

Conservation Priorities for the Farm Bill

By Minnesota State Agencies

Minnesota has a major stake in the Conservation Title. Farm Bill conservation programs are the biggest single source of funding for conservation on privately owned lands, and Minnesota is among the top recipients. State and local conservation delivery partners leverage this funding in conjunction with Minnesota's Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment objectives and funding.

The four Minnesota agencies actively involved in agricultural conservation, Department of Agriculture, Department of Natural Resources, Pollution Control Agency and Board of Water & Soil Resources, have identified guiding principles for the Conservation Title:

- **It must work for those who work the land.**
- **It must work for the environment.**
- **It must work for conservation delivery partners.**

The agencies have also compiled the priority recommendations bulleted below.



- **Invest in Conservation:** Ensure a strong, stably-funded Conservation Title for critical private lands conservation programs. The long-term resilience of our land and water resources, along with a strong farm safety net, is essential for environmental and economic security.
- **Maintain Conservation Compliance:** Some Minnesota agencies are concerned that commodity prices and changes to the farm safety net will render the existing conservation compliance provisions ineffective. Maintain conservation gains attributable to the Swampbuster, Sodbuster and Highly Erodible Land provisions.
- **Keep Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) as a stand-alone program:** Ensure continued funding of WRP at a level sufficient to enroll 250,000 acres per year nationwide. Minnesota has built a successful partnership that has leveraged \$90 million in state funds to realize the multiple benefits of water quality, flood retention and habitat restoration.
- **Continue Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Grassland Reserve Program (GRP):** CRP and GRP provide critical protection of fragile soils, water quality and wildlife habitat. Continue sharpening the targeting to maximize both water quality and wildlife habitat benefits. Increase the flexibility of land use options for CRP, especially the use of managed haying and grazing. Consider integrating CRP, GRP and the project area component of the Biomass Crop Assistance Program into one seamless program.
- **Maintain Funding Levels for Working Land Programs:** Maintain funding levels for conservation on lands in agricultural production and non-industrial private forests, with special attention to nutrient management, soil quality, as well as non-industrial private forest land management and wildlife habitat. Consider integrating the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Programs (WHIP). These resources are critical to accelerate BMPs on working farms and forests.

- **Fund Conservation Technical Assistance:** Local “boots on the ground” technical expertise is necessary to apply conservation targeting tools; target outreach to attract voluntary program participation in high-priority areas; plan, design and establish conservation practices; and monitor and model farm and watershed-scale to ensure that efforts are effective. USDA field offices, conservation districts, Technical Service Providers and other conservation delivery partners are vital to this process.
- **Enhance Federal-State Partnerships:** Partner more fully with states. Include greater flexibility and autonomy in determining the best use of funds for Farm Bill conservation programs and regional landscape initiatives. Establish a pilot block grant program for integrated program resources. Block grants will provide administrative flexibility in return for accountability for outcomes. Reform Section 1619 to allow data sharing with state partner agencies to achieve effective and efficient partnerships, while maintaining producer privacy. Restore pass-through funding to State Foresters to provide financial assistance for forestry practices.
- **Streamline Conservation Delivery:** Simplify the menu of conservation programs along the lines suggested in several of the preceding recommendations. Reduce administrative burdens, realize long-term cost savings, and improve program effectiveness by accelerating the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative. Consult with state and local conservation partners as the initiative is rolled out.
- **Continue funding for Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPAHIP):** In 2011, Minnesota enrolled nearly 10,000 acres of high quality habitat in a pilot “Walk-In-Access” (WIA) program with funding from VPAHIP. WIA leverages existing public and private conservation investments to maximize the public benefits from conservation programs.
- **Support Farmer Leadership in Water Quality:** Invest in voluntary quality assurance initiatives such as the one being developed in Minnesota to support and facilitate leadership from the agricultural sector in addressing water quality challenges. . Accelerate efforts to scale NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) methods to the minor watershed level to help assess conservation progress and establish implementation benchmarks and goals at this scale. Facilitate technical teams to help analyze aggregated data from farmer-led initiatives together with the best available watershed-scale water quality data collected by others.
- **Build Healthy Watersheds and Landscapes:** Conservation practices are necessarily implemented at the farm scale, but conservation objectives are now understood in the context of a larger scale. Continue the approach taken with NRCS Landscape Initiatives to help landowners and managers link individual conservation efforts to multiple benefits at the watershed or landscape scale.



Minnesota Pollution Control Agency