

Incentivize Private Landowners to Conserve Wildlife and Habitat and Provide Access for Hunting

More than two-thirds of the land area in the United States is privately owned in farms or ranches (915 million acres) and private forests (300 million acres). Regulatory programs protect many habitats and ecosystems, but the core of private land conservation policy in the U.S. drives voluntary, incentive-based programs to improve habitat while also promoting markets for sustainably-managed agricultural products. These programs incentivize habitat conservation on private lands by offering cost-shares and grants to landowners and producers that improve both their bottom line and the quality of wildlife habitat on their land.

Wetlands and Grasslands Conservation

- Reaffirm a national policy goal of no net loss of wetlands while protecting and enhancing remaining wetlands and streams.
EPA; Defense/COE

President George H.W. Bush first set a national policy goal of “no net loss” of wetlands in 1989. The next Administration should reaffirm this national policy goal and achieve no net loss of wetlands while also enhancing and protecting the nation’s remaining wetlands and streams. Incentive and cost-share programs for wetlands restoration, management, and protection contained in the *North American Wetlands Conservation Act* (NAWCA) and Farm Bill programs should be pursued vigorously to sustain conservation and water quality and quantity in North America.

Other Farm Bill provisions such as conservation compliance and Sodsaver ensure that federal farm policy precludes wetland drainage or conversion of native grasslands. Under this direction, landowners must



conserve wetland and grassland habitats on their land in exchange for participating in federal farm programs. These practices must be maintained to ensure that agricultural production does not work at cross-purposes to basic conservation standards that have been a normal part of farming operations for decades.



Farm Bill Conservation Programs

- Fully fund and implement conservation programs authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill and encourage landowner participation in CRP, ACEP, EQIP, and other programs. **Congress; Agriculture/NRCS, FSA**
- Continue and expand the successful Working Lands for Wildlife partnership, as directed under the 2018 Farm Bill, to encourage conservation of habitats for at-risk species on agricultural land and provide producers with regulatory certainty. **Agriculture/NRCS; Interior/FWS**
- Ensure that vegetation planted as part of CRP or other Farm Bill conservation programs provides benefits to wildlife in addition to soil health, water quality, and carbon sequestration, including by encouraging the use of native vegetation in conservation program implementation, where practicable. **Agriculture/NRCS, FSA**

The Farm Bill is the largest single source of funding for conservation on private lands, with the current *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018* dedicating approximately \$6 billion in annual funding. There are a number of individual programs within the Farm Bill that provide important wildlife habitat conservation benefits.

USDA must implement all authorized programs to realize all intended benefits. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) should be enhanced to ensure that vegetation planted and managed on enrolled land provides wildlife habitat values as well as soil erosion, water quality, and carbon sequestration benefits. Financial assistance programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) are also essential to encourage wildlife conservation benefits. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) initiative, Working Lands for Wildlife, adds the benefit of regulatory certainty to participants in Farm Bill conservation programs.

Easement programs, such as the Agricultural Conservation

Easement Program (ACEP), which includes Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), provide significant benefits to both wetland and upland wildlife while also promoting long-term stewardship of private lands. We urge USDA to maximize public investment in ACEP, including maintaining historical allocations for both ALE and WRE, while prioritizing easements that will enhance wildlife conservation benefits of land being protected.

The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) provides block grants to state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies to fund recreational access and habitat improvement programs on private lands. In addition, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) has proven to be a huge success in its ability to leverage private dollars to maximize federal investment in innovative, creative, and tailored conservation projects throughout the country. We encourage USDA to continue supporting these highly successful and popular programs.

Conservation Easements

- Reaffirm the federal government's commitment to supporting land and habitat protection through conservation easements that encourage keeping existing wetlands, grasslands, and forests in conservation uses. **Interior/FWS; Agriculture/NRCS, FS**
- Provide mandatory funding for Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) and modify it so it would have two categories of eligible land: general forest land and forest land of special significance. **Congress**

The sale or donation of easements preserves agricultural landscapes, helps producers keep their working lands working, and protects wetland and grassland habitats. Easements available through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, funded through purchases of federal Duck Stamps and NAWCA funds, have been the backbone of habitat conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region and other core habitats for nearly sixty years. We encourage the

Administration and Congress to reaffirm the importance of these tools that conserve and protect the public benefits of these landscapes for future generations to enjoy. We urge that mandatory funding be provided for HFRP and that it be modified to increase its applicability to forests beyond those that harbor important species, but are worthy of protection for other uses.