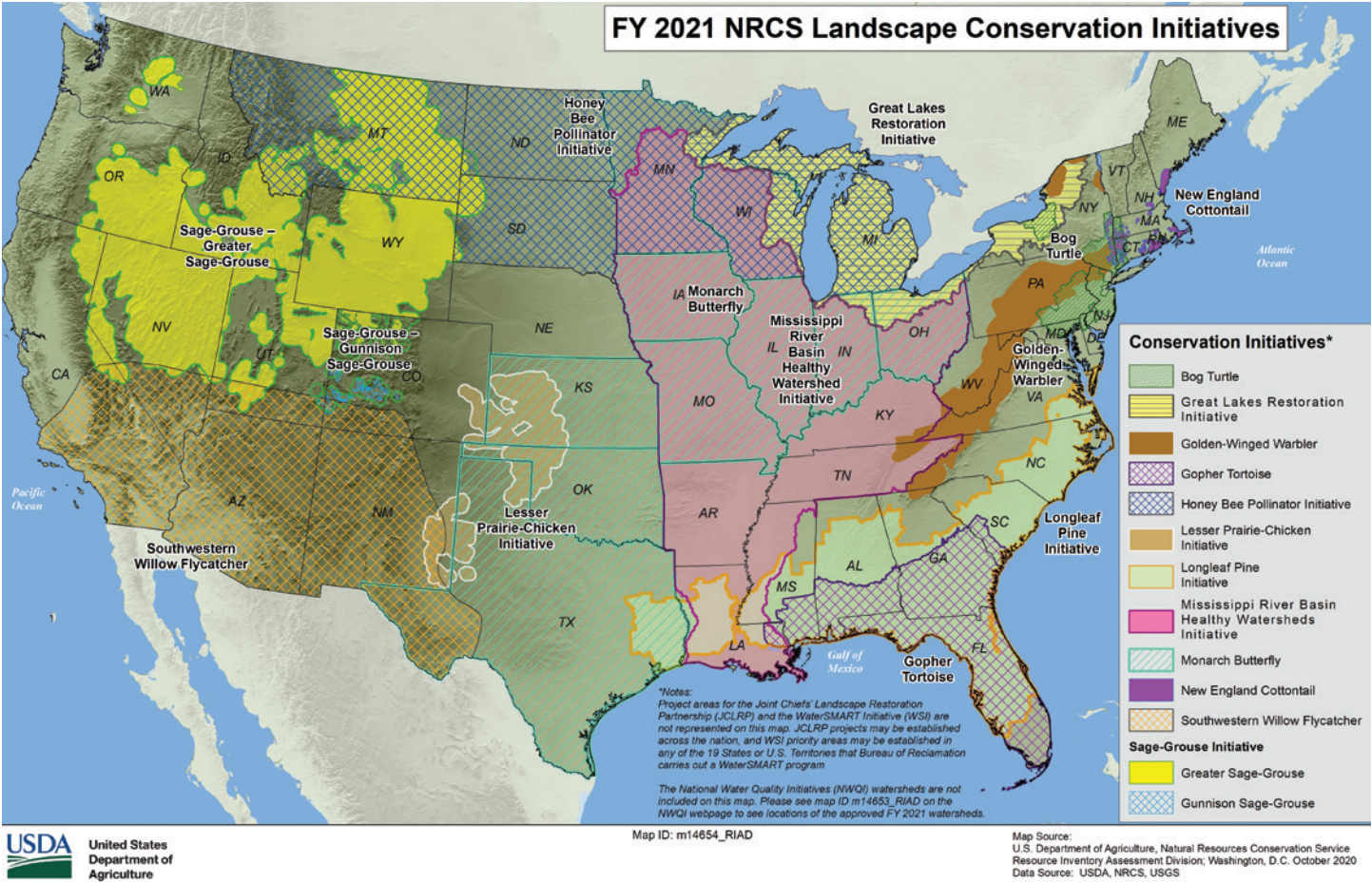


Lance Cheung/USDA

Landscape and Species Conservation

The Natural Resources Conservation Service 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 help identify areas to prioritize through Farm Bill conservation program funding and emphasize a partnership-driven model to help deliver these initiatives. Partnerships help increase the science, conservation planning, and administrative capacity to deliver focused and science-based conservation.

The landscape conservation initiatives have been adapted in recent years to focus on water-based initiatives (WaterSMART and the Great Lakes Restoration, Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds, and National Water Quality Initiatives), wildlife- and ecosystem-based initiatives (the Great Plains Grassland, Sage Grouse, and Longleaf Pine Initiatives). Since 2012, various national and state-based wildlife initiatives have been administered under the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) moniker. Priority landscapes and species are updated periodically, so it is important to check the NRCS website for updates.



NRCS uses Landscape Conservation Initiatives to accelerate the benefits of voluntary conservation programs, such as cleaner water and air, healthier soil, and enhanced wildlife habitat.

Working Lands for Wildlife



In 2012, NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) developed an innovative partnership, offering producers regulatory predictability under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in exchange for the maintenance of the conservation practices identified in their conservation plan. While the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) approach began with ESA predictability, it has evolved into a comprehensive and collaborative conservation approach, of which ESA predictability is only an optional component. The approach allows producers to keep their operation viable and productive while voluntarily benefitting at-risk, candidate, or listed species. The 2018 Farm Bill promotes the WLFW model and allows the FSA to enter into a similar partnership agreement for the Conservation Reserve Program.

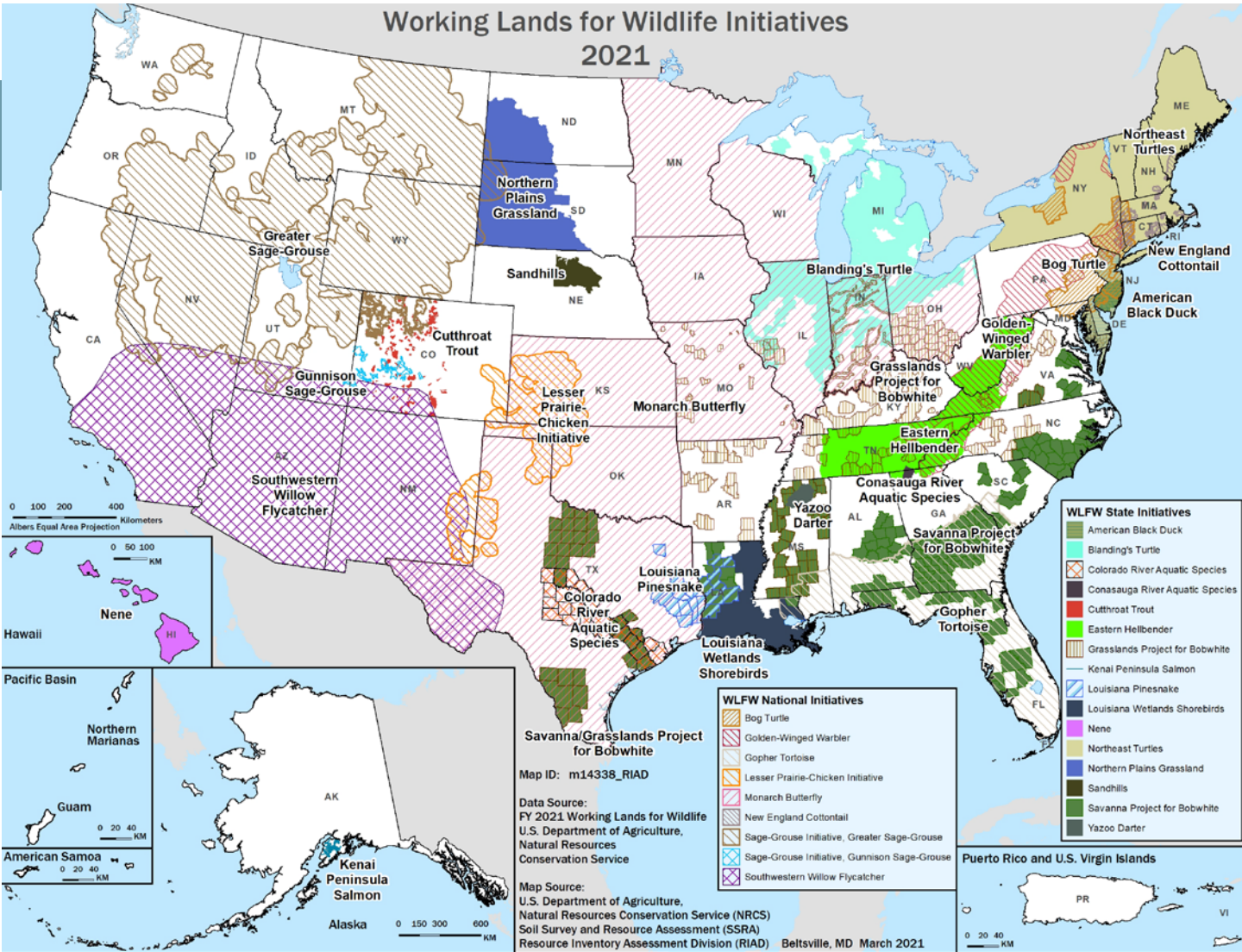
The WLFW conservation model builds on lessons learned in conservation over the years and stands on a foundation of five pillars. In order for a project to succeed and garner NRCS support, partners should consider the following questions:

- **Trust and Credibility:** What and who will give the project credibility? Who must be included to ensure that the project is successful? How will key stakeholders be engaged to ensure producer buy-in and scientific rigor?
- **Shared Vision:** What is the project's common goal that unites stakeholders? How will this plan further the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of agriculture and forestry within the project area?



Building beaver dam analogs helps restore wet meadows on western rangelands. Photo: Mandi Hirsch.

