



2011

FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS
FORUM FOCUSED ON THE WEST


Summary of Recommendations

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A misty, golden-hour landscape with a cow in the foreground. The scene is bathed in a warm, orange glow, with a cow standing in the middle ground, partially obscured by the mist. The background shows rolling hills and a line of trees under a hazy sky.

IN RECENT DECADES, federal agriculture policy has been marked by bipartisan support throughout the legislative process. Yet in the current fiscal climate, high unemployment and record federal deficits may influence 2012 Farm Bill negotiations, and the resulting programs and funding levels. The purpose of this report is to summarize and present recommendations for the 2012 Farm Bill, as articulated by private landowner leaders in the West. Our goal is to work with Congressional decision-makers to achieve more with less—from a societal, economic and conservation perspective—through efficient and effective Farm Bill implementation.

Conservation policy has typically taken a back-seat to other national issues like defense, the economy, healthcare and more. But today, an increasing world population combined with societal and economic demands for food production, water quality and quantity, energy development, and air quality is resulting in an unprecedented need to marry fish and wildlife conservation policy with strong agriculture policy that supports healthy landscapes and community viability. Reauthorization of the Farm Bill is the best federal policy mechanism available for maintaining our Nation's soil and water resources to ensure economic, social and conservation resources are maintained for the future.



FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS FORUM FOCUSED ON THE WEST

The Intermountain West Joint Venture, Partners for Conservation, and the University of Montana College of Forestry and Conservation hosted a *Farm Bill Conservation Programs Forum Focused on the West* (Forum) in Bozeman, Montana on May 31-June 2, 2011. The purpose of the Forum was to bring together landowner leaders and conservation partners from 13 western states to identify conservation priorities and provide recommendations for improving Farm Bill conservation programs, particularly with respect to 2012 Farm Bill reauthorization. Forum funding was provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Farm Bill Conservation Title programs authorized in 2002 and 2008 provide a powerful funding source for catalyzing conservation on private agricultural lands (2008-2012, \$24.1 billion). Innovative application of Farm Bill programs offers an opportunity to achieve broad-scale and lasting conservation

on working lands. Under-represented in past Farm Bills, the West is now a focal point for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to showcase its proactive approaches for conserving large and intact rangelands that mutually benefit agriculture and wildlife. When considered with public lands, conserving private lands yields multiplicative benefits for comparably small conservation investments.

The USDA has built trust and credibility with private landowners and has a proven conservation track record, but efficiency and effectiveness can always be improved with stakeholders' needs in mind. We called on private landowners from around the West to weigh in on priorities because practical solutions to improve Farm Bill delivery typically come from first-hand experience with USDA programs. Long-term success will hinge on the reauthorization of several Farm Bill conservation programs, provision of adequate technical assistance to facilitate program delivery, development of partnerships between USDA and other conservation entities, and removal of barriers in implementation with private landowners.

The Forum featured a blend of presentations, working sessions, and facilitated dialogue. The agenda was developed based on a pre-meeting online survey. An archive of the agenda, session notes, and pre-meeting survey results from the Forum is available at <http://iwjv.org/>. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Dave White delivered the keynote address, providing a historical perspective of past Farm Bill legislation and an overview of the agency's suite of conservation programs. He urged producers and conservation partners to "do that which is right" in these challenging fiscal times, and spoke of the power of direct communication with decision-makers to articulate what works for producers.



The West is now a focal point for the USDA to showcase proactive approaches for conserving large and intact rangelands that benefit agriculture and wildlife.



Agricultural producers and partners are interested in maintaining abundant food and fiber, food security, expanded agricultural export, energy independence, family farm and ranch vitality, and natural resource conservation. The take home message was:

Agricultural production and natural resource conservation are compatible in both policy and implementation.

FARM BILL FORUM OBJECTIVES INCLUDED:

1. Identify major challenges western agricultural producers face in keeping farming and ranching viable;
2. Understand Farm Bill conservation program legislation, rule-making, administration, and funding;
3. Highlight the value of specific programs that work the best, characterize their importance to working lands conservation, and identify how to make them better;
4. Discuss opportunities for targeting program delivery through Special Initiatives and mechanisms to enhance their effectiveness;
5. Transfer lessons learned from existing landscape-level conservation efforts;
6. Discuss strategies to build capacity for program delivery through working with partners; and,
7. Strengthen private landowner engagement through strategic communication with decision-makers.



A landowner-led Farm Bill Forum was hosted May 31-June 2, 2011 in Bozeman, Montana.



In the opinion of landowners, the most important USDA programs are those that restore grasslands and shrublands, manage wildlife habitat, and maintain/restore cover on croplands with high soil erosion.

