

BY Aimee Weldon

The Farm Bill

STEADY FUNDING IN UNSTABLE TIMES

Since the 1985 Farm Bill, conservation programs and incentives for private land conservation have continued to expand with each successive five-year bill. Thanks to the advocacy of hundreds of land trusts and a national coalition of conservation, sportsmen's and agricultural organizations, as well as the Land Trust Alliance, the most recent Farm Bill, passed in May 2008, offers **more than \$23 billion** in conservation funding to protect, restore and manage land. This represents **the single greatest source of federal funding** for private land conservation and a goldmine of opportunities for land trusts.

The Farm Bill does not have a reputation for being simple, so becoming a savvy Farm Bill user first and foremost means learning to navigate and apply the complex alphabet soup of programs to your projects on the ground. But it shouldn't end there! Bringing your newfound expertise to the landowners that you work with and helping them to understand and select programs that will help them meet their needs also helps you to achieve your conservation and stewardship goals—without a need for additional capacity.

Furthermore, conservation programs under the 2008 Farm Bill remain well-funded despite the general economic downturn that is pinching conservation resources elsewhere. While we wait for the economy to get back on its feet, the Farm Bill offers an opportunity to bolster stewardship programs and help finance the protection and improvement of the lands we care about.

Here is a short guide on some of the most popular programs and their use.

Easement Programs

Easement programs under the Farm Bill are helping to conserve millions of acres of important landscapes across America. The following paragraphs describe the three largest easement programs in the 2008 Farm Bill. Each is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and allows enrollment at any time with projects ranked and selected according to state and national criteria one or more times each year.

FARM AND RANCH LANDS PROTECTION PROGRAM

FRPP The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farms, forests and rangelands in agricultural use. NRCS partners with eligible entities such as land trusts to acquire conservation easements from landowners, and will provide up to 50% of the fair market value of the

easement. Land trusts are responsible for providing a cash match of at least 25% of the *purchase price* of the easement, a small but important difference from the previous bill. This new rule encourages bargain sales, which reduce the purchase price and thus the cash match required, resulting in significant cost savings to land trusts.

In addition to cropland and pasture, eligible lands now include forests and other lands, such as buffers to development, which contribute to the economic viability of the land. The 2008 bill also gives land trusts full responsibility to hold and monitor easements as well as draft easement terms.

GRASSLAND RESERVE PROGRAM

GRP The Grassland Reserve Program is a voluntary conservation program that protects grazing lands or grasslands with significant ecological value. Participants voluntarily limit future development and crop production on

the land but retain the right to graze under an approved management plan. Important changes in the 2008 bill include the option for land trusts to partner with NRCS to acquire, hold and enforce easements similar to FRPP. In these cases, NRCS will provide up to 50% of the *purchase price* while the land trust is responsible for the remainder, again encouraging bargain sales of land and saving land trusts money.

WETLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM

WRP Although land trusts cannot hold easements under the Wetlands Reserve Program, it is nevertheless an important conservation tool to protect and restore wetland habitats. The program provides funds to restore wetlands on agricultural lands, while protecting them with a conservation easement. On qualified land, landowners can receive full compensation for a WRP easement on the wetland portion of their property from NRCS and, where appropriate, land trusts can work with landowners to combine other easement programs to protect the remainder. For example, a landowner could protect the sensitive wetlands on his or her property using a WRP easement and then use FRPP or GRP in partnership with a land trust to protect the

For more information on FRPP, GRP, WRP, WHIP and EQIP or for general updates, visit www.usda.gov/farmbill, or the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2008

For more information on the CRP programs, visit the Farm Service Agency website at www.fsa.usda.gov

To contact your NRCS State Conservationist, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/directory/specialists.html#StateOff

www.lta.org/policy/farm-bill

Join USDA leaders for the Rally 2009 session "How to Access Farm Bill Programs" on Tuesday, October 13, from 3:30 to 5 pm. For more information go to www.lta.org/rally

Land trusts can catalyze widespread conservation by becoming experts on these programs and bringing this expertise to their communities.

non-wetland portion. This not only ensures that the conservation values on the land receive the most appropriate level of protection, it also reduces the cost to the land trust by reducing the total remaining acreage to be placed under easement.

Restoration Programs

The new Farm Bill offers billions of dollars in financial assistance to help landowners—including land trusts with fee simple properties—improve or restore their land for the benefit of the environment. On easement properties, land trusts can achieve restoration goals by helping private landowners to select the right program and apply for funding. No technical expertise is required as NRCS provides free technical assistance to all program participants.

The following is a brief sampling of important Farm Bill restoration programs. Note that both WRP and GRP offer restoration cost-share as well—with or without entering into an easement agreement.

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

CRP Administered by the Farm Service Agency, CRP pays landowners to convert whole fields from production to natural cover for periods of 10-15 years. Partici-

pants receive annual rental payments and 50% cost-share to restore natural cover. Applications are competitively accepted during designated sign-ups only. However, for particularly significant practices, such as riparian, wetland or habitat restoration, landowners can enroll at any time under the Continuous CRP (CCRP). Qualified landowners can receive significantly greater financial assistance under CCRP including up to 90% cost-share, additional incentive payments and higher rental payments.

CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

CREP CREP is perhaps the most popular and cost-effective CRP program. A partnership between the USDA and individual states, CREP provides significant incentives to landowners to address high-priority conservation issues like water quality and wildlife habitat, usually in priority watersheds. Incentives can include cost-share, rental payments, easement options and tax credits. Enrolling in CREP makes good economic sense to many landowners as they are able to take marginal land out of production and address soil and water resource concerns while often making more money than they could by farming.

WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVES PROGRAM

WHIP As the name suggests, WHIP focuses on restoring fish and wildlife habitat on private agricultural land, including non-industrial, private forest lands or land that has the potential to support trees. The program provides cost-share of up to 75% to restore habitat.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM

EQIP The largest working lands program in the Farm Bill, EQIP covers a range of activities that improve soil, air, water and wildlife habitat. The program is open to agricultural producers only and supports projects like constructing waste management facilities, restoring stream banks, removing invasives, creating wildlife habitat, conducting prescribed burns and much more. EQIP provides cost-share assistance plus compensation for any income foregone to establish the practices. The 2008 bill explicitly includes creation of pollinator habitat and removal of invasive species as priorities for funding and opens eligibility to forest landowners. Almost any resource concern can be addressed with EQIP and there are significant opportunities for land trusts to help inform landowners of these options.

Mission-driven Conservation

The programs outlined above only scratch the surface of the many opportunities available under the 2008 Farm Bill. Strategic use of the full array of Farm Bill programs has the potential to shape the conservation landscape in new and significant ways. Although not all land trusts own eligible lands themselves, most work with landowners who do, and chances are those landowners are not fully informed of their options. NRCS simply does not have the capacity to conduct outreach to landowners as staff levels have remained level since 1985 despite a dramatic expansion in the number of conservation programs they manage. NRCS depends on partners like land trusts to help educate landowners and bring the best and most strategic conservation projects to them. This strategy also helps land trusts build strong relationships and credibility with landowners.

Widespread use of Farm Bill programs will address some of our most pressing conservation challenges—from declining water quality to biodiversity loss to climate change. So dive in today! 🌱

AIMEE WELDON IS THE MANAGER OF THE LIVING LANDS PROJECT AT DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE. SHE IS CURRENTLY DEVELOPING A LAND TRUST GUIDE TO THE FARM BILL AND HAS PROVIDED NUMEROUS WORKSHOPS AT REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LAND TRUST CONFERENCES ON THIS TOPIC.