



Since 2002, Farm Bill objectives of promoting stewardship of land and water resources through conservation and forestry provisions have been enormously successful in advancing conservation of wildlife habitat and improved water quality across the nation.

However in many areas of Pennsylvania and other states, farmland and forest land face intense development pressure. Farm Bill programs provide important incentives to farmers to employ responsible farming practices that will help to sustain the economic viability of their lands while greatly improving the quality of our water and the protection of wildlife habitat. Farm bill conservation programs can also help farmers comply with federal and state regulations.

It is vitally important that the 2018 Farm Bill adequately addresses the demand placed on the conservation programs to maintain the high level of incentive for enrollment that will keep working farmland in production, while at the same time sustaining a healthier environment for present and future generations.

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy offers the following priorities and themes for the 2018 Farm Bill:

**1. New Investment**

Increase the overall amount of funding for the Conservation and Forestry titles. Restore the funding authorization for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to \$500 million. Increase the enrollment for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), maintain investment in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and continue the WRE component of ACEP. Avoid decreasing or diverting funding from other Conservation and Forestry title programs to achieve these goals.

**2. Preserve Farms with Strong, Flexible Easements**

Modify Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) component of ACEP to allow the “buy-protect-sell” model of establishing permanent easements. Allow ALE easement terms to permit subsurface development if it doesn’t impair the easement’s conservation values. Revise the ALE Plans to reduce enforcement challenges. In implementing the Farm Bill, encourage NRCS to allow more flexibility in the timing of securing matching funds.

**3. Emphasize Wildlife Habitat Protection Across Programs**

Wildlife habitat conservation under EQIP should be increased from 5% to 10%. CSP rankings and payments should incentivize those practices with benefits for wildlife. Include provisions and funding to combat invasive and nuisance species, especially forest insect pests/diseases and feral swine. Reauthorize the Voluntary Public-Access and Habitat Incentive Program at \$150 million over 5 years.

**4. Protect Working Forest Land**

Strengthen forest land conservation components in conservation title programs, and increase forest land owner access to more traditional conservation programs such as EQIP, CSP and ALE (such as allowing waivers for maximum forest cover in ALE and designation of forests of special significance). Reauthorize the Healthy Forests Reserve Program at \$12 million. Allow eligible third parties to hold easements in working lands programs.

**5. Prioritize Practices With Multiple Benefits**

Emphasize practices in conservation cost-share programs that protect habitat, reduce agricultural pollution, improve water quality, encourage nutrient management, and provide ecosystem services.

**6. Create Cumulative Conservation Opportunities**

Design programs to complement each other and offer the farmer or forest land owner a clear and simple pathway to build on previous conservation program participation.

**7. Support Urban Agriculture**

Funding and technical assistance should be included for a comprehensive urban agriculture title, including market research, grants, access to USDA loans and risk management tools by urban farmers, and community gardens. Establish a new urban agriculture office to implement policies and programs.