

REAUTHORIZING A NEW FARM BILL

Many species of big game and associated wildlife, as well as ranchers and farmers, have all been the beneficiaries of legislation whose seeds were planted during the Great Depression.

All too often we associate public lands with wildlife, but private lands are vitally important because they constitute 74 percent of the land ownership in the lower 48 states. In addition, 50 percent, or 890 million acres, of this land base is managed as cropland, pastureland, and rangeland. Thirty percent is managed as forestland.

Besides being a significant part of the American landscape, private lands need to be kept in private hands and on the tax rolls. Private land conservation helps ensure working and natural lands are affordable for the next generation. It is voluntary and pro-private property rights, helping landowners retain many property rights, including to own, use, sell, and pass on to their heirs. I am proud to be the fifth-generation owner of our family's farm and forestland in Mississippi.

The successes in conservation and wildlife management are anchored by key pieces of legislation from the last 135 years since Theodore Roosevelt founded the Boone and Crockett Club. As the pioneer and architect of North America's conservation movement from the late 1880s to the 1930s, the Club led the way in creating the National Forest System, National Park System, National Wildlife Refuge System, and federal agencies to oversee them. The Club was involved in organizing a system of state wildlife agencies—especially their funding—and modern-day game laws from the 1930s to the late 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Club witnessed the development of modern-day environmental regulations. However, one piece of the conservation system was still missing—the one involving private lands. In the early 1990s, the Club and our members began placing a great emphasis on designing a series of private land conservation programs, especially in the Farm Bill.

However, the bill 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 of the Great Depression. It addressed widespread domestic hunger, falling crop prices, and the catastrophic Dust Bowl. It was proposed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, a cousin of TR.

The Farm Bill of recent times is a compilation of many different Acts over the past nine decades. Reauthorized every five years, it is one of the largest single sources of conservation spending in the federal budget and represents the largest federal investment in private lands conservation. It has evolved over time to include conservation and forest policy, addressing commodity issues such as disaster payments, crop insurance, and price supports, as well as nutrition. It affects every citizen—from those who eat to everyone who grows what we eat to those who hunt or fish for what they eat.

The Boone and Crockett Club and its members have left a significant mark on past Farm Bill policy. In 1996 the Club played an active role in conceptualizing and getting the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program included in the Farm Bill, which made wildlife benefits a significant objective of Farm Bill policy. In 2002 it was active in including provisions in the Conservation Reserve Program to conserve bottomland hardwoods and in establishing the Healthy Forests Reserve Program. In 2008 the Club was able to include provisions for an Emergency



James L. Cummins
PRESIDENT

Forest Restoration Program and an Endangered Species Recovery Program. This year, we are taking the lead in creating the Forest Conservation Easement Program and working to grow and improve the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. These provisions directly impact wildlife habitat and, therefore, healthy game bird and big game populations.

We have also taken the lead in identifying an offset. Enrolling unproductive and marginal cropland in the Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetland Reserve Easement Program 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 Wetland Reserve Easement will, over the next ten years, save over \$2 billion in crop insurance subsidies, commodity payments, and disaster assistance. We are also working on a similar offset associated with the Conservation Reserve Program and estimate the savings associated with it will be over \$15 billion. In addition, enrolling unproductive and marginal land in these conservation programs will help farmers and ranchers maximize their financial returns by retiring



James with Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Terry Cosby. Chief Cosby was the keynote speaker at the Boone and Crockett Club's Annual Spring Dinner at the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in March 2023.



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Tree planting crews plant bottomland hardwood seedlings on land enrolled in a Wetlands Reserve Easement along the Mississippi River near Natchez, Mississippi.

cropland with low or negative profits. As Ducks Unlimited has often said, “Farm the best and conserve the rest.”

Wetlands Reserve has restored over 1 million acres of bottomland hardwoods and wetlands in the Lower Mississippi River Valley, which is helping to recover the federally threatened Louisiana black bear. 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. I have worked on this program since it was authorized in 1991.

