



CONSERVATION (/CONSERVATION) > PUBLIC POLICY (/CONSERVATION/PUBLIC-POLICY)

Farm Bill

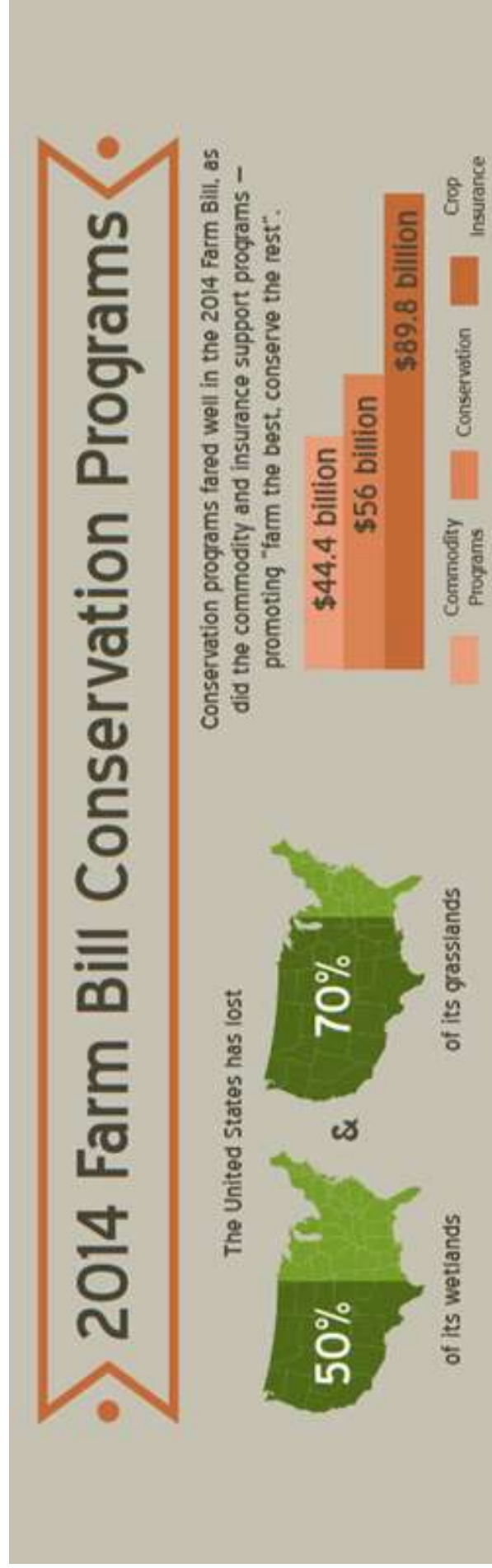
The importance of Farm Bill policy to Ducks Unlimited



Photo © Michael Furtman

Founded by concerned waterfowlers and foresighted conservationists in 1937, Ducks Unlimited has taken a continental, landscape approach (/conservation/where-we-work?poe=farmBill) to wetlands and waterfowl conservation. Guided by sound science (/conservation/how-du-conserves-wetlands-and-waterfowl?poe=farmBill) and supported by legions of dedicated volunteers (/how-to-help/volunteer?poe=farmBill) and members, DU has conserved more than 14 million acres of waterfowl habitat across North America.

DU's mission (/about-du?poe=farmBill) is to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people. The majority of the remaining wetlands in the United States are on private land, where most waterfowl are raised, migrate and winter. To further our mission, DU supports balanced agricultural policies that can help American farmers and ranchers be more competitive and successful in meeting demands for food, fiber, and energy. In addition, DU supports agricultural policies that conserve soil, water, wetlands, grasslands, and forests that people and wildlife depend on. The Farm Bill is the most effective tool for conserving wildlife habitat on private land, which is central to DU's mission.



DU has a long history of working with ranchers, farmers, and other private landowners across the country to enhance and restore millions of acres of critical waterfowl and other wildlife habitat. The agricultural conservation programs that are authorized and funded through the Farm Bill are the backbone of DU's cooperative conservation work with our partners in agriculture.

Renewed Wetland Protections

Since the passage of the 1985 Farm Bill, federal agricultural policies have encouraged producers to cultivate the most productive lands and minimize impacts on wetlands and highly erodible soils in exchange for federal farm program benefits. The 2014 Farm Bill re-coupled conservation compliance to crop insurance, which was de-coupled in 1996. This policy of "conservation compliance" has helped provide an effective safety net for America's farmers, ensure an abundant and safe food supply for consumers, and conserve crucial habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. Research has confirmed that this policy has been very effective in conserving wetlands on private lands over the past three decades. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that more than 3 million acres of "farmed wetlands" (areas that can be cultivated and planted in dry years, but can't be drained or filled by producers without losing farm program benefits) have been conserved nationwide thanks to this policy. In addition, conservation compliance has helped reduce soil erosion by approximately 295 million tons per year on more than 140 million acres of U.S. farmland.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The continental United States has already lost more than 50 percent of its wetlands and continues to lose these habitats at an alarming rate. One of the most successful federal conservation programs has been the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), which provides a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based way for private landowners, farmers, and ranchers to protect and restore wetlands on their property. In an effort to achieve budget savings and streamline existing programs, the 2014 Farm Bill consolidated several former conservation easement programs, like WRP, into the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Through ACEP, producers can enroll land in either an agricultural land or wetland conservation easement programs, which will receive more than \$2 billion in federal funding over the next five years. These easements are highly popular with private landowners and are an effective tool for conserving key waterfowl habitats in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, Gulf Coast, Chesapeake Bay watershed, Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes, Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), Central Valley of California, and many other areas of the nation.