- **Strategic Approach:** Which conservation programs and practices will deliver the desired outcomes for the targeted species or group of species? Which geographies will be targeted and why? How will the project go from science to implementation? How does the approach fit within existing wildlife management plans, such as State Wildlife Action Plans or Species Status Assessments? Have relevant Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guides (WHEGs) been developed?
- **Accountability:** What are the project's measurable population and landscape outcomes (e.g. number of home ranges, % nesting success, % population increases, invasives eliminated, % riparian buffers restored, etc.) and in what timeframe will they be achieved? What outputs will be achieved, e.g., acres treated, financial assistance obligated, workshops held, conservation plans written, etc.? How will these goals be tracked?
- **Leverage:** What technical and financial assistance will partners contribute to the project and can partners leverage grants? Do any partners have shared positions to help ease the administrative workload within NRCS offices? What state or non-NRCS (e.g., Partners for Fish and Wildlife) federal programs are operational in the area?



Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) targets conservation efforts to improve agricultural and forest productivity while enhancing wildlife habitat on working landscapes. Target species are used as barometers for success because their habitat needs are representative of healthy, functioning ecosystems where conservation efforts benefit a much broader suite of species. Note that some WLFW target species also are part of the NRCS Landscape Conservation Initiatives.

Working Lands for Wildlife is currently active in all 50 states, encompassing 24 different landscapes. Eight national and 16 state-identified species or landscapes are used to focus individual projects that meet both the needs of wildlife as well as those of agricultural operations. Individual species are used as barometers for healthy, functioning landscapes where conservation efforts benefit additional species as well.

ESA Predictability

Working Lands for Wildlife can provide 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. NRCS and FWS have recently expanded on the original single-species approach to an ecosystem model by providing predictability for 83 other riparian species within the range of the southwestern willow flycatcher. It is important to note that ESA predictability is not provided under each WLFW project.

Although there are some technical differences, this approach is similar to Safe Harbor Agreements (SHAs)

from the producer’s point of view. However, unlike SHAs, where landowners enter into individual agreements with FWS and receive incidental take permits, WLFW’s predictability is initiative based, and the landowner does not interface with FWS as a regulatory agency. The landowner is covered through implementing a conservation plan with covered practices. ESA predictability is not tied to a contract for financial assistance from one of the Farm Bill programs (which are typically short term). So long as the covered conservation practices are implemented, the landowner will continue to receive predictability.

ESA predictability is becoming an increasingly important tool for water quality as well. At least seven states—Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Virginia, and Washington—offer agricultural certainty programs that offer participating producers assumed compliance with state water quality regulations assurances, waivers for compliance with future regulations, and protection from penalties for unexpected events impacting water quality.

Landscape Conservation Resources
[NRCS Landscape Conservation Initiatives](#)
[Working Lands for Wildlife](#)

EQIP and CRP for Lesser Prairie Chickens and Grassland Birds

In the southern Great Plains, several bird species that depend on healthy grasslands are in decline. Most grassland birds use grasslands on private working ranches. EQIP is the primary mechanism for the Working Lands for Wildlife Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI). Since 2010, NRCS has invested \$41.67 million through EQIP and Conservation Technical Assistance with 883 participating landowners through the LPCI, resulting in the conservation of 1.61 million acres of working lands. EQIP prescribed grazing in the LPCI provides additional benefits to declining populations of grassland songbirds when implemented on the same landscape as CRP. EQIP grazing practices help to transition expiring CRP into working lands that maintain conservation benefits and avoid grassland conversion.

A recent study (2015-2017) by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies evaluated the effectiveness of voluntary conservation practices on privately owned agricultural lands, highlighting LPCI and CRP for increasing distribution and abundance of grassland birds. Researchers found that conservation practices contributed to improved regional abundance for 24 of the 40 grassland bird species studied, over half of which are in decline, amounting to 2.4 million more songbirds. LPCI ranches enrolled in prescribed grazing showed the greatest diversity and abundance of grassland-dependent birds compared to reference grasslands, and grassland bird diversity was greater on CRP land than agricultural land.



Ken Brunson

Assessing and Evaluating Conservation

With money comes the responsibility of accountability. It is critical that conservationists engage and invest in real outcome monitoring when implementing Farm Bill conservation practices to ensure that targeted resource concerns are being addressed. Quality 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.

Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool

The 2018 Farm Bill directs USDA to streamline conservation program delivery, and to quantify and report program outcomes. To this end, NRCS developed the Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART) to streamline NRCS's conservation planning and program delivery. As the central hub for resource inventories, conservation planning, and program ranking, CART provides an opportunity for NRCS to better monitor and report conservation effects.

The CART tool integrates several USDA planning tools into one and pre-populates conservation planning questions by pulling geospatially referenced data. This data and site-specific information about land use, resource concerns, and any existing conservation practices is then used to create a resource inventory and document existing conditions. CART offers a decision support system framework to propose conservation practices that would bring the landowner to a certain performance level for a given resource concern. The assessment can then be moved forward to ranking where the planned conservation practices can be considered for funding from applicable ranking pools.

In 2020, NRCS began using CART to rank EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and RCPP applications, as well as to document CRP technical assistance activities. It is anticipated that CART will enhance the quantity and quality of data in order to improve conservation delivery and a deeper understanding of conservation effects.

Conservation Effects Assessment Project

The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) is a multi-agency effort to measure the effects of Farm Bill conservation programs and practices, using the results to improve conservation planning, on-the-ground resource management, and policy decisions. CEAP primarily focuses on four national assessments, cropland, wildlife, wetlands, and grazing lands, as well as watershed assessments.

Studies under the CEAP-Wildlife Component focus on the response of various species to NRCS practices or priorities. CEAP-Wildlife has been particularly instrumental in the success of Working Lands for Wildlife, producing nearly 40 peer-reviewed research studies since WLFW's inception. CEAP helps to bridge the science and implementation gap, creating tools, such as the Rangeland Analysis Platform, and reports—such as the Science to Solutions series—to make the research findings more understandable for resource managers, farmers, ranchers, and the public.

Assessment and Evaluation Resources
[Conservation Effects Assessment Project](#)
[CEAP-Wildlife](#)



Rangeland Analysis Platform

In 2018, researchers at the University of Montana, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Bureau of Land Management, developed a new app to track how vegetation has fared over time on the nation's 1.1 million square miles of rangelands. Fast, powerful, and free, the Rangeland Analysis Platform (RAP) is an innovative online tool that uses NRCS National Resource Inventory (NRI) and BLM Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) data to quickly visualize and analyze rangeland cover and production for western rangelands. RAP combines satellite imagery with thousands of on-the-ground vegetation measurements to map vegetation (including annual and perennial grasses and forbs, shrubs, trees, and bare ground) from the Great Plains to the Pacific Coast, starting in 1984 up until the present day. Trends can be easily examined at pasture, ranch, watershed, or county levels, providing powerful context and perspective for rangeland management and conservation planning. The RAP is available at <https://rangelands.app/>

Conservation Programs in the 2018 Farm Bill



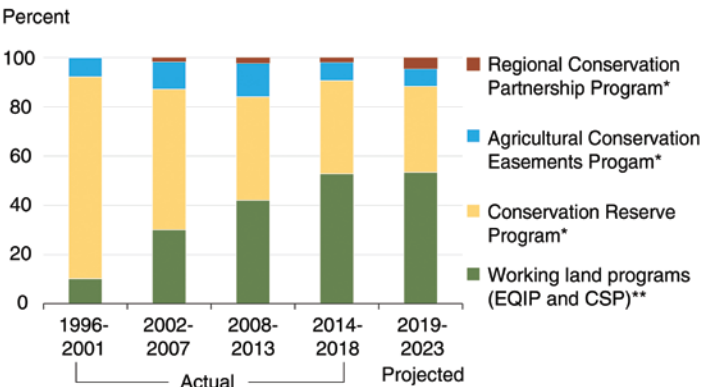
Mountain plover chick. Photo: Tyler Michaels.

Title II is the conservation title of the 2018 Farm Bill, and it continues to be based on the four primary program areas—providing cost-sharing for improved farming practices on working lands, idling ecologically significant lands through the Conservation Reserve Program, securing easements to protect agricultural lands and wetlands, and encouraging conservation partnerships.

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 knowledge of each conservation program and the conservation compliance components of the 2018 Farm Bill, and understanding how the programs can

work together and how to apply for funding, conservation providers can help landowners meet their conservation goals.

Share of conservation spending by major programs and predecessors in the 2018 and previous farm acts



*Includes predecessor programs
**Includes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and predecessor programs. The programs are shown together because they are combined in the CBO estimates. Sources: ERS analysis of Office of Budget and Policy Analysis data for 1996-2017 and Congressional Budget Office Estimates for 2018-2023.

Conservation Compliance

Although the Farm Bill’s financial incentive programs are often more familiar, disincentive policies continue to be an important component of conserving important habitat. The Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation compliance provisions, often known as Sodbuster and Swampbuster respectively, require producers 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 including FSA loans and disaster assistance payments. The 2018 Farm Bill changed Wetland Conservation compliance to require that (1) benefits cannot be denied if an exemption applies and (2) affected landowners must have the opportunity to be present during an on-site inspection. The 2018 Farm Bill also adds a prohibition on providing assistance to producers out of compliance with highly erodible cropland and wetland conservation compliance requirements.

The “Sodsaver” provision added into the 2014 Farm Bill works to protect native prairies and grasslands in North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska. Sodsaver discourages producers from converting native grasslands to annually tilled crops by reducing benefits from federal crop insurance and non-insured crop disaster assistance programs. The provision was amended in the 2018 Farm Bill to clarify that reductions in benefits are for not more than four cumulative years during the first 10 years after initial tillage.