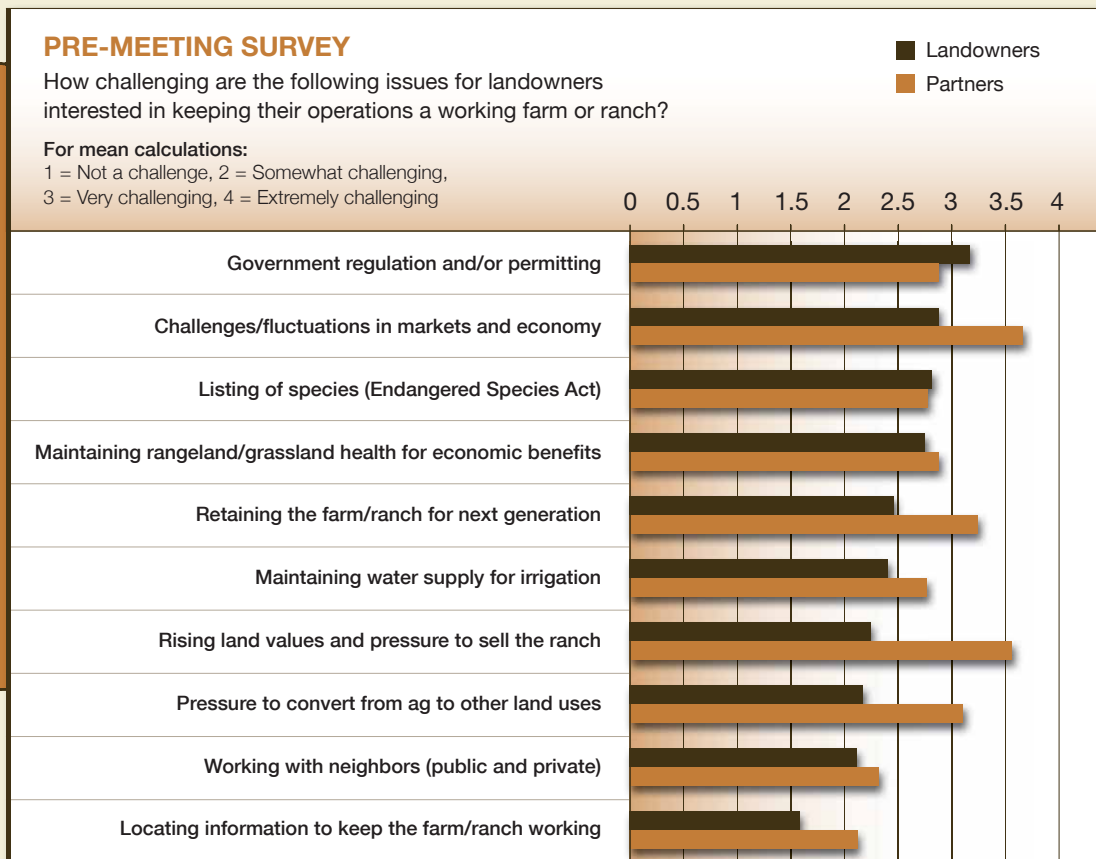
FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Forty-five participants attended the Forum including 19 landowner leaders (*see Participant List on page 18*). Representatives from agency and non-government organizations also attended to support landowner leaders with technical expertise and insights when needed. All participants were selected based on their individual and collective conservation leadership, experience with USDA Farm Bill conservation programs, and/or involvement with the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative.

PRE-MEETING SURVEY HELPS SHAPE DISCUSSION

In advance of the Forum, an online survey was sent to landowner and conservation partners to shape the meeting agenda, discussion topics, and provide a baseline measure to assess results of the meeting. The respondents had a high level of experience. Thus, the results provide important insights about how Farm Bill conservation programs support landowners,

the value of the special initiatives, how other organizations can partner to enhance the Farm Bill conservation programs, the value of outreach and marketing approaches for Farm Bill, and the impact of policy efforts by landowners. A comprehensive write-up of survey results is available at <http://iwjv.org/>.



The response rate for each of the surveys was quite high:

17 of 20
landowners/land managers responded
(response rate of 85%)

&

10 of 16
conservation partners responded
(response rate of 65%)

MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS AND INSIGHTS FROM LANDOWNERS INCLUDE:

- > Government regulation/permitting, challenges/fluctuations in the market and economy, and listing of species (e.g. *Endangered Species Act*) are the top three challenges that landowners face in keeping their farms and ranches working.
- > Landowners have a desire to strengthen programs to support shared values between ranching sustainability and wildlife conservation. Landowners also believe that increased flexibility to apply programs across private and public lands will result in greater conservation benefits obtained.
- > Landowners support maintenance of NRCS technical assistance to help plan and implement programs.
- > Landowners that have participated in special initiatives are seeing success in achieving conservation goals for both agriculture and wildlife conservation.
- > The most important programs are those that restore grasslands and shrublands, manage wildlife habitat, and maintain/restore cover on croplands with high soil erosion.
- > On-the-ground implementation is best achieved through working with partners to more effectively market and deliver NRCS programs. Effective partnerships include the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), conservation districts, and national land and wildlife non-profit organizations.

