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Wetlands, Waterfowl, and the Farm Bill

Now is the time to show your support for agricultural conservation programs that provide a host of benefits for wildlife and people



Several species of waterfowl gather on a flooded pasture in western Washington.

Photo © Chuck and Grace Bartlett

By Kellis Moss

The Agricultural Act of 2014, better known as the Farm Bill, is set to expire in September 2018, and inaction by Congress could result in the termination of conservation programs that benefit farmers, ranchers, and wildlife. The Farm Bill is the largest legislative vehicle for private lands conservation funding, impacting millions of acres of wetlands, grasslands, and other waterfowl habitats nationwide. That's why now is the time for Ducks Unlimited members across the country to contact their U.S. senators and representatives and ask them to support strong conservation funding in the 2018 Farm Bill. Together, we can continue the tradition of conserving our wetlands while meeting the food and fiber needs of a growing population.

As the September 2018 expiration date approaches, there are several important conservation programs that are in need of funding, including the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Unfortunately, the 2014 Farm Bill reduced conservation funding by nearly \$6 billion from the previous Farm Bill. These cuts directly impacted many on-the-ground conservation programs, including those that provide crucial habitat for waterfowl. As a result, DU's volunteers (volunteer?po=JF18), staff, and partners are now laying the groundwork (/conservation/public-policy?po=JF18) with key members of Congress and their staffs to discuss the many benefits these programs provide to farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen, while also building support for the 2018 Farm Bill. As a DU member (/join?po=JF18), you can make a real difference for wetlands and waterfowl by sharing your support for Farm Bill conservation provisions with your members of Congress and by inviting them to see firsthand how these programs have benefited the land, water, and wildlife in your area.

Here is a preview of DU's top priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is a voluntary, incentive-based conservation program that was established in the 2014 Farm Bill when the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) were restructured to cut costs and consolidate government programs. ACEP is composed of two easement functions: Wetlands Reserve Easements, which are very similar to the former WRP, and Agricultural Land Easements, which retain the purposes of the former FRPP and GRP.

ACEP provides technical and financial assistance directly to landowners to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the purchase of easements, which conserve habitat either permanently, for the maximum term allowed by the state, or for 30 years. Wetlands conserved through this program provide crucial habitat for waterfowl, improve water quality by filtering sediment, reduce flooding by storing excess runoff, and recharge groundwater. The program also reduces federal disaster payments by taking marginal flood-prone cropland out of production.

As Congress begins work on the 2018 Farm Bill, Ducks Unlimited is advocating an increase in ACEP funding levels. In the 2008 Farm Bill, WRP was funded at an average of \$410 million per year. However, when the 2014 Farm Bill authorization expires, ACEP funding will drop to \$250 million per year. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which implements ACEP, testified this summer before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry that demand for ACEP among private land-owners far exceeds available funding. In 2017, the NRCS was able to fulfill only 15 percent of ACEP wetland easement applications, and that number is expected to drop to only 7 percent this year due to current funding limitations. A substantial increase in funding for ACEP will be needed in the 2018 Farm Bill just to close the funding gap with this demand. Such a funding increase would ensure that ACEP continues to provide vital waterfowl habitat across the United States, from the breeding grounds of the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) to wintering and migration habitats in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and Great Lakes.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was established in the 2014 Farm Bill to encourage partnerships with producers to increase the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and natural resources at a regional level. By the end of the current Farm Bill, the NRCS and its partners will have invested over \$2.4 billion on more than 300 projects across the country. RCPP has expanded opportunities for the NRCS, conservation partners, and producers to work together to harness innovation, expand the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary private lands conservation.

The Rice Stewardship Partnership, which was founded by Ducks Unlimited and the USA Rice Federation, is built on these same principles to conserve working rice lands, water, and waterfowl. DU has partnered with USA Rice, the California Rice Commission, Lower Colorado River Authority, and rice farmers to use RCPP funding to improve water quality, increase water availability, and enhance habitat for nesting and wintering migratory birds. More than \$50 million in financial assistance will be delivered to rice producers to implement these conservation practices through six projects, which will positively impact 500,000 acres of rice and rice-rotation lands for wildlife. Improvements to RCPP in the next Farm Bill would help provide more conservation funding in other high-priority waterfowl conservation areas such as Chesapeake Bay and the Great Lakes.

Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is another voluntary, incentive-based program that will hopefully receive increased funding and acreage allocations in the 2018 Farm Bill. Among the most popular conservation programs in U.S. history, CRP helps private landowners protect environmentally sensitive land. Eligible farmers and ranchers are paid a yearly rental rate and cost-share assistance under 10- to 15-year contracts to restore highly erodible cropland to long-term grass cover, trees, or wetlands. These practices have prevented more than 8 billion tons of soil from eroding. CRP lands significantly reduce nitrogen and phosphorous runoff and sequester millions of tons of greenhouse gases each year. The program has also been a windfall for waterfowl, pheasants, and other grassland-nesting birds. Between 2005 and 2011, CRP lands produced an additional 1.5 million ducks each year. Unfortunately, CRP acres have been steadily declining on the prairies and elsewhere.

Although originally authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill for up to 45 million acres, CRP's highest enrollment was just under 37 million acres. Today, the acreage cap is only 24 million acres. CRP enrollment in the PPR peaked at approximately 8.3 million acres in 2007, but by 2016 had declined to only 4.3 million acres. The loss of CRP acres has taken a toll on both waterfowl and upland game birds. For example, when CRP enrollment was at its peak in 2007, Minnesota boasted a pheasant harvest of more than 650,000 birds. By 2016, the state's pheasant harvest had fallen to fewer than 200,000 birds.

Conservation Compliance

Among the most important provisions in the Farm Bill is conservation compliance, commonly known as "Swampbuster" and "Sodbuster." Since 1985, conservation compliance has required farmers receiving federal commodity and conservation payments to be stewards of the land by restricting the conversion of wetlands and the cultivation of highly erodible land. Over the past 30 years, conservation compliance has been linked to most USDA commodity programs to reduce soil erosion and deter wetland drainage. In exchange for taxpayer-funded commodity supports, producers have agreed to farm their most productive lands, while minimizing impacts on wetlands and highly erodible soils.

This longstanding agreement between American taxpayers and farmers has served as an effective model for promoting sustainable land use, conserving wildlife habitat, protecting drinking water, and providing flood protection. In the 2014 Farm Bill, a coalition of commodity, crop insurance, and wildlife groups came together to support linking crop insurance premium assistance to conservation compliance for the first time since 1996. Maintaining this provision in the 2018 Farm Bill is a top priority for Ducks Unlimited and its partners. Conservation compliance protects 3.3 million wetland acres nationwide, including 2.35 million acres in the U.S. portion of the PPR, which are at considerable risk of drainage. The estimated cost to the federal government of leasing these same wetland basins, which account for 40 percent of the PPR's carrying capacity for breeding waterfowl, would be \$1.3 billion over five years. Conservation compliance not only comes at zero cost to taxpayers but also saves the government money by discouraging the cultivation of marginal, flood-prone cropland, which is supported by federally funded disaster payments.

How You Can Make a Difference

Ducks Unlimited volunteers from across the country have been stepping up and speaking out in support of conservation funding in the 2018 Farm Bill. In 2017, many DU volunteers attended Farm Bill listening sessions held by the House Committee on Agriculture from New York to California and many places in between. In August, Nicole Montana Van Vleck, president and CEO of Montna Farms, attended a Farm Bill listening session in Modesto, California, and spoke about her farming operation and why conservation matters to her. In October, Trevor Bentley, a sixth-generation farmer and member of the SUNY Cobleskill college chapter of Ducks Unlimited, testified at a campus listening session about the importance of conservation on his New York farm. There will be many more opportunities to engage with members of Congress, both formally and informally, as debate over the 2018 Farm Bill advances. Congress is interested in your opinions. Consider reaching out to your representative and senators to help carry DU's conservation message forward.

With nearly 1 million members and other supporters across this great nation, Ducks Unlimited has always led the charge for conservation. Engaging in this important discussion is another way that you can help achieve DU's vision of filling the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow, and forever. Please don't hesitate to contact us for help in crafting your message. For more information, visit the DU website at ducks.org/farmbill ([/conservation/public-policy/farm-bill?poe=JF18](http://conservation/public-policy/farm-bill?poe=JF18)).

Kellis Moss is director of public policy at DU's Government Affairs Office in Washington, D.C.

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