

Strengthening conservation and sustainable agriculture practices in the Farm Bill



CONSERVATION THAT CONNECTS

Introduction

The purpose of this white paper is to offer new ideas and solutions for the conservation title in the federal Farm Bill. It is the result of work by a team of conservation and production agriculture professionals from the public and private sectors convened by the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation.

In 2022, the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation of Dundee, Illinois, assembled a working group to consider conservation and production agriculture improvements in the upcoming Farm Bill. The group was comprised of leaders with diverse backgrounds who share decades of technical expertise with the federal government, as well as production agriculture and federal farm programs.

After an in-depth review of current statutes, regulations and policies, the group recommended several changes to current policy as outlined in this paper. If included in the 2023 Farm Bill, the changes would improve sustainable agriculture production, soil health, and conservation management.

← Meet the members of the working group, **PAGE 15**

Background

Congress reauthorizes a Farm Bill approximately every five years. The current legislation, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, expires in 2023. This white paper provides recommendations and modifications to current law that would boost economic stability for production agriculture and improve soil and water health and wildlife habitat in the agrarian landscape.

Farm Bill programs predominantly target land that is privately owned and mostly in the eastern two-thirds of the country. These programs over the past several decades have provided land-stewardship tools and incentives that give agricultural producers ways to protect soil health and improve air and water quality.

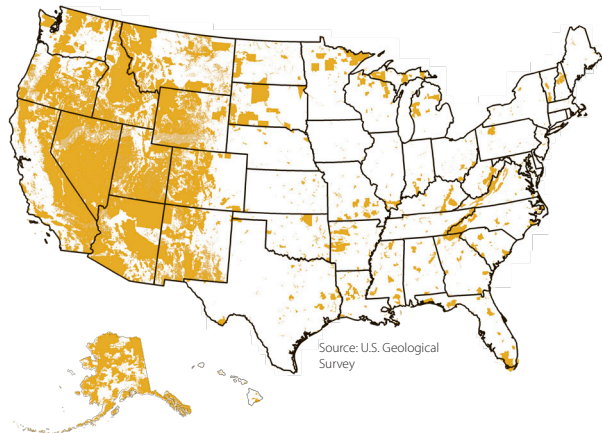
U.S. farmers and ranchers are expected to feed not only their nation's citizens but also a large portion of the world's growing population on a shrinking footprint of agricultural land. In addition, they face mounting pressure and increased expectations to better protect soil and water, improve the overall environmental landscape, and to meet the challenges of a changing climate producing radical temperature and moisture extremes.

Agriculture also contributes heavily to the billions of dollars generated by hunting and fishing by establishing and maintaining wildlife habitat and land devoted to conservation.¹

Just as agricultural equipment and biotechnology are rapidly evolving, Farm Bill programs must evolve as well if they are to remain effective in bolstering food, fiber, and fuel production efficiently and cost-effectively while maintaining adequate food security.

BY THE NUMBERS

Federal land in the United States



61 percent of U.S. land is under private ownership.

Agriculture production is a major use of roughly **52 percent** of the privately owned land base.

The U.S. population is projected to grow by **100 million** over the coming decades.

The world population is projected to reach **8.5 billion** in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050, and 11.2 billion by 2100.

Total land in farms decreased from 896.6 million acres in 2020 to **895.3 million** acres in 2021.

Farmland acreage has decreased by more than 13.6 million acres since 2014, an average of more than **1.9 million acres per year**.