Greater sandhill cranes and snow geese on private land that is annually hayed and grazed on the Silvies River floodplain just outside Burns, Oregon.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2012 FARM BILL

In recent decades, federal agriculture policy has been marked by bipartisan support throughout the legislative process. Yet in the current fiscal climate, high unemployment and record federal deficits may influence 2012 Farm Bill negotiations, and the resulting programs and funding levels. The purpose of this report is to summarize and present recommendations for the 2012 Farm Bill, as articulated by private landowner leaders in the West. Our goal is to work with Congressional decision-makers to achieve more with less—from a societal, economic and conservation perspective—through efficient and effective Farm Bill implementation.

Landowner leaders identified eight major recommendations to help shape the 2012 Farm Bill and improve program efficiency and effectiveness.



RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

1. Maintain Conservation Title funding to sustain vibrant agricultural markets.
2. Support voluntary incentive-based conservation in place of top-down federal regulations.
3. Promote landscape-scale conservation through strategically targeted Farm Bill investments.
4. Promote new and innovative ways to deliver conservation across mixed ownership.
5. Support outcome-based evaluations that assess program effectiveness and adaptively improve program delivery.
6. Provide increased technical assistance necessary to spur innovation through partnerships.
7. Merge conservation easement programs and expand opportunities for qualified third parties to write, hold, and enforce conservation easements.
8. Improve and streamline cost-share, restoration, and management programs.

Conservation policy has typically taken a back-seat to other national issues like defense, the economy, healthcare and more. But today, an increasing world population combined with societal and economic demands for food production, water quality and quantity, energy development, and air quality is resulting in an unprecedented need to marry fish and wildlife conservation policy with strong agriculture policy that supports healthy landscapes and community viability. Reauthorization of the Farm Bill is the best federal policy mechanism available for maintaining our Nation's soil and water resources to ensure economic, social and conservation resources are maintained for the future.

NRCS leadership and its partners have elevated Farm Bill program relevancy in the West by capitalizing on the natural link between sustainable ranching and the conservation of large and intact grazing lands that support world-class wildlife populations. Producers in the West are well-positioned to help meet our Nation's agricultural needs with reauthorization of the Farm Bill Conservation Title.

The 2012 Farm Bill is a primary driver for sustaining the working lands and rural communities that supply our nation's food and fiber demands.

Recommendation 1:

MAINTAIN CONSERVATION TITLE FUNDING TO SUSTAIN VIBRANT AGRICULTURAL MARKETS.

Private landowners in the West recommend that decision-makers reauthorize baseline funding levels (2008-2012, \$24.1 billion) for the Conservation Title to ensure the U.S. maintains a strong and productive agriculture economy. Farm Bill Programs have a proven track record of success and are the primary driver for sustaining the working lands and rural communities that provide food and fiber.

Unprecedented future demands will be placed on our Nation's natural resources as world population growth increases to a projected 9 billion people by 2050. Higher living standards and the basic need to feed 2.6 billion more people dictate high demand for meat, dairy and grain products. Farm Bill conservation is a critical investment in sustaining the natural resources on which our agricultural security depends, especially in the face of global, environmental and fiscal uncertainty.

Programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Wetlands Reserve Program have a demonstrated record of success in maximizing economic returns for our agriculture and conservation investments. Western U.S. agriculture is poised to meet increased food and fiber demands through implementation of the 2012 Farm Bill.



Recommendation 2:

SUPPORT VOLUNTARY INCENTIVE-BASED CONSERVATION IN PLACE OF TOP-DOWN FEDERAL REGULATIONS.

Private landowners in the West encourage federal decision-makers to direct future investments—through policy, funding, and administration—to voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs in contrast to regulatory-based programs.

Voluntary community-based conservation is a powerful mechanism for achieving natural resource conservation through sustainable agriculture. Across the country, locally-led and landowner-driven conservation initiatives have become the preferred alternative to top-down and often unfunded regulatory mandates. In the West, water quality regulations and the threat of endangered species listings continue to be primary challenges to keeping working farms and ranches viable in the future.

Landowners responding to our online survey ranked government regulation (*e.g.*, *Endangered Species Act listings*) as the most challenging issue they face. Survey responses also showed that conservation partners working with landowners underestimated the challenges landowners have with respect to government regulations impacting their ability to keep working farms and ranches operational.