Conservation Program Areas

Working Lands

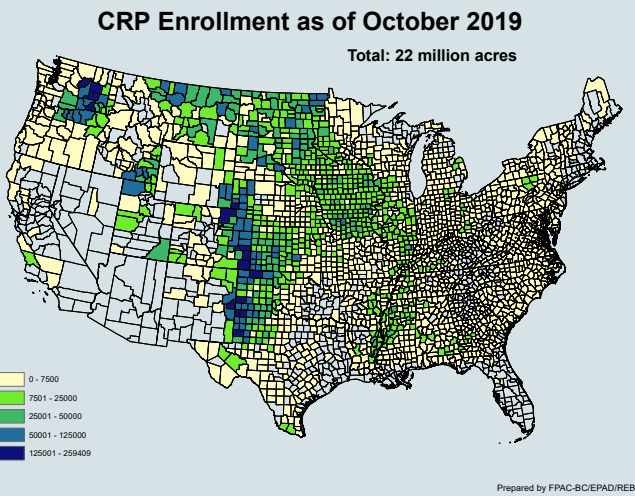


Caroline Armer

These 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. Since 2002, working lands programs have come to account for the majority of Title II conservation funding while overall Title II funding has increased.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program – Annual funding authorized between \$1.75 and \$2.025 billion, and includes:
 - At least 10% of funding for wildlife habitat
 - Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs) – \$37.5 million per year divided among “Classic” CIGs, on-farm conservation innovation trials (OFTs), and Soil Health Demonstration Trials (SHDs)
- Conservation Stewardship Program – Annual funding authorized from \$700 million to \$1 billion

Conservation Reserve Program



CRP provides annual rental payments to producers to establish conservation cover on ecologically significant cropland and marginal pastureland immediately adjacent to a stream, wetland, or other water body. Since it was authorized in 1985, CRP has been a key tool for providing wildlife habitat, reducing erosion, and improving water quality. The 2018 Farm Bill increases the enrollment cap to 27 million acres by 2023, while requiring USDA to enroll at least 2 million acres of working grasslands in CRP—similar to previous Farm Bills’ contract option under the Grassland Reserve Program. The Farm Bill also requires USDA to enroll 8.6 million acres in the continuous signup, of which 40% must be in Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) water quality practices, and to administer the new Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) and CLEAR30 pilot programs. Financial assistance outlays are expected to average \$2.2 billion annually.

Easements



Jeremy Roberts/Conservation Media

The 2018 Farm Bill reauthorizes the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and its Agricultural Land Easement and Wetland Reserve Easement components. The overall goal of the ACEP is to support voluntary easements on working lands to maintain their agricultural purposes and conservation values, and to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands. ACEP is authorized at \$450 million annually between 2018 and 2023.

- ACEP Agricultural Land Easements protect agricultural lands from development including conversion of grasslands to non-grazing uses
- ACEP Wetland Reserve Easements restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in 30-year or permanent easements
- The 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 2019 and 2023, but annual funding levels are set by Congress.

Partnerships



Todd Fearer

The 2018 Farm Bill builds upon the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) that was established in the 2014 bill. The 2018 Farm Bill also continues another successful partnership program, the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) and increases its funding.

- RCPP is a competitive opportunity for locally led, partnership-based conservation efforts on regional or watershed scales that leverage USDA funding. The 2018 Farm Bill makes the RCPP a standalone program with its own dedicated funding and rules. The RCPP program is funded at \$300 million per year.
- 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 \$50 million for the life of the Farm Bill.

Working Lands



Working lands programs in the Farm Bill have increased as a proportion of conservation spending over the past 25 years, amounting to more than half of all spending under the conservation title in the 2018 Farm Bill. These programs allow private land to stay in production while implementing practices to address conservation issues specific to that area. Technical assistance providers help the landowners identify their natural resource and land condition concerns and work with them to implement practices that will help address these concerns. Federal financial support defrays a portion of the costs of

implementing practices that are recommended as part of the conservation plan. The two primary working lands programs are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). While EQIP focuses on helping producers alleviate natural resource problems, CSP focuses on helping producers maintain and improve on existing conservation systems or integrate those systems across the entire operation. Together these programs have a significant impact on fish and wildlife habitat conservation across the country.



Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) encourages producers to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. The purpose of the program is to enhance natural resources, particularly through improvements to soil health, conservation of water resources, improving air and water quality, sustaining biodiversity, and more. Through EQIP, landowners receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices or conduct conservation planning to address natural resource concerns, improve environmental conditions, and benefit wildlife. A core objective of EQIP is to help landowners achieve locally-led conservation practices while in compliance with environmental regulations.

EQIP is one of the largest funded Farm Bill programs with a congressional authorization of \$9.175 billion through 2023, or \$1.75 to \$2.025 billion annually. However, Congress can cap funding levels within annual appropriations bills at less than the authorized level. The 2018 Farm Bill doubled the portion of EQIP funding dedicated to wildlife projects from 5% authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill to 10%. Whereas past NRCS policy only required the agency to meet the 5% target on a national scale, current agency policy requires each state to meet the 10% target individually.

Due to these spending requirements, producers' interest and participation in the program, and the program's consistently increasing funding levels, EQIP has become one of the most important Farm Bill programs for fish and wildlife conservation.



Young forest habitat in Rhode Island managed for New England cottontails. Photo: Charles Fergus.

Between 2015 and 2019, 2.65 million acres were managed for upland wildlife habitat and 926,000 acres for early successional habitat through EQIP.

State EQIP Wildlife Subaccounts

NRCS policy encourages states to create dedicated wildlife habitat subaccounts within their EQIP budgets, targeting funds toward appropriate practices and geographic areas to meet the needs of priority wildlife species and their habitats. To ensure that state NRCS offices meet their EQIP spending target of 10% for wildlife, NRCS will be tracking the 18 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.

Conservation Activity Plans

EQIP provides funding for producers to identify conservation practices to address a specific natural resource need. Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) can include nutrient management plans, woodland management, grazing management, prescribed burning, integrated pest management, a fish and wildlife habitat plan, pollinator habitat plan, invasive species, and more. Partnership positions and other certified Technical Service Providers can help producers develop these CAPs.

Conservation Incentive Contracts

The 2018 Farm Bill introduced EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (EQIP CIC) to incentivize conservation around locally established resource priorities. EQIP CIC is limited to select priority resource concerns within specific watersheds or high priority areas. Both traditional EQIP contracts and EQIP CIC contracts offer payments for practice establishment, but incentive contracts offer payments for enhancement activities. EQIP CIC and CSP differ because CSP requires an entire operation to be enrolled, whereas EQIP CIC does not.

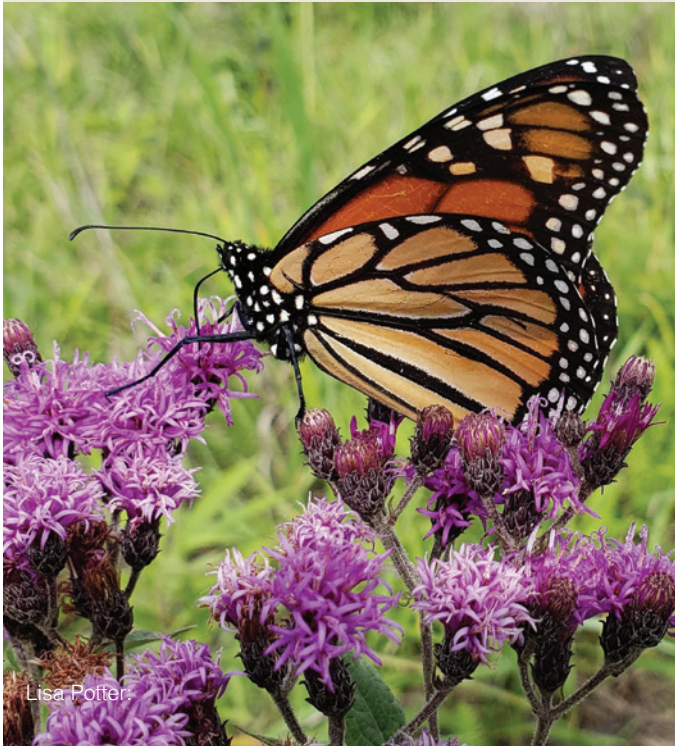
The State Conservationist, with input from the State Technical Committee, defines high priority areas and their resource concerns. Within these areas, the State Conservationist identifies specific practices for each relevant land use that would address the area's priority resource concerns.

High Priority Practices

The 2018 Farm Bill allows NRCS offices to provide payment rates up to 90% on up to 10 high priority practices. The goal of these elevated rates is to incentivize the adoption of practices with relatively low adoption rates and high environmental benefits.

Wildlife Habitat Planting

In 2018, NRCS created a new conservation practice standard—Wildlife Habitat Planting (420). This practice addresses the technical complexities of establishing wildlife habitat, including pollinator and monarch butterfly habitat plantings. Previously, wildlife plantings were carried out under other practice standards, such as Range Planting. This limited wildlife managers' ability to tailor the plant materials specifications to the needs of the targeted species.



Lisa Potter

Case Study

Using EQIP for Wildlife in the Longleaf Pine Ecosystem



Growing season burn in mature longleaf. Photo: Reese Thompson.



To help inform the public about the importance of prescribed burning, Thompson created the mascot Burner Bob—a bobwhite quail who is “A Cool Dude with a Hot Message” that prescribed fires are necessary to maintain healthy habitat for the longleaf forest family. Photo: Reese Thompson.

The longleaf pine ecosystem originally encompassed over 90 million acres in the Southeast. This biologically rich ecosystem evolved with a regular burning cycle that produced a prairie grassland landscape scattered with large trees and carpeted in wiregrass and bluestem.

However, it is estimated that only 3 million acres remained by the early 2000’s. As longleaf pine forests decreased, so did native species—29 have been listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, including indigo snakes, and red-cockaded woodpeckers, with the gopher tortoise considered a candidate for listing. Since much of the landscape is privately owned, NRCS created the Longleaf Pine Initiative and through Working Lands for Wildlife is supporting private landowners helping to restore longleaf pines and improve habitat for the gopher tortoise and bobwhite quail.