¹Realtree: *Fishing and Hunting contribute billions to U.S. economy.* business.realtree.com/business-blog/fishing-and-hunting-contribute-billions-us-economy



Recommendations

Implement changes to the Conservation Reserve Program

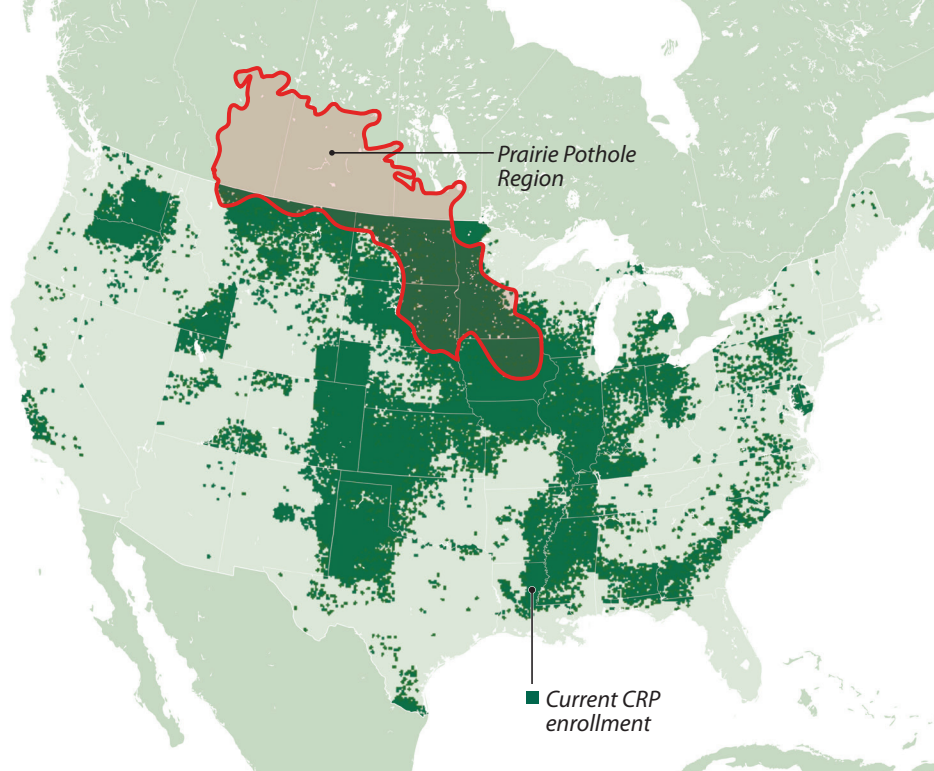
First authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is widely considered the Farm Bill's cornerstone conservation program. CRP has evolved from a simple marginal and fragile land set-aside initiative into a multifaceted program enabling farmers to cost-effectively address soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on their land.

CRP also has been instrumental in protecting land in the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States, which is comprised of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota (see map, above).

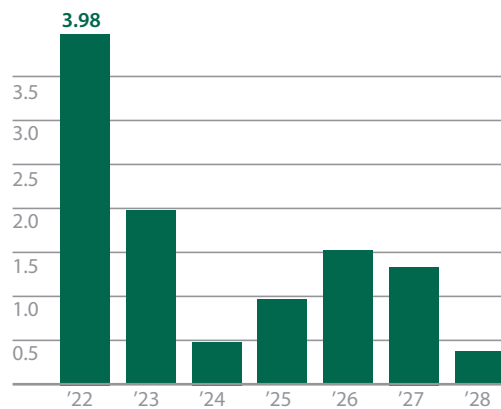
From 2022 through 2028, 10,664,721 acres under CRP contracts are expected to expire.

Frequent criticisms of CRP include:

- CRP hinders beginning farmers because its rental rates have been nearly equal to or greater than local cash rent, especially when Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program payments are added.
- The minimum general and continuous CRP enrollment period of 10 to 15 years is too long.
- Current policy determining CRP rental rates by soil productivity factors ineffectively targets CRP goals and objectives because lower rental rates are paid on the poorer quality ground and higher rental rates on better quality ground enrolled in a CRP contract. As a result, too much high-quality farmland is enrolled in CRP.



Expiring CRP contracts
Millions of acres, 2022–2028



Source: USDA Farm Service Agency

BY THE NUMBERS

National CRP enrollment peaked in 2007 at **36.7 million acres**.

CRP enrollment as of May 2022 was **22 million acres**.

The CRP acreage cap is **27 million acres** by 2023.

Nearly a quarter of the total national enrollment—**5.496 million acres**—is in the **Prairie Pothole Region** as of May 2022.