Farm Bill conservation programs exemplify how voluntary incentive-based solutions can help sustain agricultural production while meeting environmental improvement goals and



Across the country, locally-led and landowner-driven conservation initiatives have become the preferred alternative to regulatory mandates and programs.

standards. In the West, Farm Bill resources are being used to solve complex natural resource issues through sustainable ranching (*Inset below*). Finding win-win solutions through community involvement is at the heart of what fourth-generation Montana Rancher David Mannix calls the “80-20” rule, where stakeholders focus on the 80% they have in common versus the 20% that divides. Many programs, like the Conservation Reserve Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, act as a buffer between regulatory agencies and producers.



PROVIDING REGULATORY ‘CERTAINTY’ FOR PRODUCERS UNDER THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT (ESA)

USDA’s Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) underscores how NRCS is orchestrating a paradigm shift in at-risk species conservation by replacing undo regulatory burdens with voluntary incentive-based approaches that mutually benefit agriculture and wildlife. SGI was launched in March 2010 immediately after the greater sage-grouse was designated a ‘candidate’ species for listing as threatened or endangered under ESA. Such a designation would have profound impacts on ranching operations and rural communities, let alone impinge other economic and energy development opportunities in the West. To strengthen SGI, NRCS in concert with the FWS completed the first-ever regional Conference Report that provides regulatory certainty to agricultural producers on private and public lands. In this Conference Report, NRCS and FWS conditioned 40 Farm Bill conservation practices to ensure that they benefit sage-grouse. If the species is listed under ESA, ranchers now have confidence that they are implementing the appropriate conservation practices, and thus are in full compliance with ESA.

Recommendation 3:

PROMOTE LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION THROUGH STRATEGICALLY TARGETED FARM BILL INVESTMENTS.

Private landowners in the West recommend that federal decision-makers support Farm Bill investments that are strategically targeted and applied at the landscape scale.

Over the past few decades, a shift has occurred from traditional resource management emphasizing a government entity, a species or resource of concern, a narrow time scale, or single beneficial use to an ecosystem approach focused on ecological boundaries across private and public lands, interagency cooperation, wide temporal and spatial scales, multiple species, and landscape function and process. The ecosystem approach combined with the onset of collaborative conservation in the 1990's has established the foundation for landscape-scale conservation.

Strategically targeting Farm Bill resources at appropriately large scales to achieve desired outcomes provides the biological basis for a new era in conservation. "Conservation triage" describes the targeting of Farm Bill resources to priority landscapes as a preferred alternative to providing palliative care to degraded systems where the probability of success is low. Targeting Farm Bill resources increases the chances

that enough of the right conservation practices will be applied in priority areas to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes for agriculture and conservation.

NRCS is helping institutionalize targeted landscape conservation with special initiatives that prioritize landscapes to achieve watershed, species and ecosystem-level benefits. The Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative is one outstanding example—NRCS worked with farmers to flood 470,000 rice field acres to re-route millions of migratory birds away from the oil-stained Gulf of Mexico by (*Inset below*).

Today, special initiatives receive a small percentage of the overall Farm Bill conservation program budget. For NRCS to enter a new era of implementing highly targeted and successful landscape conservation, policy-makers and landowners will have to overcome the historical expectation that Farm Bill resources be distributed equitably to states, districts, and landowners without regard to prioritization across multiple jurisdictions. New strategies for producers involved in a special initiative may include allowing other federal funds to qualify as match for NRCS easement programs, delivering financial assistance programmatically to groups rather than individuals, and adding in conservation planning and maintenance funding to ensure long-term success. NRCS delivery of current conservation initiatives is defined by significant contributions of non-federal funding by partners, an important outcome in this economy.

NEW HAVENS FOR MIGRATORY BIRDS IN THE GULF REGION

The Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) took flight in May 2010 following the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill. This highly targeted landscape-level partnership is one of the most popular initiatives in NRCS history. Private landowners who support wildlife conservation enrolled >470,000 acres to provide inland coastal food, water, and cover for migratory birds before they reached the oil-impacted areas in the Gulf of Mexico. Demand to participate was three times greater than anticipated across Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Texas. MBHI is now focused on the future, with projects that benefit wildlife, landowners, and the environment for years to come. Projects provide food and critical habitat for bird populations, much-needed water during drought, support for local economies by attracting hunters and bird watchers, and new opportunities to improve wildlife management.





Recommendation 4:

PROMOTE NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS TO DELIVER CONSERVATION ACROSS MIXED OWNERSHIP.

Private landowners in the West recommend that NRCS find new ways to cross-pollinate federal agencies including NRCS, Farm Services Agency, FWS, Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Service to achieve landscape level conservation across jurisdictional boundaries.

Private landowners operating within commingled land ownership patterns maximize the biological and social benefits of their conservation actions by implementing them across boundaries at appropriately large scales. Still, landowners operating in mixed ownership landscapes often times receive conflicting messages from USDA and Interior officials on ways to best operate on their private and public lands. Coordination of conservation delivery across federal agencies will increase conservation benefits at appropriate large biological scales. The USDA's Sage Grouse Initiative is achieving world-class wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching on private and public lands (*Inset at right*).

