

# TRENDS IN U.S. AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

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Environmental problems related to agriculture, including water pollution and water use inefficiency, air pollution, loss of wildlife habitat, and invasive species, are a substantial concern facing the United States (Rabalais et al., 2001; Reganold et al., 2011). To address these problems, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) operates a number of conservation programs that use financial incentives and technical assistance to encourage farmers to protect environmental quality. These programs use a variety of different methods and emphasize different resource concerns (soil quality, water quality, wildlife habitat, etc.) but all rely on voluntary participation by farmers and rural landowners.

Conservation programs are often divided into two basic categories: land retirement and working lands programs. The land retirement category includes the largest and older existing conservation program, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), as well as several smaller easement programs that protect wetlands, grasslands, and farmland. The basic approach of CRP is to remove land from active agricultural production and restore natural plant cover for a fixed length of time, typically 10 years. Land retirement programs are best suited to protect and restore natural areas (such as wetlands), protect soil health, and provide wildlife habitat. While these programs can produce water quality benefits by reducing

surface runoff, there are a number of environmental problems poorly addressed by land retirement. The other category, working lands programs, address problems such as subsurface water pollution through artificial drainage, soil erosion on active farm fields, and water efficiency. The primary working lands programs are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which promotes adoption of single conservation practices like no-till and cover crops, and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which promotes whole-farm planning and adoption of comprehensive measures to address resource concerns.

bill, passed by Congress every four to six years. The last farm bill, passed in 2008, expired on September 31, 2012. Congress passed an extension of the 2008 Farm Bill in late 2012, extending authorization for most farm programs through September 2013. Congress plans to work on new farm legislation in the coming months. Despite this uncertainty, there seems to be relative agreement on the direction of conservation policy. Many of the trends promoted in the most recent farm bill debate reflect ongoing trends in program structure. These trends include: 1) continued shift from land retirement to working lands programs; 2) reduced funding for conservation; 3) consolidation and streamlining of conservation programs; and 4) a greater emphasis on regionalism and federal-local partnerships. Table 1 includes a summary of consequences of alternative approaches. Unlike the past several farm bills, the new farm legislation is likely to have a reduction in money spent on conservation, which will affect nearly every program.

While land retirement approaches have been in operation for a longer period of time, since the 2002 Farm Bill most of the growth in conservation spending has been on working lands programs (Figure 1). These programs are popular among farmers, as they allow farmers to experiment with management techniques or technologies they are unfamiliar with and help them comply with regulations. The increased focus on working lands programs is also driven by the persistence of environmental problems from working lands. With the increased national interest in fiscal discipline, the new farm bill is likely to see a decrease in funding for

Table 1. Alternatives and consequences to approaches to conservation policy.

Issue	Alternative	Consequences
Program approach	Land retirement emphasis	Better for wildlife habitat, not as effective for water, air pollution; may have less political support.
	Working lands emphasis	Better for water pollution; may have production benefits; politically popular.
Program consolidation	Larger number of programs	More programs can potentially better target the wide range of differing environmental problems.
	Smaller portfolio of programs	Reduces information barriers to farmers.
Federal-local partnerships	More partnerships	Shifting of costs from federal government to local agencies; better access to local networks, increased farmer trust and program participation.
	Top-down federal approach	High costs to federal conservation agencies; less ability to craft program to local conditions.