- CRP falls short of its potential to be more of a land-use program that does not compromise habitat and land- and water-protection objectives.

We propose these changes to the Conservation Reserve Program:

1. Increase CRP rental rates for poorer quality land and lower rental rates for better quality land

One of the primary criticisms of CRP is that it removes cropland from the rental marketplace that otherwise could be leased by beginning, limited resource, or socially disadvantaged farmers. In addition, early in the CRP timeline, some rural communities believed they had been harmed economically by large CRP enrollments, including whole farms enrolled by retiring farmers. Though not verified, these enrollments were blamed for revenue losses among local agricultural suppliers as fertilizer, seed, and other inputs and supplies were no longer needed for the enrolled land.

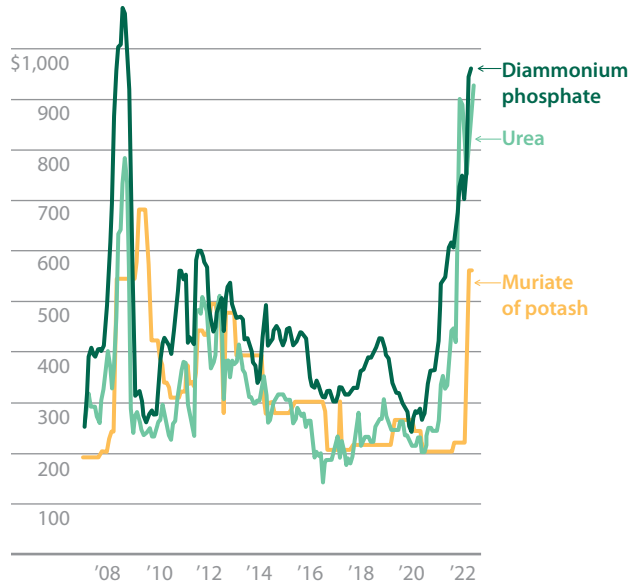
Over the more than three decades of CRP's lifespan, changes have been made to the program, such as disallowing whole-farm enrollment and restricting the percentage of acres that may be enrolled in CRP in each county. For example, the 2018 Farm Bill maintains the acreage limitation that not more than 25 percent of the cropland in any county can be enrolled in CRP, and eliminates the 25 percent county acreage cap limitation waiver (even with county government and producer support).

CRP historically targets marginal and fragile lands and wetlands to improve water quality and prevent wind and water erosion. In addition, CRP has created and improved wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities, boosting state and rural economies dependent on hunting and fishing.

In essence, CRP rental payment policy pays the lowest rental rate per acre for the most marginal and fragile land targeted for enrollment, and the highest rental rate for more productive cropland, a policy that reduces available productive cropland.

Policymakers have been somewhat successful in

Fertilizer prices
Per metric ton



Source: Bloomberg; World Bank. Last observation April 2022.

providing producers adequate incentives to enroll targeted marginal and fragile land in CRP. Yet the enrollment downturn from more than 37 million acres to the current cap of 27 million acres by 2023 attests to waning interest among farmers and landowners.

Biotech seed and crop improvements, including genetic drought and insect resistance, along with great strides in mechanized technology, have increased production capabilities, especially in the western Corn Belt and Prairie Pothole Region. Yet since 2020, input prices have dramatically increased, especially for fertilizer (see chart, above), diminishing profits even as crop prices rose in the past year.

This scenario provides an opportunity to modify CRP to make it a more viable alternative to crop production on lower-capacity land where crops are not economically feasible.

In addition, food-price increases over the past three years have spurred some policymakers to request that some land be allowed to exit CRP prematurely so it can re-enter production.

For example:



CRP policy specifies that county average CRP rental rates must be set at levels reflecting the average cash rental rates per acre for non-irrigated cropland to produce the major annually tilled crop for three predominant soil types within a soil survey area in a county during the past year, adjusted for inflation. A three-year average of National Agriculture Statistical Service data is used to establish these rates.