CONSERVING WORLD-CLASS WILDLIFE THROUGH SUSTAINABLE RANCHING

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) exemplifies our capability to proactively solve complex wildlife conservation issues using highly targeted, landscape-level partnerships across mixed ownerships. The key to SGI's success is a shared vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching—what's good for ranching is good for grouse—with SGI, both wildlife and agriculture win. NRCS and its partners practice 'conservation triage' by targeting Farm Bill resources in high sage-grouse abundance centers or 'core areas' to maintain large and intact grazing lands rather than provide palliative care to small and declining populations. Types of conservation practices include sustainable grazing systems to improve hiding cover for birds, marking or moving 'high risk' fences near breeding sites to reduce bird collisions, removing invasive conifers from grasslands to allow re-colonization of otherwise suitable habitat, and establishment of conservation easements that prevent the conversion of large and intact working ranches into subdivisions.



Recommendation 5:

SUPPORT OUTCOME-BASED EVALUATIONS THAT ASSESS PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS AND ADAPTIVELY IMPROVE PROGRAM DELIVERY.

Private landowners recommend that NRCS support outcome-based scientific evaluations of conservation actions to assess their effectiveness, quantify benefits, and improve program delivery. Resulting science can be used to rally partner support and relay Farm Bill success stories to broad audiences.

NRCS has always implemented practices to enhance sustainability of agricultural operations but evidence is lacking, in some cases, to measure the success of past 'opportunity-based' conservation projects. Renewed interest in strategically targeting Farm Bill resources at appropriately large scales provides an unprecedented opportunity to both achieve and document the conservation benefits of Farm Bill programs.

Landowner leaders at the Forum asked NRCS to communicate more effectively Farm Bill success stories to federal decision-makers, our own producers and the American people. Private landowners by nature are a quiet but hard-working dedicated segment of society; collectively, we need to do a better job of telling our story or risk losing funding that is vital to food security and natural resource conservation. Forum participants suggested using science as a rallying point for documenting conservation success and relaying resulting messages to stakeholders.

One option gaining in popularity is for NRCS to work with independent advisors to ensure that outcome-based evaluations are conducted and published by reputable scientists. Nationally-recognized science advisors identify major questions, recruit collaborators to conduct the work, and provide oversight and management of resources to sustain the project. Partners contribute matching funds to help support resources from NRCS's Conservation Innovation Grants and the Conservation Effects Assessment Project.

For example, scientists have recently quantified the biological benefits of NRCS's Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) that following the Gulf Oil Spill enhanced >470,000 acres of productive farmland to provide inland coastal food, water, and cover for migratory birds before they reached oil-impacted areas. In Louisiana alone, independent researchers from Mississippi State University report that actively managing only 2% of the wintering habitat (176,000 acres) under MBHI provided 36% of the total food needed to support 9.2 million wintering ducks in the Gulf. Word of this success spread quickly to multiple news outlets and has resulted in an expanded program that will benefit rice producers and waterfowl populations for years to come.

“Nationally-recognized science advisors identify major questions, recruit collaborators to conduct the work, and provide oversight and management of resources to sustain the project.”





NON-FEDERAL JOB CREATION SPEEDS DELIVERY AND SUCCESS OF SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE (SGI)

NRCS and its partners recently recommitted themselves to furthering SGI success by increasing technical assistance to accelerate Farm Bill implementation. The Intermountain West Joint Venture orchestrated and managed a massive partnership resulting in the hiring of 24 new biologists and range conservationists, strategically located in priority landscapes where human capital is limiting implementation of SGI objectives. NRCS's investment in technical assistance is being leveraged with funds from 32 conservation partners, including state fish and wildlife agencies, non-governmental organizations, BLM and Forest Service, corporations, conservation districts, and the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. New "Partner Positions" are being hired and will be supervised by non-federal partners and housed in USDA service centers for at least three years.

Recommendation 6:

PROVIDE INCREASED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NECESSARY TO SPUR INNOVATION THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS.

Private landowners in the West recommend providing the technical assistance necessary to spur innovative partnerships that increase efficiency and effectiveness in Farm Bill delivery.

For 75 years private landowners have trusted and valued NRCS for providing high-quality technical assistance to help make their operations more productive. Landowners today are concerned that funding shortfalls for technical assistance put at risk NRCS's ability to effectively implement voluntary and incentive-based landscape-level conservation.