The Farm Bill being reauthorized this year will be the seventh one I have worked on. And with each one, I am reminded of something a catfish farmer in the Mississippi Delta told me over 30 years ago. As a young biologist, I was meeting with him and stated that I thought it was really cool that I thought it was really cool that he was growing catfish. He responded by saying it was obvious I knew nothing about what he was doing or why he was doing it. He said he was not raising catfish, but turning catfish feed into dollar bills to feed his family. While I felt pretty stupid, I always remembered what he said. After all, it was simple economics. If we get the economics—or the

incentive—right, we will get conservation. With every Farm Bill I have worked on, I have kept that concept first and foremost.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and its successor component in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, has helped install a variety of fish and wildlife improvement projects on almost 10 million acres under 50,000 different contracts with private landowners. Landowners receive incentives to implement a diversity of conservation practices, such as native grass establishment, invasive species control, wetland restoration, big game migration corridor establishment, and forest restoration or enhancement, to name a few.

The Emergency Forest Restoration Program provides payments to owners of private forest lands to conduct emergency restoration of land after a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or wildfire. Emergency measures were defined as those necessary to restore forest health and forest-related resources damaged by a natural disaster. The program required that the damage, if not treated, would impair or endanger the land's natural resources and affect future use of the land.

Actions associated with the spotted owl crisis in the 1990s, specifically the whole-scale reduction in timber harvest—and hence forest management—in the Pacific Northwest was a wake-up call to wildlife biologists and foresters that care about the scientific management of forests. From my perch in the Deep South, we anticipated that the red-cockaded woodpecker would be next. We wanted to get ahead of the curve to improve its habitat and resulting populations in a voluntary manner before excessive regulation took effect, our capacity to manage land for whitetail deer and Eastern wild turkey was restricted, and our rural economy took a major hit.

The two greatest environmental regulatory mechanisms on private land are the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. The



THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB ASKS THAT YOU PLEASE THANK OUR TRAILBLAZERS WITH YOUR PATRONAGE.

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The Louisiana black bear has responded exceptionally well from habitat restoration through the various conservation programs of the Farm Bill.

Clean Water Act regulates wetlands and water quality; we have significant, voluntary, incentive-based mechanisms to improve them, and they are working well. As a nation, we don't have significant, voluntary, incentive-based mechanisms to help species listed pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, and that is big problem. We saw an opportunity to restore habitat—and hence improve populations—for listed species associated with forests. As such, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program was created to avoid listings and assist in the recovery of listed and at-risk species through restoration and protection of forest ecosystems. Land that optimized carbon sequestration was given priority, and that was 21 years ago before carbon sequestration was viewed as cool! Cost-effectiveness was required to maximize the environmental benefits per dollar expended.

The U.S. Forest Service has estimated that the U.S. population is expected to grow by more than 120 million people by the year 2050; conversion to non-forest uses

associated with this growth is expected to exceed 50 million acres. This is 50 million fewer acres of wild places and wild things, or about the size of Alabama and Mississippi combined. Given society's dependence on private lands and risks of conversion, the Farm Bill is vital if our nation is to continue to provide the ecosystem services that our citizens require—from sequestering carbon to filtering drinking water supplies to providing the experience of a lifetime when a young person takes his or her first deer.

Almost every day on the news, we hear about our national government and Congress in disarray, and it appears more partisan than ever. If Andrew Jackson and Davy Crockett were alive today, they would probably disagree with that; they would say it sounds a lot like the 1830s. The House and Senate Agriculture committees—the committees of jurisdiction for the Farm Bill—mostly still function like the rest of rural America; they work together to help get things done that are good for the farm, not just a political party or the next

election. Their members serve not to make a fuss but to make a difference. And I commend them for resisting the alternative.

The Farm Bill's private lands conservation programs have significantly impacted land managed for big game and associated wildlife, adding almost 150 million acres to our nation's conservation portfolio. While our country is facing many grave issues, I have to think TR would be proud of how the United States has advanced the system of conservation he created to expand beyond lands the government owns to those of the private landowner. But what keeps me and the entire Boone and Crockett policy team up late at night is worrying about how to keep the world's greatest system of hunting and conservation healthy for the next 135 years with all of the political, economic, social, technological, and environmental changes we are experiencing. I think the conservation system of the future will certainly better utilize technology, the tax code, and the supply chain to foster wild places and wild



Read more about the Club's involvement with the Farm Bill.

things. I also think that voluntary conservation on private lands will be where the greatest gains occur.

As I conclude this President's Message, I want to leave you with a quote from Aldo Leopold. It truly sums up the Farm Bill, and is good guidance for all of us as we continue to improve and further develop a system for the conservation of private lands. He said, "When the land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land—when both end up better by reason of their partnership—then we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, either in substance, or in character, or in responsiveness to sun, wind, and rain, then we have something else, and it is something we do not like." ■

Jan F. Cannon