



2012 FARM BILL PRIORITIES

The United States government spends billions of dollars every year on USDA agriculture benefit programs. Benefits include direct payments, crop insurance, and disaster assistance. The taxpayers who fund these subsidies should receive environmental benefits in return. Conservation programs have helped reduce soil and wetland loss, but agriculture remains a leading source of polluted streams in Illinois. High commodity prices and incentives for corn ethanol production are reversing the progress that has been made. This factsheet shares some of our ideas on how to increase conservation on agricultural lands.

Conservation Compliance

Commodity crop farmers participating in USDA benefit programs are subject to Conservation Compliance. The Highly Erodible Land, Swampbuster, and Sodbuster provisions are designed to reduce soil loss, protect wetlands, and improve water quality on the nation's cropland. There have been notable reductions in soil erosion since Conservation Compliance was enacted in 1985, but improvements have waned since the mid-90s. **Almost half of the cropland eroding at unsustainable rates is classified as non-highly erodible and thus not subject to Conservation Compliance.** In Illinois, cropland loses an average of 4 tons of soil per acre annually, and sedimentation degrades thousands of stream miles and lake acres.

We recommend the following policy changes to better safeguard the nation's supply of clean water and ability to produce food and fiber for generations to come:

- Include federal crop insurance among the USDA benefits subject to Conservation Compliance requirements
- To be eligible for USDA benefits, NRCS-approved conservation plans or systems must be applied to both highly erodible (HEL) and non-highly erodible cropland
- Require a minimum setback of 35 feet from perennial streams and lakes for cropland planted to annual crops
- Require treatment and/or prevention of ephemeral gully erosion on all agricultural land, not just HEL
- Mandate that at least 5% of eligible tracts receive an annual compliance review



2012 FARM BILL PRIORITIES

Conservation Programs

The USDA conservation programs provide numerous benefits to the nation's wildlife, water, and soil resources. Among the most popular programs for Illinois farmers are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Technical and financial assistance provided by USDA are crucial to the effective implementation of agricultural conservation. Targeted conservation - in the areas that need it most - will provide disproportionate benefits while maximizing investment.

We recommend the following policies to ensure that USDA conservation programs continue to meet public demand for conservation resources and environmental benefits:

- Ensure the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative remains a growing component of the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative
- Revise EQIP to place more emphasis on funding management and structural practices that reduce nutrient pollution from subsurface drainage
- Maintain funding for conservation programs by cutting commodity benefit programs (e.g., direct payments)
- Mandate enough funding to support demand for technical assistance provided by NRCS staff and third-party Technical Service Providers
- Strike provisions restricting public access to compliance and status review results and geospatial information regarding conservation program enrollment

Prairie Rivers Network is Illinois' statewide river conservation organization and the state affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

Prairie Rivers Network
1902 Fox Drive, Suite G
Champaign, IL 61820
217.344.2371

www.prairierivers.org