Landowners voiced their needs to access NRCS technical assistance to gain specialized knowledge in fish and wildlife habitat management. Specifically, landowner leaders want to develop innovative ways to keep their farms and ranches viable while maximizing mutual benefits to fish and wildlife resources. To achieve this goal, NRCS will require a more equitable allocation of technical assistance funds to 1) provide outreach to landowners about ways to mutually benefit fish and wildlife resources through sustainable agriculture, 2) complete planning, contracting, and implementation to bring habitat projects to

fruition, and 3) sustain local involvement to build and maintain trust and credibility with landowners. An especially innovative and popular approach is leveraging of NRCS funds with partner match to establish cost-shared 'Partner Positions' (*Inset above*) to implement Farm Bill conservation actions. Supporting innovative efforts to provide technical assistance and build capacity is value-added, maximizing taxpayer dollars, and providing the critical opportunity to create jobs that have non-federal income sources.



Landowners view third parties such as land trusts, governmental organizations, and others authorized to hold conservation easements, as particularly critical in delivery and implementation of Farm Bill conservation easement programs.



Recommendation 7:

MERGE CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAMS AND EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR QUALIFIED THIRD PARTIES TO WRITE, HOLD, AND ENFORCE CONSERVATION EASEMENTS.

Interest in easements as a land conservation tool has grown over the last few decades in response to development pressure, loss of wetlands and wildlife habitat, state and federal tax incentives, the need to include private lands in conservation, and the inability to conserve priority landscapes through regulatory mechanisms. Easement programs that have been especially effective in the West include the Farm & Ranchlands Protection Program (FRPP) and the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) has also been effective in certain landscapes. However, landowners recommend that WRP be slightly modified to better support

“working wetlands” conservation. They support reauthorizing FRPP, reauthorizing and expanding GRP beyond its current acreage cap (2008–2012, authorized 3.22 million acre cap for enrollment), and reauthorizing and strengthening WRP.

Landowners participating in the Forum also recommend consolidating multiple conservation easement programs into one larger and more flexible program, with perpetual conservation easements preferred to short-term contracts.

Third parties such as land trusts, governmental organizations and others authorized to hold conservation easements are viewed as particularly critical in delivery and implementation of Farm Bill conservation easement programs—to leverage match, increase delivery capacity, and manage and monitor conservation easements. They recommend that each of the working land conservation easement programs permit qualified third parties to write, hold, and enforce conservation easements.

Lastly, landowners recommend that the current conservation easement policy incorporate flexibility in meeting match requirements within priority landscapes. Current requirements restrict easement opportunities for many landowners and their partners because state and private matching funds are scarce. Landowners support match requirements but recommend that NRCS broaden its criteria to count non-USDA federal funds as match within priority landscapes. Landowners also recommend that NRCS recognize state conservation tax credits as another source of match in their easement programs. Such credits help leverage federal investments and represent a direct state investment in the transaction that should be allowed as match.



Recommendation 8:

IMPROVE AND STREAMLINE COST-SHARE, RESTORATION, AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS.

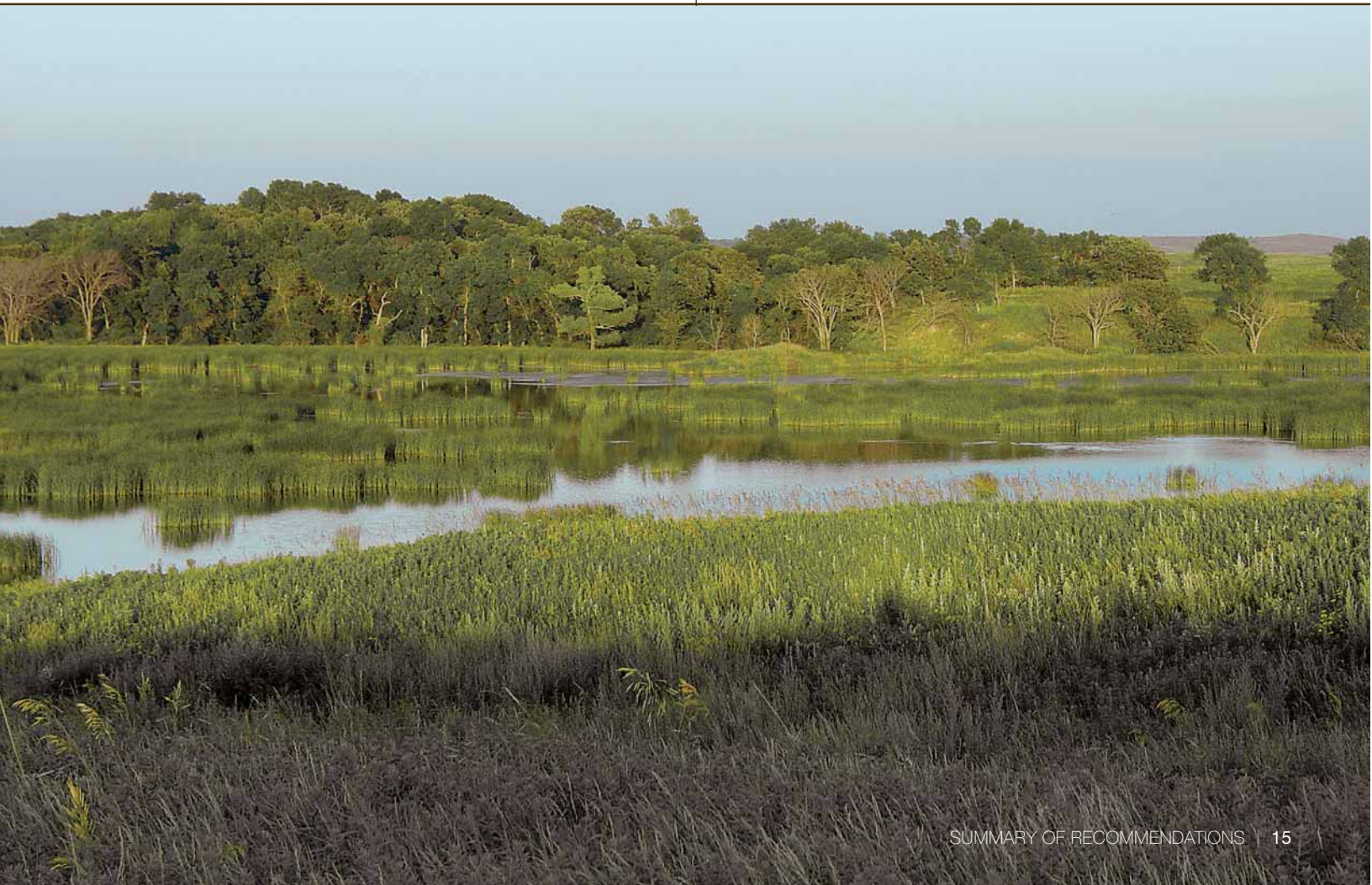
Private landowners in the West recommend improving and streamlining the Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program as outlined below:

