

FARM BILL NARRATIVES: CONSERVATION



CONGRESSIONAL
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FARM BILL NARRATIVES: CROP INSURANCE, CONSERVATION, AND FORESTRY

The Congressional Western Caucus has prepared a few key overviews for staff during consideration of H.R. 7567, the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026. These overviews should serve not only to deepen a staffer's knowledge of the subject area, but each one also includes a real world example to illustrate how the programs are used by your constituents.

CONSERVATION

Conservation authorizations are contained within Title II of the Farm Bill. These conservation programs create partnerships and incentives for farmers to voluntarily conserve their land and natural resources in collaboration with federal agencies. Within the Farm Bill, the primary tools for conservation are financial and technical assistance programs, supported by education and research programs. These programs give farmers and ranchers the tools they need to preserve their land for generations to come, at minimal cost to the producers themselves. Every American benefits from the longevity and food security incentivized through the Farm Bill.

Overview:

The Farm Bill includes the following types of conservation programs: [1]

- Working lands programs allow farmers and producers to use their land while actively implementing conservation practices to protect the natural resources and wildlife in their area. Examples include: EQIP, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA).
- Land retirement programs pay agricultural landowners for temporary changes to land use and management for environmental conservation purposes. The primary land retirement program authorized by the Farm Bill is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) which includes the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Farmable Wetland Program, Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR30) Pilot, Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP), and Transition Incentives Program (TIP).
- Easement programs place a permanent or long-term restriction on private land use in exchange for payment. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) are easement programs.
 - Within the 2026 Farm Bill, the Agricultural Land Easement Program (ALE) will have an increased federal cost-share of 65% and a more streamlined certification process. Also, the stewardship responsibilities will be elevated for Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) and the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) will be created for voluntary entity-held easement of working forest land.

- Partnership and grant programs create partnerships agreements and grants to encourage cooperation between private landowners, conservation groups, state and local governments, and the federal government, for conservation purposes. Examples include the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials, Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program, and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPAHIP)
 - In the 2026 Farm Bill, RCPP will be altered to increase the flexibility of covered programs, streamline partnership agreements, include flood resiliency programs, reimbursements for administrative expenses, and include restoration of wildlife habitat connectivity and wildlife mitigation corridors as critical conservation areas.
- Conservation compliance provisions prohibit producers from receiving the benefits of certain farm programs when conservation goals and requirements are not met. Included in this category are the conservation requirements a farmer must meet to remain eligible for federal crop insurance. Conservation compliance prohibitions apply to the farming of highly erodible lands, wetlands, or native sod.

Key Programs:

The CRP, EQIP, and CSP programs receive the largest portions of Title II funding, as mandatory spending.

- The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program that encourages producers and landowners to convert highly erodible and other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover that protects the area's natural resources and wildlife. This conversion is incentivized by the provision of annual rental payments, cost-share, and technical assistance for conservation practice installation, administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to producers and landowners, through contracts that cover 10–15-year periods. In 2023, approximately 24.8 million acres were enrolled in CRP and nearly \$2 billion was spent on payments to landowners.[1]
 - The 2026 Farm Bill reauthorizes CRP through 2031 and maintains the current program cap at 27 million acres for 5 years.
- The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to producers and landowners to address natural resource concerns, including water and air quality, soil health and erosion, wildlife habitat, drought, and weather volatility. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works directly with producers to design specialized conservation plans to protect natural resources in their area.
 - In the 2026 Farm Bill, precision agriculture practices and the Southern Border Initiative will be incorporated into EQIP.

- The Conservation Stewardship Program helps producers build upon their existing conservation efforts while strengthening their operations through the creation of conservation plans designed to expand upon the producer's efforts to improve their air, water, soil, and habitat quality, while improving agricultural operations. CSP offers annual payments to producers for implementing conservation practices on their land and maintaining them.
 - The 2026 Farm Bill makes the planning, adoption, and acquisition of precision agriculture practices eligible for CSP payments. Additionally, the bill authorizes a matching grant program for States and Indian Tribes to improve soil health on agricultural lands. The CSP minimum payment will become \$4,000.

Real World Example: Treg Hatcher of Kansas

The Conservation Title plays a key role in both fortifying producers against future catastrophes and helping them respond to ecological disasters that have already occurred. One Farm Bill success story is that of rancher, Treg Hatcher, who utilized the EQIP program to save his ranch after it was severely damaged by extreme drought and wind, and infiltrated by destructive prairie dogs. When Hatcher's pastures dried up and his cattle were left to graze on dirt, he worried it was the end of the ranch he hoped would host his family for generations. Desperate for a solution, he apprehensively turned to NRCS for help. There, he gained the help of conservation experts at EQIP, who worked with Hatcher to develop a rotational grazing plan that spread nutrients and encouraged the growth of new grass. Through EQIP, Hatcher received the funds to build new fences on his land that now supports a cattle rotation that aerates his soil, stimulates plant growth, and ended the destruction of his land. Thanks to this program authorized in the Farm Bill, Hatcher has been able to keep his land and cattle and is successfully conserving them for his children and grandchildren.[1]

Conclusion:

American farmers and ranchers have a responsibility to be good stewards of the land, but they can't be responsible for shouldering that burden alone when every American benefits from their work and conservation efforts—that's why the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill exists. Passage of the Farm Bill is vital for farmers seeking to create longevity for their lands and operations, it is the foundation of agricultural resilience against extreme weather and ecological collapse in the United States.

SOURCES

[1] Congressional Research Service (2025), "Farm Bill Primer: Conservation Title," <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF12024>.

[2] USDA (2025), "2025 USDA Budget Summary," <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-usda-budget-summary.pdf>.

[3] The Nature Conservancy, (2024), "Harvesting Hope," <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/provide-food-and-water-sustainably/food-and-water-stories/harvesting-hope-hatcher-family/>.