Reversing the current rental payment rate structure and paying the highest CRP rental rate for the least productive soil type (possibly based on lower soil productivity factors and/or higher erodibility factors and lower rates for the most productive soil type would encourage a higher enrollment of the least productive land. In addition, the Environmental Benefits Index could be modified to give higher rental credits based on total ecosystem services and benefits.

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced in May 2022 that producers and landowners could request voluntary termination of CRP contracts after the primary nesting season for fiscal year 2022. Participants do not have to repay rental payments for the one-time voluntary termination. USDA said the flexibility was meant to mitigate “the global food supply challenges caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other factors.”
- The National Grain and Feed Association and six other organizations, including the American Farm Bureau, wrote a letter on March 23, 2022, to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack requesting “flexibility (for) producers to plant crops on prime farmland as well as the least environmentally sensitive acres currently in the program without penalty.”²

According to the National Resources Inventory in 2017, the last year of public record, 4.1 million acres of prime farmland were enrolled in general sign-up CRP.³

Currently, less than half of CRP acres are enrolled in whole-field, general enrollment. Most acres are enrolled in continuous and other CRP initiative programs.

This would also:

- Reduce the number of prime farmland acres enrolled in CRP.
- Increase the percentage of marginal and fragile land enrolled in CRP.
- Increase the actual production history of cropland in a unit for crop insurance purposes.
- Reduce fertilizer and other costs for land in a unit not enrolled in CRP because only the most productive soil types that require the least inputs would be planted to crops.
- Increase profitability as less productive land is taken out of production.
- Foster more economically sustainable operations for owner/operators and cash-rent tenants on farms with their least productive soil types enrolled in CRP due to reduced input amounts, and less-costly crop insurance premiums because of higher actual production history.

²National Grain and Feed Association. namamillers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/03-23-22-Coalition-Letter-USDA-CRP-Flexibility.pdf

³USDA National Resources Inventory. publicdashboards.dl.usda.gov/t/FPAC_PUB/views/RCADVPrimeFarmlandNRI20171/StatePrimeFarmland



This rental rate policy change could be authorized in the Farm Bill nationwide or in targeted trial areas, with results reported by USDA to the Senate and House Agriculture Committees.*

2. Modify Grassland CRP to encourage wetlands enrollment

Endangered grasslands in the Prairie Pothole Region, the Playa Lakes of the western Great Plains, and other areas are populated with thousands of acres of wetlands critical to the Ogallala Aquifer and other groundwater regeneration systems, ecosystem health, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat.

As of December 2021, Grassland CRP had 3.9 million acres enrolled, and an additional 3.1 million acres were offered in a 2022 sign-up. Thousands more acres of threatened grasslands and wetlands could be enrolled in Grassland CRP if USDA would:

- Establish an Environmental Benefits Index scoring factor in the ranking process for grassland acres containing wetlands.
- Designate the Prairie Potholes and Playa Lakes as Grassland CRP National Priority Zones.
- Allow wetland acres in Grassland CRP to be included in acreage eligible for rental payment.
- Ensure that wetland acres enrolled in Grassland CRP do not count against the CRP acreage cap.

Including the Prairie Potholes and Playa Lakes as Grassland CRP National Priority Zones and assigning grasslands with wetlands a higher priority in the Grassland CRP ranking process would protect a significant number of acres threatened by conversion to cropland and urban sprawl.

CRP Signup 203 in 2021 resulted in 2,541,156 acres

*To discourage landowners from converting native sod or grassland to what would be considered marginal and/or fragile cropland, such converted native sod or grassland should be ineligible for enrollment in CRP for a minimum of 15 years after conversion.

acceptable with a ranking factor of 70 or greater out of the 3,968,434 acres offered for Grassland CRP. The national average percent of acceptable acres offered for Grassland CRP is 64 percent.

For the five Prairie Pothole states, 560,611 acres were determined acceptable out of 1,039,678 acres offered, a 53 percent acceptance rate that is 11 percent below the national average acceptance rate.