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the largest Farm Bill conservation program in terms of funding and acreage. CRP is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners created to help agricultural landowners temporarily remove erosion-prone lands from agricultural production and establish natural covers. Wildlife benefits are significant and CRP has been modified to promote specific fish and wildlife conservation objectives. CRP offers three enrollment options: General CRP Sign-Up, Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). CRP participants receive annual payments and other compensation for putting agricultural lands into conservation cover and cost-share assistance for restoring and managing enrolled land.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Maintain the 25% county cap not to include the Wetlands Reserve Program.
- Maintain the CCRP and allow for managed grazing where appropriate.
- Maintain General CRP Sign-up as another option in the conservation tool-box.
- Add management to all practices including existing practices.
- Provide an opportunity for routine grazing management on CRP lands under a grazing management plan for a reduced rental rate in areas where this would help maintain CRP acres in grassland, as opposed to the conversion to annually tilled cropland. Cost-share fencing and water to help transition CRP.
- Use CRP acreage to fund a GRP-transition program.
- If cuts in CRP occur, make strategic decisions to focus remaining acres in places that benefit wildlife the most.





CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), previously known as the Conservation Security Program, rewards producers for conservation performance. Producers earn payments to improve, maintain, and manage existing conservation activities and undertake additional ones on working lands. The higher the conservation performance is ranked, the more a producer is paid. Program goals include improving soil, air and water quality, increasing biodiversity and pollinator habitat, sequestering carbon and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and conserving water and energy use. CSP is authorized to enroll nearly 13 million acres each fiscal year, for a total of more than 50 million acres enrolled by the end of the 2008 Farm Bill. CSP is available nationwide on a continuous application basis, and is focused on natural resources that are of specific concern for a state, or specific geographic areas within a state. Applications are evaluated relative to other applications addressing similar priority resource concerns to facilitate a competitive ranking process among applicants within a state who face similar resource challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Maintain CSP, with the concept of rewarding good stewardship practices, utilizing CSP payments (*in contrast to direct payments*).**
- **Modify/tailor CSP to reflect regional differences.**
- **Simplify ranking and formulas for CSP criteria.**
- **Increase NRCS technical assistance/expertise and feedback through assessment and shared evaluation.**
- **Monitor outcomes of the “best”-keep the bar set high to ensure wildlife benefits occur.**
- **Pay for real environmental outcomes.**
- **Initiate a pre-application screening with site visit.**

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM AND WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides cost-share to producers to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimize environmental benefits, and help landowners meet state, tribal, and local environmental regulations. EQIP covers a wide array of conservation practices that help farmers and ranchers address threats to soil, water, air and related resources such as pollinators, at risk species and threats from invasive species. The 2008 Farm Bill added forest management, energy conservation and practices related to organic production to a suite of options for funding. Additionally, the 2008 Farm Bill allows NRCS to accord “great significance” to certain conservation practices including nutrient, residue or air quality management, invasive species management, pollinator habitat, animal carcass management technology, and pest management.

