

# 2023 Farm Bill

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 pressure from development, invasive species and economic hardship. 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 2023 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 specific suggestions for the 2023 Farm Bill:

## 1. Invest in Natural Climate Solutions

Build on the recent historic levels of funding for the Forestry and Conservation titles to increase the amount and quality of forestland and encourage carbon-focused agricultural practices. Remove barriers to entry for voluntary carb on markets. Conservation Title programs' rankings and payments should preferentially incentivize those practices with carbon benefits. Expand resources and tools to farmers for making informed, science-based decisions to support climate change mitigation and build climate resilience.

## 2. Preserve Farms with Strong, Flexible Easements

Provide robust funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Refine the "buy-protect-sell" model of establishing permanent easements under ACEP-ALE to work as intended. Require ALE easement terms to permit subsurface development if it doesn't impair the easement's conservation values. In implementing the Farm Bill, direct NRCS to allow more flexibility in the timing of securing matching funds. Exempt ACEP from the adjusted gross income limitation.

## 3. Protect Working Forest Land

Reshape the Healthy Forests Reserve Program into the two-track Forestland Conservation Easement Program, modeled after ACEP, while protecting the investments of other longstanding conservation programs. Further strengthen forest land conservation components in Conservation Title programs, and increase forest landowner access to more traditional conservation programs such as EQIP, CSP and ALE. Improve the Forest Legacy Program to allow qualified third parties to hold easements.

## 4. Emphasize Wildlife Habitat Protection Across Programs

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program as a share of EQIP should be increased from 10% to 12%. Reauthorize the Voluntary Public-Access and Habitat Incentive Program at \$250 million over 5 years. Expand and provide robust funding for the Working Lands for Wildlife framework.

## 5. Include Significant Tools for Fighting Invasive Species

Include provisions and funding to combat invasive and nuisance species, especially forest insect pests or diseases and feral swine. Create new resources to establish public-private partnerships designed to collaboratively manage responses to invasive species threats. Explore organizational changes to improve management of invasive species within USDA.

## 6. Expand Resources and Opportunities for Historically-Underserved Producers

Increase federal cost share in ACEP to 90% for socially-disadvantaged and limited-resource farmers, and include similar provisions in the Forest Conservation Easement Program. Remove barriers to participation by socially-disadvantaged farmers and producers in USDA loans and programs. Commit more technical assistance resources, both internal and external, to historically underserved farmers.

## 7. Elevate 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. Create a new tax credit and grant program to stimulate investment and healthy nutrition options in food deserts.