Like most farm programs, conservation programs are renewed and modified in the farm

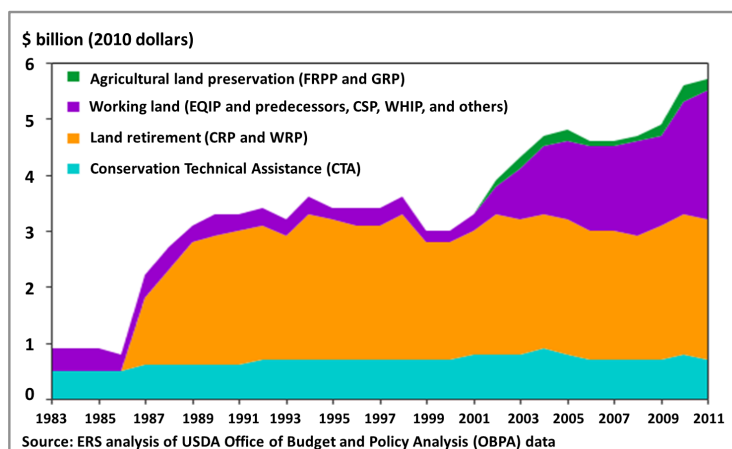


Figure 1. U.S. spending on conservation programs, 1983-2011.

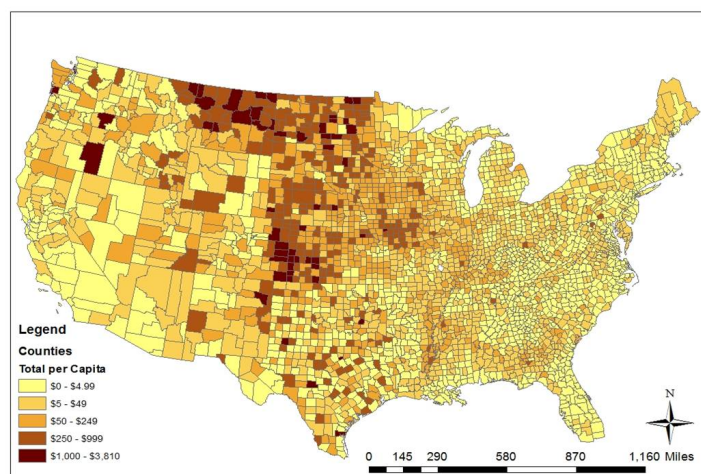


Figure 2. Conservation payments per capita for U.S. counties. Payments include CRP, EQIP, and CSP programs (USDA 2013).

conservation programs. Recent proposals will shift most of the spending cuts to CRP, while preserving much of the funding for working lands programs. All programs are likely to see cuts however as Congress allocates less money for the Farm Bill than in past years.

The portfolio of conservation programs is large and complex. Research has demonstrated that the complexity of the system, including more than 20 programs with different goals and procedures, prevents many farmers from understanding programs and applying to participate (Arbuckle et al., 2011; Reimer 2012). Proposed changes to future farm policy include consolidating a number of programs into two new ones, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The ACEP will combine multiple land retirement programs into one streamlined easement policy, while RCPP will take over the functions of multiple targeted regional conservation programs. Combined, these will replace seven current programs with just two, while still addressing the same environmental issues. In addition to streamlining the portfolio, these two new programs also represent the other major shift in conservation policy by focusing on regionalism and partnerships. Both focus on combining federal conservation dollars with

local and regional approaches. By building partnerships with local and state conservation agencies and a wide range of non-profit groups, these approaches seek to maximize technical and outreach capacity, as well as tap into existing farmer information and social networks. In this way, federal conservation programs can help to coordinate and facilitate landscape-scale conservation approaches that maximize the benefits of federal spending.

Many of these trends, including increased emphasis on popular working lands programs, streamlining of programs to improve farmer familiarity, and utilizing regional partnerships, are likely to improve the willingness of farmers to participate. However, cutbacks in program spending will limit opportunities for participation. Also, federal program dollars are not distributed evenly across the country (Figure 2), and some of these trends may lead to more variation in program spending geographically. Much of this is driven by resource concerns, which vary widely across the country. Increased emphasis on regional approaches may continue to drive disparities in spending. New approaches, including market mechanisms like water quality credits and pay-for-performance schemes, are still not a part of the direction for conservation programs in the near future. Continuing to rely on financial incentives, particularly given fiscal concerns

at the federal level, may limit the impact of agricultural conservation programs in coming years.

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