Modifying Grassland CRP to prioritize applications containing wetlands is important to preserve grasslands, support the grazing livestock industry, and enhance wildlife habitat, and because wetlands sequester carbon from the atmosphere through plant photosynthesis and by acting as sediment traps for runoff.

3. Authorize National and Wetlands Soil Health and Income Protection Programs

Congress authorized the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) as a CRP component in the 2018 Farm Bill. It had a maximum cumulative enrollment of 50,000 acres limited to the Prairie Pothole states. In response to criticism of the long-term minimum CRP enrollments, it offered three-, four- or five-year enrollment options.

Participation was minimal, primarily because USDA initially established rental rates for SHIPP based only on the soil type of the enrolled land, which is a lower rate than the higher county average CRP rental rate for all land. This contradicted the legislative language authorizing SHIPP.

Authorize a national SHIPP

A national SHIPP with the following parameters would result in more widespread enrollment and cost-effective protection of wetlands and sensitive, fragile lands.

- SHIPP should be expanded to all states.
- SHIPP contracts should be for three, four, or five years.
- Landowner or eligible operator should choose land to be enrolled.

- Land must have been planted with a crop the preceding three years.
- No more than 15 percent of the cropland on a farm may be enrolled in SHIPP.
- Enrolled land may be hayed or grazed outside the primary nesting season with no reduction in payment.
- Enrolled land may be harvested for seed outside the primary nesting season with a 25 percent reduction in payment.
- Rental rate should be 75 percent of the average county rental rate with additional rental rate increases for incentives for ecosystem benefits and services.
- There should be a 50 percent cost-share for vegetative cover establishment.
- There should be a 75 percent cost-share for beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers or ranchers for vegetative cover establishment.

Authorize a Wetlands SHIPP

Wetlands are an important part of each region's ecosystem, particularly in the Prairie Potholes. A Wetlands SHIPP would provide a proactive approach to preserving wetlands as opposed to imposing penalties for converting them to cropland. Steps should include:

- Authorizing a specific Wetlands SHIPP component for the Prairie Pothole states.
- Cropland acres enrolled in SHIPP must have been cropped in the three preceding years.
- Farmable wetlands must have been cropped three of the 10 preceding years.
- Wetlands SHIPP contracts should be for five years.
- Landowner or eligible operator may choose land to enroll.
- Wetland acres with no cropping history would be eligible for enrollment in Wetlands SHIPP, subject to limitations, and are not required to meet cropping history requirements.

- Wetlands SHIPP contracts should not include more than 50 percent wetland acres that do not meet cropping requirements.
- Wetlands SHIPP contracts should include a minimum of 20 percent wetland acres that do not meet cropping requirements.
- Rental rate should be the average of the county CRP rental rate enrolled for cropland acres and 50 percent of the average county rental rate with additional rental rate increases for incentives for ecosystem benefits and services for enrolled wetland acres that do not meet cropping requirements.
- Crop acreage bases on enrolled cropland should be suspended for the duration of the contract.
- Wetlands enrolled in SHIPP should not count against CRP acreage or 25 percent county acreage caps.
- Expiring CRP land would be eligible for Wetlands SHIPP if eligible wetlands that do not meet cropping requirements are included in the contract, according to required minimum and maximum percentages.
- All expiring Wetlands SHIPP contract acres should be eligible for enrollment in CRP with the wetlands acres that do not meet cropping requirements at the 50 percent rate.*
- After Wetlands SHIPP acres enrolled in CRP expire, those acres should be given priority for enrollment in the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program or in the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers Initiative.
- There should be a 50 percent cost-share for vegetative cover establishment on acres that meet cropping requirements, and as determined necessary, on all other enrolled acres.
- There should be a 75 percent cost-share for beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers or ranchers for vegetative



Example

A Wetlands SHIPP contract covers 27 acres, with 20 acres of cropland that meets the cropping history requirements and a seven-acre wetland.

The county average CRP rental rate is \$120 per acre. The annual rental payment for five years would be:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 20 \text{ acres} \times \$120 = \$2,400 \\
 + \text{seven acres} \times \$60 = \$420 \\
 \hline
 \mathbf{\$2,820}
 \end{array}$$

The seven-acre wetland meets the minimum wetland requirement and does not exceed the maximum.

cover establishment on acres that meet cropping requirements.