EQIP provides payments of up to 75 percent of costs associated with planning, design, materials, equipment, installation, labor, management, maintenance or training, and up to 100 percent of the estimated income sacrificed by a producer to implement conservation practices. Contracts can run from one to 10 years, but most are for two or three years. EQIP is one of the largest funded programs with a Congressional authorization of \$7.325 billion through 2012.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) encourages participants to develop and improve high quality habitat that supports wildlife populations at national, state, tribal and local significance through financial and technical assistance. Cost-share up to 75 percent is available for establishing conservation practices to develop fish and wildlife habitat, with contracts running one to 15 years. Twenty-five percent of the funds can be used to enter into long-term agreements for lands that would address issues raised by state, regional, and national conservation initiatives. Agricultural land is defined more

broadly in WHIP than in any other Farm Bill conservation program. This interpretation allows non-farmed acres that may not be eligible for assistance through other programs to be improved for wildlife habitat.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Maintain EQIP and WHIP as successful conservation programs.
- Maintain opportunities to utilize EQIP on public land in combination with private land conservation efforts.
- Eliminate the \$50,000 cap for WHIP.
- Develop the opportunity to implement WHIP on public lands with the ability to provide incentive payments.
- Implement the flexibility to address cost-share rates and practice specifications. Landowners noted that NRCS in some states have been very proactive in working with partners to ensure that NRCS conservation practice standards, specifications, and cost lists reflect the state-of-the-art knowledge and financial realities. This issue is most often a bottleneck in regard to conservation work that fits within the scope of NRCS conservation practices but is seldom utilized in a particular state.
- Foster innovation allowing landowners to work together to address natural resource concerns and tackle multi-landowner projects through consolidated contracting in both EQIP and WHIP. Similar innovations have previously occurred through Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) (*See Case Study below*).
- Within National and State priority areas, allow District Conservationists the flexibility to make local resource decisions and communicate quantifiable outcomes.

COOPERATIVE CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE (CCPI) FUNDS WATERSHED GROUP IN HUMBOLDT CALIFORNIA

The Yager/Van Duzen Environmental Stewards (YES) was one of the first 10 conservation projects to be funded through the 2008 Farm Bill CCPI. YES is a watershed group comprised of ranching landowners and managers in the Mid Domain of the Van Duzen River Watershed in Humboldt County, California who voluntarily worked with the EPA in development of the Technical Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) for the watershed. The ranching landowners allowed EPA to conduct an assessment of sediment sources within their combined 80,000 acres of land holdings. YES assessed and prioritized sediment sources on the ranch roads. CCPI has assisted them with upgrading and treating road related sediment sources, controlling sediment delivery and improving water quality. This highly successful model of collaborative efforts between NRCS and landowners not only allowed landowners to reduce sediment and improve water quality but also allowed for the opportunity of a partnership that has directly benefitted NRCS staff.



Members of YES and NRCS meet in the field to discuss sediment sources, control mechanisms, and improved water quality.



PARTICIPANT LIST

Landowners/Land Managers

- Clen Atchley**
Ashton, Idaho
- Leo Barthelmess, Jr.**
Malta, Montana
- Mike Byrne**
Tulelake, California
- Duane Coombs**
Austin, Nevada
- Tuda Libby Crews**
Bueyeros, New Mexico
- Jim Faulstich**
Highmore, South Dakota
- Dean Hunt**
McKinleyville, California
- Kenny Knowles**
Arnett, Oklahoma
- Hod Kosman**
Scottsbluff, Nebraska

- Leo LaGrande**
Williams, California
- Terry Mansfield**
Cheney, Washington
- Dina Moore**
Kneeland, California
- Pat & Sharon O'Toole**
Savery, Wyoming
- Lynne Sherrod**
Collbran, Colorado
- Gregg Simonds**
Park City, Utah
- Bill Sproul**
Sedan, Kansas
- Mike Stevens**
Hailey, Idaho
- Jim Stone**
Ovando, Montana

Conservation Partners

- Gary Burnett**
Blackfoot Challenge
Ovando, Montana
- Barth Crouch**
Playa Lakes Joint Venture
Salina, Kansas
- Matt Drechsel**
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Alturas, California
- Ali Duvall**
Intermountain West Joint Venture/Partners for Conservation
Missoula, Montana
- Randy Gray**
Intermountain West Joint Venture
Hillsboro, New Mexico
- Tim Griffiths**
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Bozeman, Montana



“Maintaining strong conservation programs under the Conservation Title of the next Farm Bill is critical to providing adequate and economical food production, clean water, wildlife benefits and recreation opportunities for current and future generations. Through public and private partnerships, we are developing win-win solutions for working landscapes and the natural resources that they support.”

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conserving habitat through partnerships

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