Reese Thompson is a multi-generational tree farmer in Georgia who recognized the importance of the longleaf ecosystem. Using EQIP and CSP, Thompson has facilitated a controlled rotation of prescribed burns every 2-3 years to replicate the historic fire regime. In addition, Farm Bill funding has supported herbicide control of hardwoods in the understory, planting of longleaf pines, and adding native pollinator seed mixes to areas that are site prepared for longleaf plantings, as well as in fire breaks and on forest edges. These management activities have helped with a resurgence of gopher tortoise, indigo snakes, and red-cockaded woodpeckers—all species of concern in the region. Regular burning has also benefited Bachman’s sparrow (a significant increase in nesting of this bird has been observed in areas that were burned within 18 months) and bobwhite quail have recolonized his farm. Thompson notes that longleaf conservation efforts have turned the corner on the decline—there are now more than 4.5 million acres of longleaf pine forests in the Southeast with a goal of 8 million by 2025.



Erin Cork, a wildlife biologist in Georgia Department of Natural Resource's Private Lands Program, with a 7 foot 3 inch indigo snake found on Thompson's property. Erin is authorized by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permit to handle this protected species. Photo: Dirk Stevenson.



Reese Thompson

“I couldn’t be a good steward of the land without assistance and partnerships through NRCS, the Longleaf Alliance, and other organizations. As they said in Field of Dreams, if you build it, they will come—we’re helping to build good habitat and seeing how it’s working. We see and hear bobwhite quail everywhere and gopher tortoises have expanded well beyond where we found them just a few years ago.”

– Reese Thompson shown here with his son Reese and a 250 year old longleaf pine.



Longleaf pines after a growing season burn with lopsided Indian grass in the front and wiregrass understory behind. Photo: Reese Thompson.



A turkey nest found at the base of a young longleaf pine. Photo: John B. Jensen.



Gopher Tortoise. Photo: Reese Thompson.



New growth after a burn, the native ground cover has rebirth. Photo: Reese Thompson.

EQIP - Conservation Innovation Grants



Jay Butler, operator of the Audubon-certified 18,000-acre Pronghorn Ranch near Douglas, Wyoming. Photo: Evan Barrientos.

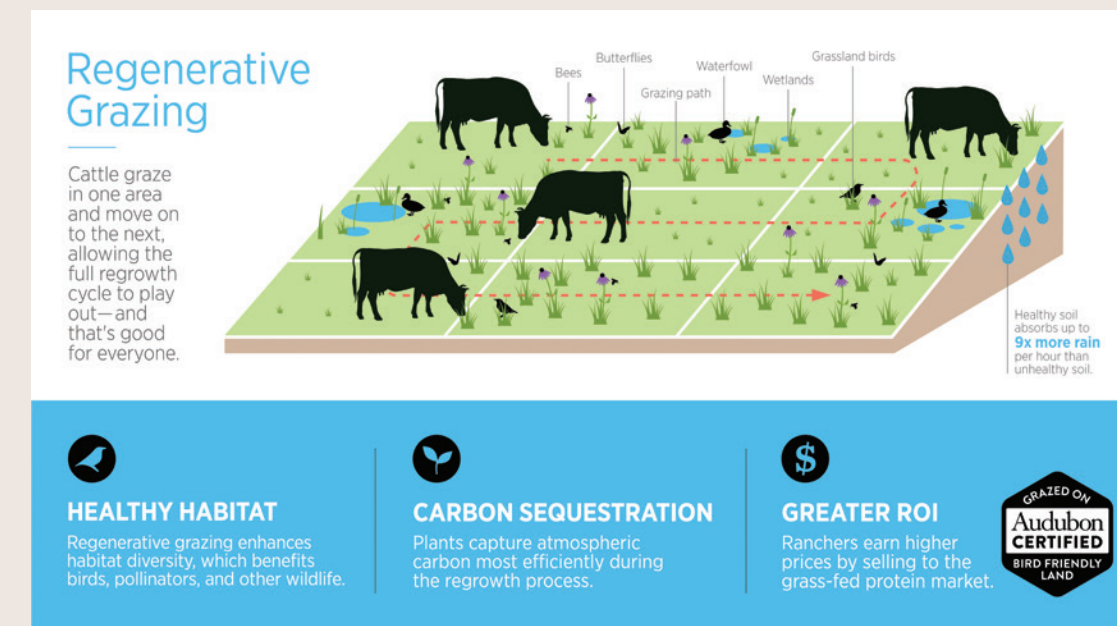
The Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program is a competitive grant program within EQIP. The national program is funded up to \$37.5 million per year between 2019 and 2023, while state grants are funded at the discretion of the NRCS State Office using state allocated EQIP funds, and as such, are not administered in each state. The purpose of CIG is to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies in conjunction with forestry or agricultural production. Funds are awarded to state and tribal governments, nongovernmental organizations, or individuals to achieve this. The CIG program benefits agricultural producers by providing more options for environmental enhancement and compliance with regulations. Its goal is to transfer conservation technologies and novel approaches to agricultural producers, NRCS staff, and the private sector.

Each year, NRCS identifies priority categories within CIG that can advance new or emerging high priority natural resource issues. Selected applicants may receive grants of up to 50% of the total project cost. Projects require nonfederal match and producer involvement.

In addition to the “CIG Classic” competition, the 2018 Farm Bill established On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (OFT). CIG Classic awards fund pilot projects, field demonstrations, and on-farm conservation research of promising technologies or approaches, while OFT awards fund wider-scale adoption and evaluation of innovative conservation approaches such as those proven effective in CIG Classic and in partnership with agricultural producers.

A Market-based Approach to Grassland Bird Conservation

Grassland bird conservation is inextricably linked to management practices on millions of acres of privately owned rangelands. The National Audubon Society recognized that significant grassland habitat enhancement could only be achieved through cooperative approaches that work with producers that live and work on these lands. The Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program uses an innovative, market-based approach to connect conservation-conscious consumers to ranchers who employ bird-friendly management practices in raising their livestock. In 2017, Audubon was awarded a three year \$1.5 million CIG grant to expand a pilot program to develop self-sustaining markets for “bird-friendly beef” to incentivize grassland conservation in seven states across the Great Plains. Audubon-certified ranches implement collaboratively developed Habitat Management Plans uniquely tailored to address site-specific habitat and bird conservation opportunities.

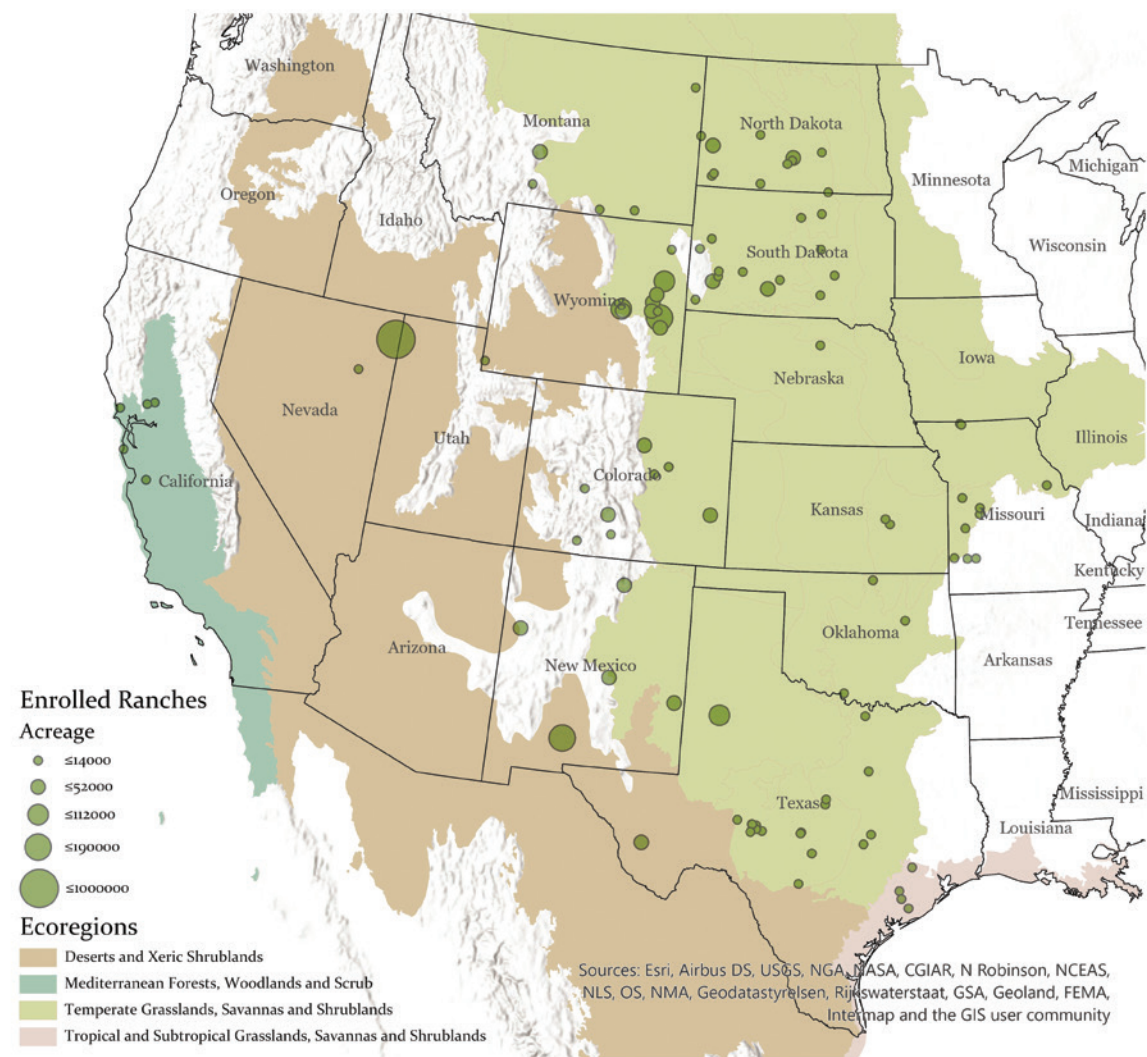


Habitat Management Plans emphasize regenerative grazing approaches that diversify habitat structure, improve soil health, and ensure environmental sustainability that benefits pollinators and other grassland wildlife.