- Land enrolled in Wetlands SHIPP may be hayed or grazed outside the primary nesting season with no payment reduction.
- Enrolled land that meets cropping requirements may be harvested for seed outside the primary nesting season with a 25 percent reduction in payment.
- No more than 20 percent of the cropland on a farm shall be eligible.

*Wetlands acres expiring from SHIPP would be subject to Swampbuster provisions. Swampbuster, officially titled the Wetland Conservation provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, discourages the conversion of wetlands to cropland use. The purpose was to achieve a balance between attempting to reduce crop subsidies and conserving wetlands (1985 Conference Report).



Improve conservation easement management practices and options

Most USDA easement programs have lifespans of 10 years to perpetuity. USDA should allow more flexibility in the management of these programs to maximize effectiveness and to fulfill their intended purposes.

Under current restrictions, weed control can become problematic over the lifespan of a 10- to 15-year easement contract, and infestation of undesirable species such as red cedars can reduce the easement's conserving use and wildlife habitat value. These problems are exacerbated on permanent easement lands because they remain under restrictions in perpetuity.

USDA should review all current easement management practices, including ensuring consistent management across conservation programs and CRP mid-term management contract options, in collaboration with state natural resource departments and state technical committees. After this review, USDA should allow land enrolled in any easement program to be modified to improve water management by plugging ditches or using other approved practices. Additional management practices could include vegetative cover control, weed, tree and invasive shrubbery control; creating or enhancing wildlife habitat; or any other purpose approved by state officials.

Modifications should also be considered to facilitate the practical administration and management of the easement area, provided the modifications would not adversely affect the functions and purposes for which the easement was established.

Grazing conservation easement land is preferable to haying for wildlife habitat purposes as it can be managed to control early-season grasses and vegetation, and to improve nutrient cycling. The controlled grazing allows later native warm-season grasses, forbs, and pollinator habitat species to thrive.

Cost-share for fencing and livestock watering equipment on USDA easements, including CRP, with a minimum lifespan of 10 years or more should be authorized at 75 percent cost-share, subject to de minimis size restrictions, as determined by the secretary of agriculture.

USDA easement land with less than 10 years of its contract period remaining may be made eligible for fencing and water equipment cost-share if the contract holder agrees to extend the CRP contract a minimum of 10 years.

Because modifications to an easement could affect the total acres enrolled in the program, all modifications to an existing easement must result in no net loss of enrolled land.

Mitigate long-term and permanent easement lands

Certain lands under long-term and permanent easements no longer provide the desired conserving use and habitat goals for which they were intended. Reasons for this include:

- Urban sprawl.
- Growth of undesirable, unmanageable vegetative cover.
- Surrounding land use changes compromising the easement's value.

A common-sense solution would be to allow land in any easement program to be mitigated for land of equal or greater conservation and wildlife benefit under the following guidelines:

- The easement mitigation must result in equal or greater ecological and economic value compared to the acreage that is mitigated.
- The party requesting the modification would be responsible for 100 percent of the cost of the land transfer, including:

- Appraisal to ensure the economic benefit of the new acres is equal to or greater than that of the acres lost.
- Repayment of original acreage restoration work being taken out of the easement.
- As applicable, survey of property boundaries, including review and approval by an applicable agency.
- Recording and legal fees, as applicable.
- Easement mitigation on land subject to urban sprawl shall require the party requesting the easement to pay half the fair market value of the land in the original easement.

Acreage exchange should be duly prepared and recorded in conformity with standard real estate practices, including requirements for title approval, subordination of liens, and amended warranty easement deed recordation.

The exchange acres should also meet eligible land criteria for the applicable easement.

Improve data collection and analysis

It is an ongoing challenge to quantify the value of conservation practices such as enrolling less productive land in CRP and other conserving-use programs, planting cover crops or establishing permanent vegetative cover to improve wildlife habitat on conservation easement lands.