ACEP will be administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and is the federal government's largest wetlands restoration program. It is designed to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Native American tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands that have been degraded or converted for agricultural use. ACEP provides an avenue for farmers and ranchers to remove marginal croplands from production. The program also provides societal benefits for improved water quality and quantity, reduced flood damage, and enhanced wildlife habitat.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), CRP provides annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to producers who take marginal cropland out of production and restore it to wildlife habitat. CRP is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers, which helps them safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Most of the land enrolled in

CRP on the prairies consists of restored grassland interspersed with numerous wetlands. During the program's peak enrollment, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) estimates CRP land in the PPR was credited with adding an estimated 2 million ducks to the fall flight each year.



CRP has historically produced a net increase of

2 MILLION

ducks per year in the Dakotas and Montana.**



= 100,000 ducks

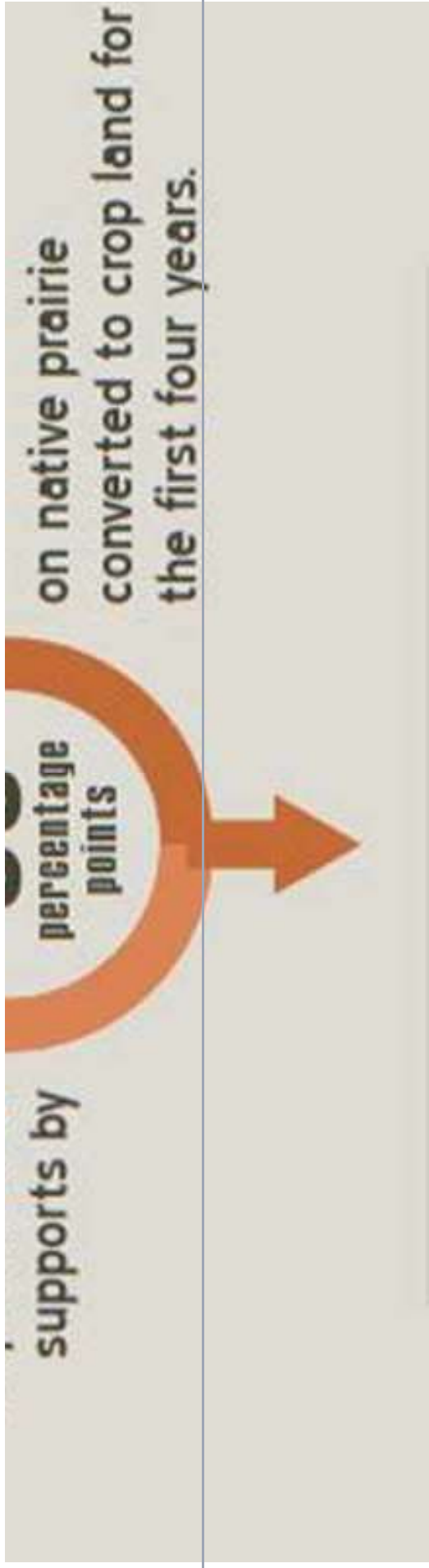


The 2014 Farm Bill will step down the national enrollment cap from 27.5 million acres in 2014 to 24 million acres by 2017. While funding cuts to conservation programs such as CRP present challenges, DU and its partners must also explore and develop new ways to make these programs more economically competitive and attractive to producers in an era of strong commodity prices. This paradigm shift will require habitat managers to think outside the box when developing new incentive options to promote conservation on private lands.

Sodsaver

The Prairie Pothole Region was once part of the largest grassland ecosystems in the world. However, the region has changed dramatically since the days of Lewis and Clark. After settlement, grasslands in the most productive portions of the PPR were converted to cropland to feed a growing world population. Today, grassland-dominated landscapes are largely confined to areas with poor soils, steep topography, and/or climatic conditions unsuitable for crop production. During 2006–2011, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska suffered a net loss of 1.3 million acres of grassland—a rate and scale not seen since the Dust Bowl era. In the PPR, grassland loss has exceeded the rate of protection by 500 to 600 percent. Widespread conversion of native prairie is harmful not only to waterfowl and other wildlife, but also to livestock producers, who in many areas depend on native rangelands to sustain their herds.





The 2014 Farm Bill provides much-needed relief to native grassland habitats on the Great Plains. The new law includes a stronger Sodsaver provision, which creates a federal disincentive for converting native prairie to cropland and applies to the top duck-producing states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. While Sodsaver does not prohibit producers from breaking new land, it ensures that they do so at their own financial risk, and not at the taxpayer's expense. Under the new law, farmers who plow native sod will have their crop insurance premium subsidies reduced by 50 percentage points during the first four years of production on newly converted lands. This provision also prohibits landowners from substituting yield performance from more productive acres in their operation to newly broken lands. Bringing this often marginally productive land into production provides little benefit to taxpayers, increases soil erosion and nutrient loss, and ultimately results in reduced water quality, increased flooding, and the loss of valuable wildlife habitat.

Read more about Sodsaver » ([/conservation/farm-bill/sodsaver-saving-americas-prairies?po=farmBill](#))

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