Importantly, 75% of Audubon-certified ranches were connected to premium markets (via animals or product sales) at the conclusion of the project period. Two new beef brands were created solely around the ACR program, and several preexisting brands began sourcing solely from ACR ranches. *Prairie Bird Pastures* is a Missouri-based brand that sells beef locally and ships throughout the state. *Blue Nest Beef* is a national beef subscription company that ships beef to consumers anywhere in the continental United States. *Evergreen Ranching*, a grassfed beef brand that sources solely from Audubon-certified ranches, has expanded into institutional markets (hospitals, universities), which offer outstanding growth opportunities. Audubon anticipates up to 5,000 animals being sourced from Audubon-certified ranches in 2021, and that number could double as markets continue to expand in the coming years.

EQIP *(continued)*

Audubon Conservation Ranching Across the West



Dave Haubein's Prairie Bird Pastures in Missouri is an Audubon-certified ranch. Photo: Jodi Stemler.

The purpose of CIG is to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies in conjunction with forestry or agricultural production.

EQIP Program 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 2019 and 2023, and the maximum payment limit can no longer be waived. EQIP contracts can last up to 10 years but are often 1-3 years in length. NRCS now has the authority to enter into contracts with “water management entities” to implement water conservation or irrigation practices.

Eligibility

- Participant must be an agricultural producer or owner of non-industrial private forestland, or a 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.
- NRCS may enter into EQIP contracts with “water management entities” under a streamlined contracting process to implement water conservation or irrigation practices under a watershed-wide project that will effectively conserve water, provide fish and wildlife habitat, or provide for drought-related environmental mitigation.

- Socially disadvantaged, beginning and limited resource farmers, as well as tribes and veterans are eligible for an increased payment rate and may receive advanced payments of up to 50% 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 the 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 to 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 grants will announce their sign-up period and objectives independently of the national announcement.

EQIP Resources

- [EQIP Program](#)
- [Landscape Conservation Initiatives](#)
- [Conservation Innovation Grants Program](#)
- [CIG On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials](#)
- [Apply for EQIP](#)
- [Conservation Activity Plan](#)
- [List of Conservation Practices](#)

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. The CSP program 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.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, CSP was changed from an acreage-based program to a dollar-based program, authorizing between \$700 million and \$1 billion in funding per year for new CSP enrollments, with separate funds set aside for existing contracts.



Lisa Potter

Case Study

Missouri Monarch Project

Charlie Campbell was one of many producers interested in establishing monarch habitat on a portion of his traditionally row cropped land in northwest Missouri. Working with his local Pheasants Forever Inc. and Quail Forever (PF/QF) Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist, Andrew White, Charlie decided that CSP would be a good fit for the property and his goal of improving wildlife habitat. Together, PF/QF and NRCS helped develop a high diversity seed mix of native grasses and wildflowers designed to benefit monarch butterflies as well as species Charlie wanted more of, like bobwhite quail, pheasant, turkey, and deer. Since CSP requires conservation activities to occur on working lands, Charlie still farms the rest of the property but has created a special spot for wildlife to thrive.

As part of a Regional Conservation Partnership Project in Northwest Missouri, over 29,000 acres were enrolled in CSP in 2018 with conservation plans benefiting monarchs. On those working lands, nearly 6,600 acres were improved for monarch butterflies through habitat restoration, enhancement, and mitigation. Missouri’s success can be attributed to its strong partnerships between NRCS, PF/QF biologists, and the Missouri Department of Conservation’s private land biologists, who work together to promote the important wildlife benefits of monarch habitat and how these programs can benefit producers and their operations.

“Little did I know just how much this program would benefit wildlife and bring them back to the farm in larger numbers,” commented Campbell. “I’m seeing more of everything out there!”

CSP Program 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. Producers have the option to reenroll for another five years, but they must compete with other renewal offers, meet the original terms, and agree 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. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized increased payment rates for resource-conserving crop rotations, cover crop-based activities, advanced grazing management, and the development of comprehensive nutrient management plans.

CSP Grassland Conservation Initiative

The 2018 Farm Bill established the CSP Grassland Conservation Initiative (CSP-GCI) to provide payments to farmers managing permanent grasslands that are no longer eligible for commodity payments. Producers with lands where commodity crops were historically grown, but have not been since 2009, are eligible to receive \$18 per acre per year throughout the contract if they meet the stewardship threshold for one priority resource concern by the end of the contract.

Eligibility

- Eligible lands include private and tribal cropland, grasslands, pasture, rangelands, non-industrial private

forestlands, and other private agricultural land on which resource concerns related to agricultural production could be addressed. Public lands are eligible when they are a working component of the participant’s agricultural or forestry operation.

- 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 the operation, though applicants can cross ranking pool boundaries.

How to Apply

The CSP application process now runs through the Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool to assess the existing conservation performance and opportunity for additional conservation activities; applications are evaluated through a point-based system to estimate environmental benefits and cost efficacy.

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 Program Resources
[Conservation Stewardship Program](#)
[CSP Enhancements and Bundles](#)
[Apply for CSP](#)

Conservation Reserve Program



Throughout its thirty-five-year history, CRP has been an integral component of the USDA conservation program toolbox, helping to diversify farm and ranch operations, conserve soil, improve soil health, reduce sedimentation and agricultural run-off, protect and enhance water quality, and restore important wildlife habitat. 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 statutorily 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, songbirds, and waterfowl.

Producers enrolling in CRP can choose from a variety of CRP Conservation Practices (which are different than, yet composed of, NRCS National Conservation Practice Standards) and participate in special programs including the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement initiative, the Soil Health and Income Protection Program, or Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers 30 program.

The 2018 Farm Bill increases the national cap for CRP over the course of five years from 24 to 27 million acres. To offset the costs of an increasing acreage cap, the 2018 Farm Bill limited soil rental rates to 85% of the estimated rental rate for general enrollment, and 90% of the estimated rental rate for continuous enrollment; capped cost-share at 50% of seed costs and 100% of the cost of practice establishment; and prohibited cost-share for mid-contract management or maintenance activities.



Conservation Reserve Program 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. The 2018 Farm Bill directs USDA to hold general sign-ups on an annual basis, however acreage cap reductions have limited general sign-up opportunities in the past. The general sign-up is focused on whole fields and, depending upon ecological site conditions, may be established to grass, forbs, shrubs, or trees. Of the acres currently in CRP, 64% are enrolled under the general sign-up, where offers compete and are ranked for their environmental benefits and cost. To be eligible, the offered land must be highly erodible cropland having an erosion index (EI) of 8 or greater, fall within a national or state conservation priority area, or be under an expiring CRP contract. Newly enrolled lands must have been cropped for four of six years from 2012 to 2017. Expiring CRP is considered to meet the cropping requirement.

Did You Know? Landowners enrolled in CRP can perform routine or emergency haying and grazing on all conservation practices. Assistance from wildlife conservation partners can help ensure these economic uses are implemented in ways compatible with, and even beneficial for, priority wildlife habitats.

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 to the land offered. Each eligible offer is ranked in comparison to all other offers nationwide, and selections are made from that ranking.

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), rare and declining habitat (CP25), and pollinator habitat (CP42) often provide the highest quality habitat in general sign-ups.



USDA

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. The 2018 Farm Bill requires USDA to enroll and maintain at least 8.6 million acres through continuous signups by 2023, of which 40% must be under the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) Initiative. CLEAR targets the enrollment of land and implementation of practices that would reduce sediment loadings, nutrient loadings, and harmful algal blooms. The initiative was initially established in 2016 and was codified in the 2018 Farm Bill.

CP43 Prairie Strips are a new CRP practice within the CLEAR initiative. The focus of the practice is to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and provide wildlife habitat. Prairie strips consist of diverse, dense, herbaceous, predominately native perennial vegetation and are placed along the perimeter and through fields in 30 to 120-foot bands.



Lynn Betts/NRCS/SWCS

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

The State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative encourages participants to establish CRP conservation plantings that restore important habitat for wildlife species that are threatened or endangered, have suffered significant population decline, or have economic or social value. Because wildlife needs and conservation priorities vary across geographic and ecological regions, local and

regional conservation groups, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, biologists, farmers, and ranchers have the first-hand knowledge and experience to help address the needs of these high-priority species. Through SAFE, producers create habitat that is beneficial to the target high-priority wildlife species. This may involve planting trees, grasses, forbs, or other species that help restore or improve wildlife habitat. SAFE conservation covers require more frequent management activity, more diverse mixes, and more forbs and legumes than other CRP covers.

Case Study

Shrub-steppe SAFE

Shrub-steppe, once the dominant habitat type across most of eastern Washington, was viewed by many people as having little value, leading to conversion of over 60% of the state’s shrub-steppe to other uses. Most of the remaining shrub-steppe is in coulees carved by the Missoula Floods or moraines deposited by glaciers during the last ice age. These areas are typically characterized by shallow soils less suitable for farming.

The Washington Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Shrub-steppe State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) project is a state and federal partnership between the FSA and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). WDFW provides technical assistance and help in developing conservation plans for those farmers and ranchers interested in participating in the project. SAFE has been an important tool for landowners to help conserve species in a voluntary and incentive-based manner. As of December 2019, farmers and agricultural producers have enrolled 92,469 acres in this SAFE project area.



Male sharp-tailed grouse displaying in a SAFE field. Photo: Eric M. Braaten, Private Lands Biologist, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“CRP and subsequently SAFE play a vital role in our farm’s implementation of a regenerative ag model. CRP and SAFE are shining examples of how public/private partnerships can work toward their intended purposes.” – Douglas Poole, Douglas County Producer and CRP SAFE participant

Conservation Reserve Program Options *(continued)*

Case Study

Precision Agriculture

Precision agriculture can be broadly defined as technologies that allow producers to improve their input efficiency, yield, and return on investment. Broadly speaking, the purpose of these technologies is to support farm management decisions, one of which is conservation. Aside from optimizing the use of nutrients and pesticides, these technologies can also support the targeted retirement of unproductive or unprofitable land. Farms can look at profitability and return on investment acre-by-acre and adapt practices based on what makes the most sense agronomically and economically.

