



# 2023 Farm Bill Reauthorization Priorities

---

In the United States, approximately two-thirds of the land area is privately owned with the vast majority of that in farms and ranches. In addition, approximately two-thirds of the forested land area is privately owned (with more than 10 million different owners) and one-third of forested land is public, with the largest public forest landowner being the U.S. Forest Service.

Farms, ranches, and forest lands provide a significant amount of the wildlife habitat and much of the opportunities for hunters to recreate. Yet, much of the federal forest acreage is overcrowded and has poor habitat, besides being susceptible to catastrophic wildfires that risk lives and property every year. In addition, producers need to be able to meet their agricultural objectives which may or may not involve conservation. Finding a way to help producers and forest landowners meet their objectives while offering them funding and technical assistance to address ecological needs is a win-win prospect.

The conservation and forestry provisions within the Farm Bill are crucial to helping private landowners and the Forest Service maintain and improve wildlife habitat. The Boone and Crockett Club and its members have actively engaged in public and private forest lands restoration and conservation policy changes to the Farm Bill—and it continues to be one of our top legislative priorities.

As Congress debates the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, the Club is actively working to ensure that the conservation and forestry titles are robust and are improved to address current needs.



USDA/FPAC - Preston Keres

# Boone and Crockett Club Farm Bill Recommendations

---

## CREATE NEW FOREST CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAM

---

Currently, the Farm Bill's conservation title has programs specifically geared toward farmland, grasslands, and wetlands, however, there is no regularly funded program specifically for forestland. There is also no federal forest easement program where eligible entities and land trusts can hold easements. The proposed solution is to create a Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) in the Farm Bill by amending the existing Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP), a program the Club conceptualized in 2003. The program will prevent forestland conversion to non-forest uses by purchasing development rights from private landowners. Creating this program would address a significant gap in conservation easement funding for forested lands at a time when forest conservation is critically needed.

As a forest-focused program to complement the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), FCEP has two components: Forest Land Easements (FLE) and Forest Reserve Easements (FRE), both of which target private forestland and support sustainable forest management. Through FLE, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will work with eligible entities, such as land trusts, to purchase working forest conservation easements, filling a critical void among federal programs. FLE—structured similarly to ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)—is based on a successful model of NRCS partnering with land trusts and other entities to keep working lands working. With the FRE, NRCS will hold the easement; it is similar to the highly popular Wetlands Reserve Easement.



**The Forest Conservation Easement Program is designed to significantly improve and enhance the ability of the NRCS to:**

- Conserve working forests at scale through conservation easements.
- Prioritize keeping forests as forests; continue to provide a multitude of environmental, economic, and societal benefits.
- Help landowners restore, enhance, and protect habitat for threatened and endangered species while increasing carbon sequestration.
- Help prevent encroachment around military bases.
- Provide landowners with two proven options for placing voluntary conservation easements on their land.

## REVERSE THE 9TH CIRCUIT COTTONWOOD DECISION

---

With so many collaborative efforts in place on our National Forests, the Club supports fixing the *Cottonwood* 9th Circuit precedent that has spawned frivolous litigation that delays important forest treatment projects endorsed by stakeholder-led collaborative efforts. To accelerate hazardous fuels reduction projects, and fire and fuel break projects—as supported by stakeholder groups—the Farm Bill should include the bipartisan bill (S. 1540) that reverses *Cottonwood* and, in turn, protects communities from devastating wildfires and makes a positive contribution to climate change.



## IMPROVE AGRICULTURE CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAM – WETLAND RESERVE EASEMENTS

The ACEP-Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE) has restored over 1 million acres of bottomland hardwoods and wetlands in the Lower Mississippi River Valley—a big factor in helping to recover the former federally threatened Louisiana black bear—and has similar success throughout the country. With the program, an easement is placed on enrolled land and it is restored; participating landowners can conduct limited grazing, forest management, or other compatible uses.

### There are several policy improvements recommended for the program:

- Amend ACEP to remove the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) requirements for participant eligibility to receive program payments. This would reduce application delays and secure opportunities for landscape-scale, ecologically based enrollment.
- Include new provisions for Socially Disadvantaged Producers for resolving heirship issues and allowing for 30-year contracts. This would address known issues and barriers to socially disadvantaged landowner access and use of the program.
- Include language requiring continual stewardship of enrolled WRE acres. Like with public forests, stewardship and management of wetlands is important. Including this provision in the reauthorization process would provide a clear priority for the Secretary to address stewardship of existing enrolled acres, previously not addressed in the statute.
- Eliminate the specific percent acreage limitation for WRE and add wetland soil capability class IIIw to the list of exempt acres for enrollment calculation purposes. Placing a uniform 25% cap in the county allows for continued enrollment when the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is not being used in the county or parish. These changes could help the WRE improve producer profitability and restore habitat by removing marginal lands from agricultural production.
- Adjust language for the easement payments schedule to only require scheduled payments over 5 to 10 annual payments when requested by the owner. This allows flexibility for agricultural producers to address tax implications of their easement payments.

## ADD TRIBES AND COUNTIES UNDER GOOD NEIGHBOR AUTHORITY

Since Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) was first authorized by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill, at least 38 states have participated in over 380 GNA projects. Through these GNA projects, states are contributing to the restoration of federal forests on an unprecedented scale. However, projects should not exclude pockets of county or tribal forests, as wildfires have no boundaries and communities want holistic treatments. While GNA has expanded the workforce implementing vital forest health projects by including state forestry professionals, that success should not forestall further improvements to the statute.

Include the *Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act* (H.R. 1450 and S. 697) in the Farm Bill. The bills, which are endorsed by bipartisan members of both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, would give tribes and counties the same authority as states to retain GNA project revenues to reinvest in conservation, providing a significant incentive to engage and partner on critical forest management.



## REAUTHORIZE THE VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS – HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

The Club supports reauthorization of the Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) at \$150 million over 5 years, as included in the Voluntary Public Access Improvement Act of 2023 (H.R. 5186 and S.1161). This program has been successful in improving hunter access to private lands across the United States via state and tribal wildlife agency programs. The VPA-HIP authorization in the 2018 Farm Bill was fully subscribed and recipient agencies continue to demonstrate additional need. VPA-HIP is widely supported by the hunting and angling community, as well as private landowners.

## AN INNOVATIVE MECHANISM TO HELP PAY FOR FARM BILL CONSERVATION

The Club has been working to identify an offset for the costs of Farm Bill conservation programs. Enrolling unproductive and marginal cropland in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) generates significant savings in the outlays associated with Federal crop insurance, commodity program payments, and Federal disaster assistance programs, and has very little, if any, impact on the world's food supply. For example, enrolling land in the WRE will, over the next 10 years, save over \$2 billion in crop insurance subsidies, commodity payments, and disaster assistance. A similar offset associated with CRP is estimated to provide approximately \$9 billion in savings from traditional outlays. In addition, enrolling unproductive and marginal land in these conservation programs will help farmers and ranchers maximize their financial returns by retiring cropland with low or negative profits. As Ducks Unlimited has often said, "Farm the best and conserve the rest."

### CONTACTS

**Boone and Crockett Club**  
250 Station Drive, Missoula MT 59801  
conservation@boone-crockett.org

**James L. Cummins** – B&C President  
jcummins@wildlifemiss.org

**David Anderson** – B&C Professional Member  
Natural Resource Results LLC  
danderson@naturalresourceresults.com

**Charlie Booher** – B&C Professional Member  
Watershed Results  
charlie@watershedresults.com

