

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB

2018 FARM BILL

Importance of the Farm Bill to Conservation

All too often we associate public land with wildlife, but private lands are vitally important to the conservation of wildlife in the United States because they constitute 74 percent of the land ownership in the lower 48 states. In addition, 50 percent (890 million acres) of the land-base in the contiguous United States is managed as cropland, pastureland and rangeland; 30 percent (673 million acres) is managed as forest land.

The successes in conservation and wildlife management we have been able to achieve in this country are anchored by key pieces of legislation that have been passed in the last 100 years. One such critical benefit legislation has been the Farm Bill, which had its beginning in the 1930s. Back then it was known as the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

This initial legislation was intended to help steer the country out the Great Depression. It addressed widespread domestic hunger, falling crop prices for farmers and the catastrophic Dust Bowl that resulted in massive soil erosion. This Act restricted agricultural production by paying farmers subsidies not to plant part of their land, let natural vegetation grow, and remove excess livestock. Its purpose was to reduce the surplus of agricultural commodities, and therefore effectively raise the value of crops. Periodically, the legislation is re-enacted with evolving policy, addressing commodity payments such as disaster and price supports, as well as nutrition programs.

The “Farm Bill” of recent times is a compilation of many different acts that have been passed by the United States Congress to enhance agricultural productivity and conservation on private lands. The Farm Bill is not a single piece of legislation but a dynamic series of Acts over the past nine decades that have established and updated many helpful programs. It affects every citizen from those who eat to everyone who grows what we eat.

From a sportsmen’s perspective, the most effective conservation provisions of the Farm Bill are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetland Reserve Easements, or WRE, and the wildlife habitat practices in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). These provisions directly impact wildlife habitat, and therefore healthy upland bird, waterfowl and big game populations. The most effective forestry provisions in the Farm Bill are the Timber Innovation Act and Good Neighbor Authority.

The 2018 Farm Bill continues the voluntary, locally-led, incentive-based conservation model. It builds on the success of the 2014 Farm Bill by streamlining, simplifying and improving program administration. The Bill also provides additional investment in soil health practices, such as cover crops, ultimately providing “downstream” benefits to communities in the form of cleaner air and water, healthier soils, healthier forests, and more wildlife habitat.

Title II: Conservation

Funding: There were no funding cuts to the Conservation Title.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): The Bill allows for an increased acreage cap of 27 million acres by 2023. It includes provisions to increase the conservation of grassland by 2 million acres, which are important to species such as sage grouse and pronghorn.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): The bill continues the commitment to working lands by increasing funding for EQIP to \$2.025 billion by fiscal year 2023. Furthermore, the bill increases its emphasis on enhancing and restoring wildlife habitat and invasive species control by up to \$200 million annually.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): The bill continues comprehensive working lands conservation by reforming and adding much needed flexibility to CSP. By removing the average \$18 per acre funding requirement for the program, the bill intends to better incentivize farmers to address local resource concerns.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): The Bill restores funding for ACEP to \$450 million per year. It increases the amount of land in a county that can be restored to wetlands from 10 percent to 15 percent of a county's cropland base. The bill continues to perform the functions of conserving wetlands and bottomland hardwoods through Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), which are important to waterfowl and played a major role in the recovery of the Louisiana black bear.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated the authorities of the many regional programs into RCPP, where USDA partners with private organizations to address natural resource concerns. Targeted conservation initiatives are developed on the local level and selected by USDA through a competitive, merit-based application process. The bill increases funding for RCPP to \$300 million per year and streamlines the program to allow greater flexibility.

Increasing Landowner Participation: The conference report removes impediments to conservation adoption by eliminating requirements for entities to have a SAM/DUNS number and providing USDA the ability to waive AGI limits for environmentally sensitive land of special significance, such as corridors for big game movement.

Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot: According to USDA, feral swine cause an estimated \$1.5 billion in damage to property, crops, and wildlife habitat annually and present a risk for the transmission of several catastrophic diseases. The bill establishes the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot program with \$75 million for threat assessment, control methods and land restoration.

Voluntary public access: The Bill provides \$50 million for the Voluntary Public Access Program, which funds walk-in access for hunting and fishing across the country.

Title VIII: Forestry

Expedites environmental reviews: The Bill encourages proper management for healthy and productive forests, and incentivizes infrastructure and new market opportunities while simplifying environmental reviews. It reduces the threat of catastrophic wildfires by renewing the insect and disease categorical exclusion (CE). The bill also expedites treatment of federal land by authorizing a CE of up to 4,500 acres to provide habitat for the greater sage grouse and mule deer.

Empowers state and local decision making—Good Neighbor Authority (GNA): The Bill also promotes forest management by empowering partners to remove timber through cooperative agreements or contracts to perform watershed restoration and forest management services on National Forest System lands. The Bill expands that authority to include counties and Indian Tribes to provide more localized forest management and timber removal on our federal forests.

Utility infrastructure rights-of-way vegetation management pilot: The bill authorizes the USFS to create a privately-funded pilot program to conduct vegetation management near electricity infrastructure outside of a right-of-way. This program will help reduce fuel load, decrease wildfire risk, and promote electricity reliability.

Community Wood Energy (and Wood Innovation) Program: Markets are essential for healthy forests and habitat for species such as elk and deer. The conference report modifies the Community Wood Energy Program to support grants for new infrastructure, new mills, and added capacity that will use low value, small-diameter material.

Timber Innovation Act: For successful construction, tall wood buildings require research to ensure their safety and compliance with all building standards. The conference report establishes a performance-driven research and development program to help advance tall wood building construction in the United States.

Report on wildfire, insect infestation, and disease prevention on federal land: The Bill directs USDA to update Congress on management efforts to address forest health.

State and Private Forest Landscape-Scale Restoration Program: The Bill expands existing authorities to focus the Landscape Scale Restoration Program on cross-boundary restoration to address concerns such as watershed restoration, wildfire risk reduction and wildlife habitat conservation.

Promotes cross-boundary wildfire mitigation: The conference report authorizes new collaborative tools to treat hazardous fuel loads on bordering non-federal lands.

Resource Advisory Committees (RAC): The conference report empowers local governments and local decision making by streamlining the RAC appointment process to allow more effective local collaboration on management projects and to expedite results.

Title X: Research, Extension, and Related Matters

Chronic Wasting Disease – Prioritize chronic wasting disease research (CWD), which will help land-grant universities throughout the United States better understand and combat the spread of CWD.