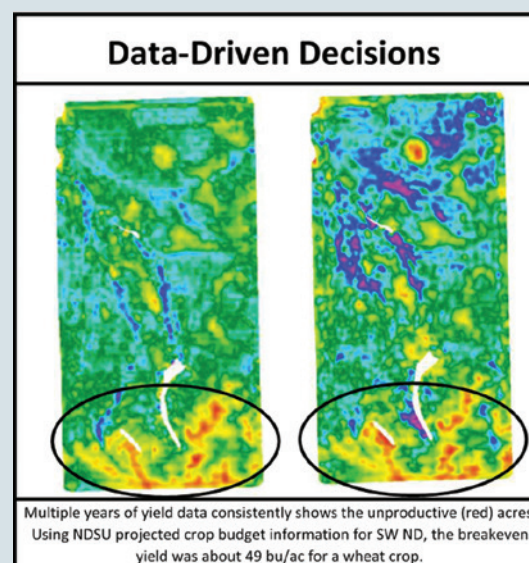
Alex Nielson, a 4th-generation no-till farmer and rancher from southwest North Dakota who raises wheat, durum, canola, and corn, learned about the new USDA Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) after sitting down with Pheasants Forever's Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist, Emily Spolyar. The program appealed to Alex because it provided him with a monetary incentive to change land use on less productive, low yielding acres in his operation, in return for establishing perennial cover that addresses soil health and provides wildlife habitat. As both a crop and livestock producer, SHIPP offered enough flexibility to utilize enrolled acres as forage and strengthens his bottom line.

Without working with Emily to evaluate acre-by-acre profitability and ROI, the economic benefits of repurposing marginal acres may not have been realized. For Alex, the combination of annual payments, higher cost share rates as a beginning farmer (75% cost share for beginning farmer/rancher), program flexibility, and shorter-term contract length, SHIPP provided him with another great opportunity to help ensure they are farming in the most efficient, sustainable way they can.

“SHIPP is a perfect program to get these acres back into grass.” – Alex Nielson



Alex Nielson



SHIPP

The 2018 Farm Bill established the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) pilot within the prairie pothole region states of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The pilot, capped at 50,000 acres, provides rental payments for producers to plant low-cost perennial cover crops on less productive portions of their farms. Producers enroll for 3-5 years and receive annual rental payments worth 50% of the weighted average soil rental rate offering. Land must have a cropping history of three consecutive years prior to enrollment, and no more than 15% of a farm's acreage can be enrolled. FSA and NRCS designed a new practice, CP90 Soil Health Perennial Conservation Cover, to meet the needs of the program. The cover is chosen by the NRCS State Conservationist with the input of the State Technical Committee, and is eligible for harvesting, haying, and grazing outside of the local primary nesting season.

CLEAR30

In addition to the short-term enrollment pilot, SHIPP, the 2018 Farm Bill also establishes a pilot project for long-term, 30-year enrollments under the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, And Rivers Initiative. CLEAR30 supports producers in the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes Conservation Priority Areas to implement high-priority, continuous water quality practices to reduce sediment, nutrient loading, and harmful algal blooms. Only expiring CLEAR contracts are eligible for CLEAR 30 enrollment. Due to the length of the contract, FSA adjusts rental payments upward by 27.5% to encourage enrollment and authorizes payments for required maintenance activities.

Partnerships Drive CREP

A CREP project begins with eligible partners identifying an agricultural issue of regional or national significance. In cooperation with FSA, they develop a project proposal to address the issue. These projects must originate from approved geographic priority areas established by FSA. If approved, FSA provides CRP funding to pay for a percentage of the project cost with the remaining amount coming from partners. Partners may offer additional incentives to the landowners.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a CRP program that helps agricultural producers retire farmland to 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. CREP agreements are generally with states, but the 2018 Farm Bill expands eligible partners to include nongovernmental organizations and sets agreement requirements, including matching fund contributions.



Alice Welch/USDA

Conservation Reserve Program Details

CRP Program 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% of the participant's costs. Participants are often required to conduct mid-contract management, or maintenance activities, to maintain or improve plant diversity and wildlife benefits. Disturbance activities such as disking, mowing, 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 signup bonus payments on many wildlife-friendly continuous CRP practices. Other incentives and cost-share may be available from state or local partners.

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. To be eligible for placement in CRP, the offered land must be:

- Cropland (including field margins) that is planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity four of the six crop years from 2012 through 2017, and which is physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity,
- Certain pastureland bordering lakes, streams, or rivers that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer or for similar water quality purposes,
- Ecologically significant grasslands that contain forbs or shrubs for grazing; or
- Farmable wetland and related buffers

How to Apply

CRP is administered by the FSA, though NRCS, and often local partners, provide conservation planning and design assistance on the ground. General sign-ups are announced annually. Continuous practice signups are available year-round. Applications are obtained at local FSA Field Offices.

CRP Resources

[CRP Program Description](#)
[FSA State Office Information](#)
[CRP Sign-Up Information](#)
[CREP Information](#)
[SAFE Information](#)



CRP habitat for bobwhite quail in Arkansas. Photo: USDA.

Easements



Lance Cheung/USDA

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 have been extremely important in conserving vulnerable landscapes and helping farmers and ranchers keep their lands as productive agricultural or forestland operations and to protect vulnerable wetland habitats.

The 2018 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. The Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) component of ACEP is intended to restore, protect, and enhance wetland values and functions on wetlands that have been in agricultural production. The Agricultural Land

Easement (ALE) component of ACEP provides public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, and protection of wildlife habitat and open space. The ACEP program is authorized annually at \$450 million.

In addition to ACEP, the 2018 Farm Bill maintains 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. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized HFRP to receive annual appropriations up to \$12 million per year.



Grant Halstrom/Point Blue

ACEP – Wetland Reserve Easements

The Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) component 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% of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 75 to 100% of the restoration costs. For projects of “special significance,” NRCS is able to waive an eligible entity’s cash contribution requirement

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% of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75% of the restoration costs.

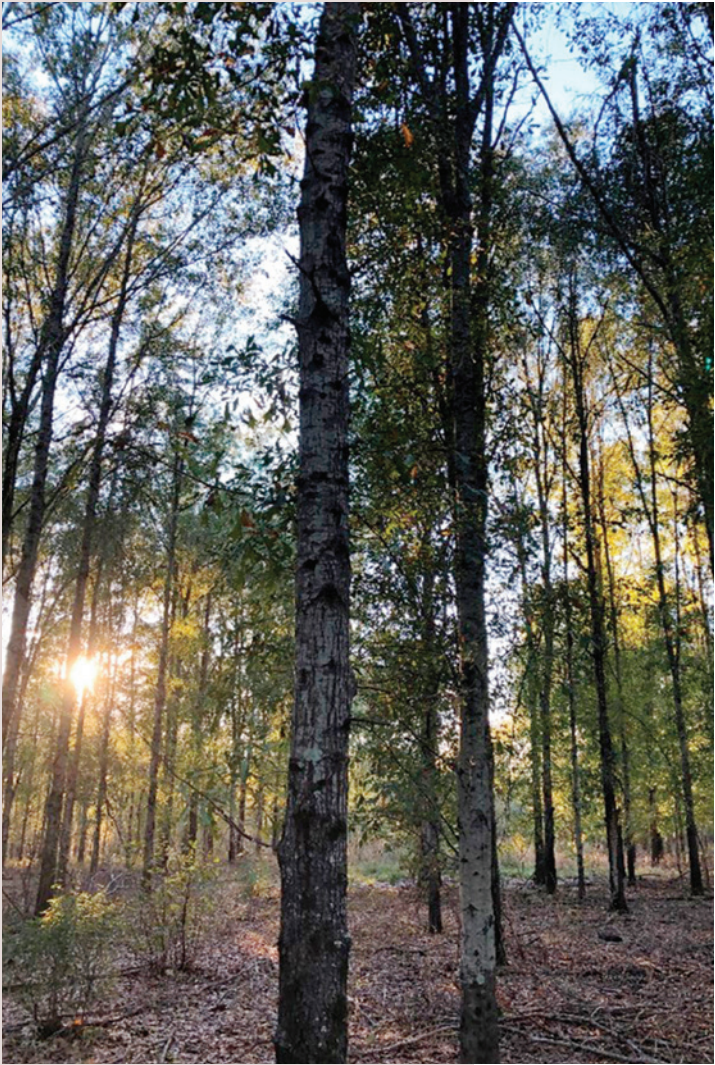
30-year Easements – 30-year easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75% of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays between 50 to 75% of the restoration costs.

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.

Case Study

Easements Conserve Bottomland Hardwood Forest

The Mississippi Alluvial Valley (MAV) is one of the most important regions for migratory birds on the continent. Nearly 40% of North America’s waterfowl and 60% of all U.S. bird species migrate or winter in the MAV, and the forested habitat that remains is continentally important for many forest breeding birds. The value of this region to wildlife today is in no small part a result of wetland restoration and protection afforded by WRE. A 2016 study by Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture partners revealed that forest area in the MAV increased by over 1 million acres since the early 1990s, with Wetlands Reserve responsible for well over half of that gain. What’s more, because of NRCS’s commitment to collaborative partnership, the majority of Wetlands Reserve Easements have been strategically placed to create and expand complexes of forest habitat in the MAV. As a result, the program is responsible for building forest blocks important to priority breeding birds, as well as expanding and linking habitat corridors essential to the now-delisted Louisiana black bear. Positive impacts on water quality, carbon storage, and many other wildlife populations are but a few more benefits of Wetlands Reserve in the MAV. The work is ongoing and essential, and as restored WRE forests age, NRCS continues to work with partners to ensure that guidance for proper management of these precious natural resources is science-based and readily available.