USDA agencies, including the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources and Conservation Service, and the Risk Management Agency, have collected production and conservation program data for decades. Yet this data is seldom analyzed and compiled into information that producers can use to increase efficiency.

Legislation addressing this need was introduced May 11, 2022, with S.4189, The Agriculture Innovation Act of 2022. This legislation would strengthen data collection and research to connect farmers and ranchers with the most effective conservation practices.

The legislation also would improve USDA's secure and confidential data collection procedures for assessing how various conservation and production practices increase crop yield, bolster soil health, and otherwise boost productivity.

Specifically, The Agriculture Innovation Act would:



- Direct the secretary of agriculture to identify, collect, link, and analyze data relating to the impacts of conservation and other production practices on enhancing crop yields and soil health, and otherwise reducing risk and improving farm and ranch profitability.
- Allow the secretary to establish a secure, confidential, cloud-based conservation and farm productivity data center to store operational, transactional, and administrative program databases and records that support business, statistical, and other analysis.

- Empower USDA to use research, analysis, and evaluation products derived from enhanced data to provide technical assistance to farmers and improve farm program implementation.⁴

The McGraw working group considers this legislation an important step toward better and more efficient data collection and analysis.

⁴U.S. Senate. thune.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/5/thune-klobuchar-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-connect-producers-with-effective-conservation-practices

About the McGraw Farm Bill Working Group



LYNN TJEERDSMA

Group leader,

Retired senior policy advisor for Senator John Thune

Lynn is a veteran of six Farm Bills during his 30-year career in Washington, DC. He spent 15 years as owner/operator of 1,800 acres in South Dakota and served in several policy-making positions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He also spent two years as policy initiatives manager for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

Today Lynn actively manages his 480-acre farm in south-central South Dakota, part of which was homesteaded by his great-great-grandfather in 1883. Multiple conservation practices are utilized on this operation, including Conservation Security Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, cover crops, no-till/minimum till, and North American Wetlands Conservation Act seedings.



CHELSEY BERINGER

District conservationist, Natural Resources and Conservation Service

Chelsey is the NRCS district conservationist for Charles Mix County, South Dakota.

Common practices in the county include brush management, prescribed grazing, water development, nutrient management, pest management, and cover crops.

She attended the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she received a BS in biochemistry with a sustainable ag minor in 2016 and an MS in natural resources-soil science in 2018. Her thesis focused on the degradation of neonicotinoids in Missouri wetland soils.

Other experience includes research projects on black bear dens and salamander populations in the Missouri Ozarks and an internship with DuPont Pioneer.



MELINDA CEP

*Vice president for natural solutions and working lands,
National Audubon Society*

Melinda joined Audubon in May 2021 as the vice president for natural solutions and working lands. In this new role for Audubon, she works to improve bird habitat and advance natural climate solutions across private and public lands.

Before joining Audubon, Melinda served as legislative and policy director for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. In that role, she managed the committee's legislative and policy work on issues ranging from conservation and forestry to agricultural commodities, public lands, research, and trade. Before her time with the committee, Melinda held multiple senior leadership positions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and served as senior director of food and markets at the World Wildlife Fund.

Melinda grew up on a farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. She holds a doctor of veterinary medicine from Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine and received fellowships from the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.



JONATHAN W. COPPES

*Assistant professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign;
Director, Gardner Agriculture Policy Program;
Fellow, Bock Ag Law/Policy Program*

Jonathan is on faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, director of the Gardner Agriculture Policy Program and author of "The Fault Lines of Farm Policy: A Legislative and Political History of the Farm Bill."

Previously, he served as chief counsel for the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry; administrator of the Farm Service Agency at USDA; and legislative assistant to Senator Ben Nelson (D-Nebraska).

His experience in federal policymaking guides his research, extension, and teaching in agricultural policy and law. His work connects the history of federal agricultural policy development to current policy development, specifically applied to risk management and natural resource conservation.

Jonathan grew up on his family's farm in western Ohio, earned his bachelor's degree from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and his juris doctor from The George Washington University Law School in Washington, D.C.