Keith McKnight

ACEP - Agricultural Land Easements

Agricultural Land Easements (ALEs) are intended to protect farms and ranches from development and ensure their viability, as well as to conserve grazing land. Whereas WREs are always purchased and held by NRCS, ALEs are held by nonprofit land trusts and state agencies and are purchased with cost-share from NRCS.

The ALE component is largely focused on maintaining farmland viability but is also an important tool for conservation partners to conserve private lands with high

value to wildlife (e.g., prairie grasslands, sagebrush steppe, wet meadows, etc.) that are threatened by development or sodbusting in particular. It does so through two important provisions.

The provision authorizing ALE Grasslands of Special Significance (GSS) is intended to promote continuation of grassland conservation previously implemented through the Grassland Reserve Program. These

easements were successfully utilized to conserve key fish and wildlife habitats, especially in the Intermountain West and Great Plains. Under GSS, the USDA share can increase from 50% to up to 75% of the easement value.

Since 1996, ACEP-ALE and its two predecessor programs have protected 1.85 million acres of agricultural land.

The 2018 Farm Bill authorized “buy-protect-sell” transactions that allow an entity to purchase land, place an easement on it, and then sell the land without development use rights at a more affordable cost. These transactions allow beginning and underserved farmers more access to affordable farmland and can be used to protect land under immediate threat of development.

In addition, for ALE “projects of special significance,” 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. Policy details on the implementation of these exemptions are available from NRCS.

Prior to 2019, NRCS used cooperative or grant agreements with eligible entities for easement acquisitions. To streamline acquisitions, NRCS is now using program agreements with eligible entities, in which potential entities and their roles and responsibilities are defined. These agreements provide a framework in which NRCS enters into parcel contracts detailing the funding and cost-share arrangements for specific, individual easements.



Corey Shake/Point Blue



Case Study

Adele Stenson/Springhill Ranch

Conserving Grasslands for Wildlife

Stenson family’s Springhill Ranch Horse Creek Complex Conservation

The Stenson family approached Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) about placing a conservation easement on their 15,000-acre Springhill Ranch in Wibaux and Dawson Counties in eastern Montana. MFWP worked with the Stensons for nearly two years before acquiring the easement with the help of ACEP-ALE funding.

The Stenson’s view the conservation easement as a guarantee that the property would contribute to the future of local family ranching, while providing the family with the capital they need to acquire the five private parcels, some of which they leased, that were intermingled in the deeded land and to make the property whole. The easement guarantees the ranch will remain a working ranch, while also conserving a variety of ecosystems, ranging from hardwood draws and grasslands on the north, to badlands, and eventually extensive Wyoming big sagebrush grasslands with sage grouse leks on the south end. The property supports 39 species of greatest conservation need, as identified in Montana’s State Wildlife Action Plan. Conservation easements held by FWP and funded by NRCS include a management plan that maintains the long-term viability of the farm or ranch operation while preserving their conservation values. In accordance with the plan, the Stenson’s adopted a new rest rotation grazing system.

The landscape surrounding the Horse Creek Complex is comprised of approximately 75% private lands, leaving relatively few public recreational opportunities for area residents. Most of FWP’s easement purchases include provisions for allowing public access and are negotiated with the landowners. In this case, the Horse Creek Complex will be open to the public for 600 hunter days each year. In addition, the easement abuts 5,000 acres of previously inaccessible state and federal lands. As MFWP’s easement funds are derived from hunting license sales, this represents an important return of hunters’ investments.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) specifically targets projects to protect or improve habitat for species listed under the Endangered Species Act or a state or NRCS priority 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% of program funding can be used for cost-share agreements, and not more than 60% 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 2023, but Congress controls the specific funding level each year. HFRP-like easement and restoration activities are also available through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.



Kyle Aldinger

Easement Program Details - WRE Eligibility

- Lands eligible for wetland reserve easements consist of farmed 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 as 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 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.

ALE Eligibility

- Land eligible for agricultural 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.

HFRP Eligibility

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

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

- [ACEP Program Site](#)
- [HFRP Program Site](#)



Tracy Robillard/USDA-NRCS

Partnerships



Dedicated Resources for Partnerships

The value of partnership projects that drive private lands conservation was clearly a priority in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The 2018 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) was a new approach in the 2014 Farm Bill and proved so successful that it was established as a standalone program with its own funding and contracting mechanism. Its purpose is “to encourage the flexible and streamlined delivery of conservation assistance” and “to engage producers and eligible partners in conservation projects to achieve greater conservation outcomes and benefits for producers than would otherwise be achieved.” To do so, NRCS leverages financial and in-kind contributions from partners across the country.

Another area of partnership encourages 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. These programs provide increased hunting opportunities in areas where public lands are more limited. The 2018 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.



Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is administered by NRCS but delivers assistance through project-specific partnerships and program contracts that resemble the authorities of other Farm Bill programs, such as EQIP, CSP, ACEP, HFRP, and CRP, or for watershed protection and flood prevention. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized RCPP as a stand-alone program at \$300 million per year, meaning it no longer relies on funds or program regulations from its “donor programs.” RCPP contracts can include several types of activities: land management/restoration, land rental, easements, and public works/watershed structures.

While there is no specific contribution requirement, partners are expected to make a “significant contribution,” roughly 1:1, to the overall cost of the project. Funding is offered through a competitive application process with proposals evaluated based on four criteria: impact, partner cash and in-kind contributions, innovation, and project management. Lead partners for successful project applications will enter into a partnership agreement for a five year period. The Farm Bill’s direction to NRCS to better track conservation outcomes applies to RCPP as well. Partners are required to include a plan for quantifying and reporting on environmental outcomes and their link to project deliverables.

In most cases, funding is provided to landowners through RCPP contracts resembling other Farm Bill

Between RCPP's inception in 2014 and 2019, NRCS awarded over \$1 billion to more than 350 partnerships, comprising nearly 2,000 partners who have brought \$2 billion in contributions.

program contracts. These contracts are part of “RCPP Classic” partnerships. The 2018 Farm Bill also created an Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) partnership mechanism that differs from RCPP Classic. AFA projects operate more like traditional block grants, with partners held responsible for the delivery of all technical and financial assistance to producers and landowners. In these cases, producers enter into contracts with the lead partner rather than with NRCS. While AFAs provide great flexibility, they also confer greater responsibilities; AFA grants have more stringent reporting requirements, require far greater technical assistance capacity, and more grant administration capacity. NRCS may enter in up to 15 Alternative Funding Arrangements each year.

RCPP Funding Pools

Critical Conservation Areas – the Secretary of Agriculture has outlined eight critical conservation areas with specific priority resource concerns outlined for each area. 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. 50% of RCPP funding will be targeted toward the following CCAs:

- Chesapeake Bay Watershed
- Great Lakes Region
- Mississippi River Basin
- Colorado River Basin
- Longleaf Pine Range
- Prairie Grasslands Region
- Western Waters Region
- Northeast Forests and Waters Region

State/Multi-state – 50% of RCPP funding will be directed toward projects that address state or multi-state conservation priorities. NRCS State Conservationists will identify state priorities, with advice from the State Technical Committees and Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils.

Case Study

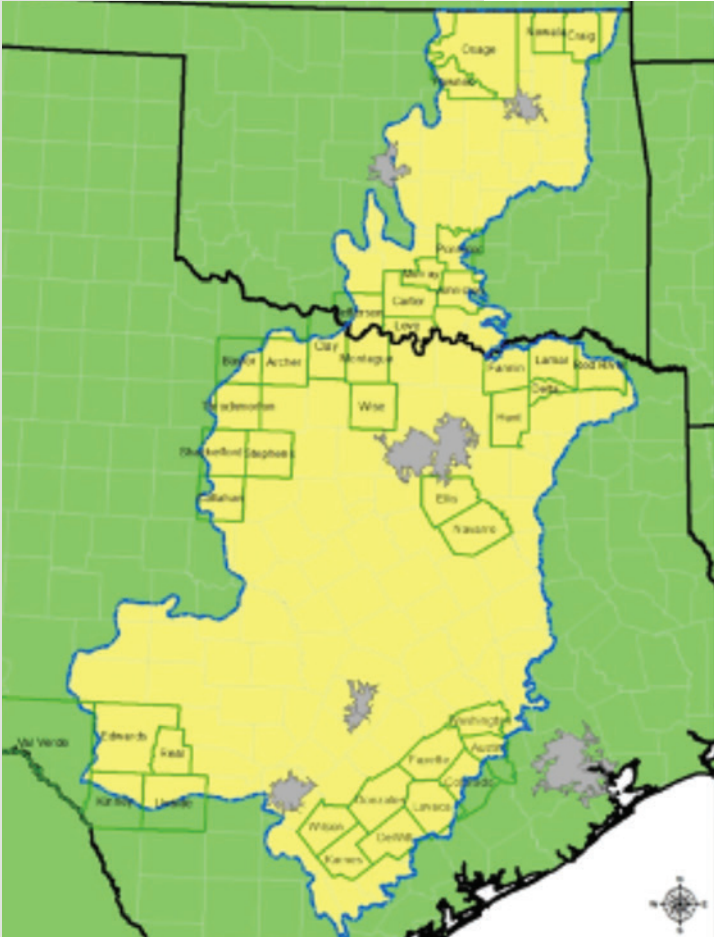
Grassland Restoration Incentives Program (GRIP)

Texas and Oklahoma

In 2018, the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture (OPJV) and its many partners received funding for an RCPP project supporting ongoing conservation efforts through its Grassland Restoration Incentives Program (GRIP). The proposal was submitted by the National Wild Turkey Federation, which serves as the designated lead partner in the RCPP for the Joint Venture. The primary objective of the project is to reverse the decline of grassland bird and pollinator populations on working lands through voluntary grassland habitat restoration within the Oaks and Prairie conservation region.

The RCPP allowed the collaboration to leverage the traditional partner funding already in place in the region. Through the project, GRIP is providing the needed technical and financial assistance capacity (TA and FA) to sustainably deliver 300,000 acres of grassland restoration per year. The RCPP only requires 65,000 acres to be restored, however the effort is serving as a catalyst to meet the broader goal.

Building conservation delivery capacity from within partner organizations is a large effort. The RCPP application accommodated this by providing funding support for three coordinating wildlife biologists working through Quail Forever and the National Wild Turkey Federation. These staff work in NRCS offices and have the clearances to use NRCS computers and deliver most of the TA required to submit NRCS projects. They work as bridges between NRCS staff and partner staff to demystify the NRCS process. In addition to RCPP practices, this exposes the partner staff to more traditional NRCS funding streams and should help meet long-term delivery goals.



GRIP Focal Counties in Oklahoma and Texas.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Tips for Successful RCPP Applications

Between RCPP’s inception in 2014 and 2019, NRCS awarded over \$1 billion to 350 partnerships. These innovative projects have proven to be successful collaborations, however, there have been lessons learned along the way. Prospective applicants can utilize these lessons to make their proposal stronger and result in a successful outcome for the resource. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has created an RCPP working group to connect wildlife focused RCPP partnerships and serve as a clearinghouse of information on the administration, progress, and types of work performed

by partners and NRCS in existing RCPP partnerships. A survey of current wildlife related RCPP projects revealed several common suggestions:

- Proposals must be creative and solve local problems with local solutions. The goal is not to use RCPP to recreate an existing program.
- Applicants should learn how NRCS does business (i.e., Field Office Technical Guide, Practice Standards, Practice Cost Lists, local offices, area offices, state offices, etc.)
- Communication is key. Lead partners should communicate with state NRCS offices before applying,

when finalizing the agreement, and when implementing the partnership agreement. Lead partners are relied upon to act as an intermediary between the NRCS RCPP State Coordinator and all other project partners

- Partners should collaborate early and often with local NRCS and state leadership to be sure the proposal is strong and that it includes proven strategies as much as possible.
- Partners should identify how they will add to NRCS’s technical assistance capacity. Administrative functions, such as processing applications, are often the chokepoint in program workflows. To the extent possible, partners should consider providing staff to help in this regard, in addition to providing outreach, promotion, and traditional on-the-ground technical assistance.
- Lead partners and NRCS should work together to provide strong training and project evaluation direction to the entire project delivery team across contributing partner organizations.
- Don’t overcomplicate things. Start small and build more as the partnership grows. Successful programs often use relatively few program authorities and practices.
- Partners should work with NRCS to tailor project ranking processes to meet the desired resource outcomes.
- Consult the NABCI [Field Guide to Developing Partnerships](#)

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, 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
[RCPP Program Page](#)
[RCPP Critical Conservation Areas](#)
[RCPP How to Apply](#)

RCPP Program Details - Partnership Agreements

Applicants of successful proposals will enter into partnership agreements with NRCS that define the

Case Study

Appalachian Forestland Enhancement for War-

Since the 1960s, cerulean warbler populations have declined nearly 75% across their range. As the majority of cerulean warbler distribution occurs on private lands, and the core of that distribution is in the Appalachian Mountains, working with private landowners is critical to the successful conservation of the species. In 2015, the Appalachian Mountain Joint Venture (AMJV) worked with over 20 partners to initiate the *Cerulean Warbler Appalachian Forestland Enhancement Project*, a unique 5-year project funded through the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program to focus cerulean warbler conservation efforts on private lands.



Barth Schorre



The AMJV Cerulean Warbler Forest Management Guidelines recommend shelterwood-type harvests to remove a portion of the timber from a forest stand, creating canopy gaps that not only attract cerulean warblers but also encourage the regeneration of oak and other valuable tree species. Photo: AMJV.

The partnership used a three-pronged approach of enhancing over 9,000 acres of forest habitat on private lands, restoring 680 acres of retired surface mines to productive forests, and permanently protecting 8,200 acres of working forest land using The Nature Conservancy’s Working Woodlands easement program. Each of these strategies relies on voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs to implement sustainable, scientifically-based forest management and restoration practices developed by AMJV partners. These practices not only enhance forest habitat for cerulean warblers, but also improve forest health and the future value of timber, providing a “win-win” for landowners.

Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

The 2018 Farm Bill continues the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) that helps states fund access and habitat improvement programs. The bill authorizes the program through 2023 with \$50 million in funding, and directs awardees, to the extent possible, to target funding to CRP and WRE landowners.

As of 2019, VPA-HIP has opened 6,918,507 acres of private lands to outdoor recreation, while boosting rural economies and improving habitat.

States and 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.

Case Study

Making Habitat and Public Access a Priority in Illinois

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is getting the most bang for the buck—especially when it comes to habitat improvement on private land—with the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The IDNR started its public access program, the Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP), in 2011 with its first VPA-HIP grant. From the very beginning, IRAP wanted to assist landowners with improving the habitat on their lands. Landowners who were in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and Conservation Reserve Program were initially targeted for hunting leases. Later, as the IRAP expanded, more acres in various conservation programs were included. Under the 2018 Farm Bill, IRAP is targeting the lands enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easement Program.

In order to get habitat on the ground effectively and efficiently, the IRAP team developed two Habitat Strike Teams. By partnering with Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, and the National Great Rivers Research Educational Center, the two on-the-ground teams went to work on thousands of acres throughout Illinois. This partnership has led to various habitat practices being implemented on IRAP leased acres and resulted in an opportunity to educate landowners in managing their land for habitat. Hunters using the land have noticed as well. Since IRAP’s inception, more than 24,000 acres have been leased for hunting, and more than half of those leased acres have had habitat restoration implemented on them.

From IRAP’s total leased hunting acres, approximately one-third are also enrolled in various federal and state conservation programs. Of these, IRAP has enrolled 1,495 acres of targeted WRE/WRP and plan to add to that number with the 2018 Farm Bill.



IRAP prairie restoration in its second year, implemented by the IRAP Habitat Strike Team located in St. Clair county, IL. Photo: IDNR.



IRAP Habitat Team Leader, Tom Branson, conducting a prescribed burn on public access land. Photo: IDNR.



Acronyms

ACEP	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
AFA	Alternative Funding Arrangement
ALE	Agricultural Land Easement
APF	Announcement for Program Funding
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
EBI	Environmental Benefits Index
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
FA	Financial Assistance
FSA	Farm Service Agency
GSS	Grasslands of Special Significance
HFRP	Healthy Forests Reserve Program
HELC	Highly Erodible Land Conservation
LWG	Local Working Group
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NGO	Non-governmental Organizations
RCPP	Regional Conservation Partnership Program
SGI	Sage Grouse Initiative
SAFE	State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement
STC	State Technical Committee
TA	Technical Assistance
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

Retired Program Acronyms

ACP	Agricultural Conservation Program
FRPP	Farm and Ranchland Protection Program
GRP	Grassland Reserve Program
SCS	Soil Conservation Service
WHIP	Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program
WRP	Wetlands Reserve Program



Mike Jones



Andy Lawrence

Resources

2014 Farm Bill Field Guide - http://amjv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2014_Farm_Bill_Guide-to-Fish-and-Wildlife-Conservation.pdf
2021 NABCI Field Guide to Developing Partnerships - <https://nabci-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Partnerships-NABCI-20210120.pdf>

General USDA, Conservation District Resources

Farm Services Agency - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov>
FSA Agency History - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/about-fsa/history-and-mission/agency-history/index>
Natural Resources Conservation Service - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov>
NRCS Agency History - http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=nrcs143_021392
NRCS Field Office Technical Guides - <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/fotg/>
NRCS State Technical Committee - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/stc/>
Technical Service Providers Information - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/tsp/>
National Association of Conservation Districts - <https://www.nacdn.org>

Landscape and Species Conservation Resources

Landscape Conservation Initiatives - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/initiatives/?cid=stelprdb1042113>
Working Lands for Wildlife - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/plantsanimals/fishwildlife/?cid=stelprdb1046975>

Assessment and Evaluation Resources

Conservation Effects Assessment Project - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/nra/ceap/>
CEAP-Wildlife - <https://nrcs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=2205f3e668ff447093ceb2f7b95b2267>

Conservation Compliance Resources

NRCS Conservation Compliance Site - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/farmbill/?cid=nrcseprd1542016>
FSA Conservation Compliance Site - https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/payment-eligibility/conservation_compliance/index
AD-1026 Form - <https://forms.sc.egov.usda.gov/efcommon/eFileServices/eForms/AD1026.PDF>

EQIP Resources

EQIP Program Site - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip/>
Landscape Conservation Initiatives - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/initiatives/?cid=stelprdb1042113>
Conservation Innovation Grants Program - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig/>
CIG On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/cig/?cid=nrcseprd1459039>
Apply for EQIP - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcseprd1342638>
Conservation Activity Plan - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcseprd1555433>
List of Conservation Practices - https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/cp/ncps/?cid=nrcs143_026849

Conservation Stewardship Program Resources

Conservation Stewardship Program - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/csp/>
CSP Enhancements and Bundles - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/csp/?cid=nrcseprd1288624>
Apply for CSP - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/csp/?cid=nrcseprd1288620>

CRP Resources

CRP Program Site - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index>
CRP Sign-Up Information - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/crp-general-sign-up/index>
CREP Information - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-enhancement/index>
SAFE Information - https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafilms/FactSheets/2019/crp_safe_initiative-fact_sheet.pdf

ACEP Resources

ACEP Program Site - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/acep/?cid=stelprdb1242695>
HFRP Program Site - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/forests/?cid=stelprdb1242716>

RCPP Resources

RCPP Program Page - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/>
RCPP Critical Conservation Areas - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1254053>
RCPP How to Apply - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/rcpp/?cid=nrcseprd1477816>



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