DAVID GAGNER

Senior director of government relations, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation

Dave began his career working on ethanol and oxygenated fuels issues while consulting and representing clients at the state, federal, corporate, and nonprofit levels. He worked for the National Association of Conservation Districts from 1999 through 2001 as director of government affairs with a focus on the 2002 Farm Bill and developing the association's grassroots system. From 2001 to 2003, Dave worked as lead agriculture representative for Ducks Unlimited. He then spent three years as chief of staff at the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Dave was a member of the management and leadership team responsible for a staff of nearly 12,500 employees and a \$4 billion budget. He served in a variety of roles within the Department of Agriculture, including as the representative on critical issues such as wetlands, wildlife, drought, the Pacific Northwest's Klamath Basin, biofuels, climate change, and preparation for the next Farm Bill's conservation title.

He is currently senior director of government relations at the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, with a primary focus on private/agricultural/working lands.

Dave graduated from Bowling Green State University in 1992 with a BA in political science, focused on environmental policy. He also served in the U.S. Army's Fourth Infantry Division.



TROY KNECHT

*Farmer, Prairie Pothole Region, northeast South Dakota;
Vice president, Knecht Farms Inc., Houghton South Dakota;
CEO, Sand Lake Sales LLC (seed, crop care, liquid fertilizer)*

Troy is a fourth-generation farmer working 7,000 row-cropped acres (2,400 owned, 2,500 rented, 2,100 custom) in a corn and soybean rotation. He also manages 2,000 acres for grazing a 300-head herd of cattle.

From 2010 to 2018, he was a member of the South Dakota Corn Growers Association and served as its president in 2017-18. He is vice president of the American Coalition for Ethanol, vice president of Redfield Energy, and serves on the Brown County Weed and Pest Board.

He is active in his community, currently serving his ninth year on the Britton-Hecla School District Board of Education, and is in his first year as the district head boys' varsity basketball coach.

He holds a bachelor of science in agriculture from South Dakota State University.



BRUCE KNIGHT

Principal and founder, Strategic Conservation Solutions

Bruce is a nationally recognized expert on conservation, agriculture and the environment. With a long track record of bringing strategic workable solutions to complex and controversial issues, he understands the workings of farm and conservation policy from the grassroots to the national level. He couples his national policymaking experience with a pragmatic approach to issues harvested from his personal farming enterprise.

Bruce was the undersecretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 2006 to 2009. In this post, he provided leadership and oversight for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the Agricultural Marketing Service and the Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration. These agencies protect animals and plants and promote fair, open and orderly markets for U.S. agricultural products.

From 2002 to 2006, Bruce served as chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the lead USDA agency for conservation on private working agricultural lands.



GREGORY PILCHAK

Greg, participating in a personal capacity, is a project manager at Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture.

He previously served as agriculture policy program manager with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. In this role, he led AFWA's efforts on Farm Bill implementation and reauthorization, private lands conservation and recreational access, and integration of wildlife and habitat concerns into sustainable agricultural production. He was responsible for tracking and monitoring the rulemaking process, policy changes, and legislation pertaining to wildlife conservation on private and agricultural lands; reporting to association members on a regular basis; and serving as the primary point of contact for state fish and wildlife agencies on these issues.

Before joining AFWA, Greg worked as a policy analyst with Strategic Conservation Solutions, a Washington-based consulting firm that works with commodity groups and conservation NGOs on sustainability issues in agriculture. Greg holds BAs in political theory and constitutional democracy and Russian from Michigan State University.

About the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation

The Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation is the nation's most prominent advocate for creative and entrepreneurial thought in conservation and a leader in conservation communications. It was created more than 60 years ago by the visionary conservationist Max McGraw, founder of McGraw-Edison Co.

Headquartered on 1,250 acres in Dundee, Illinois, McGraw aims to secure the future of hunting, fishing and land management through science, demonstration, education, and communication.



CONSERVATION THAT CONNECTS

[mcgraw.org](https://www.mcgraw.org)

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