

CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE PROVISIONS

- Conservation Compliance requires farmers who voluntarily receive taxpayer money to substantially reduce soil erosion by implementing a conservation plan on highly erodible cropland that was in production before the 1995 law was enacted.

SODBUSTER

- Sodbuster is a provision that denies public money to producers who plant crops on highly erodible land (HEL) that was not cultivated between 1981 and 1985, unless the producer implements a conservation plan first.

SWAMPBUSTER

- Swampbuster is a provision that makes wetland conservation an eligible requirement for receiving public agricultural subsidies through the USDA. Farmers who choose to drain or convert designated wetlands on their farmland become ineligible to receive farm program benefits.



NRCS District Conservationist discussing conservation practices with landowner and SWCD Commissioner. Photo courtesy of NRCS.

AGENCY CONTACTS

FARM SERVICE AGENCY (FSA)

1. The agency within the USDA that administers the federal government's farm subsidy, emergency assistance, and farmland aerial photography programs.
2. FSA has primary responsibility for the administration and delivery of the CRP and Conservation Compliance within the county. This includes Swampbuster, Sodbuster and CRP mowing requirements.
3. Implementation of programs at the local level is overseen by the County Office Committee (COC). The COC is made up of three (but up to five) elected members who represent and are elected by the agricultural producers in the county. This gives farmers a predominant say in how federal farm programs and funds affect their operations.
4. The COC hires a county executive director (CED) and a staff of assistants to carry on day-to-day operations.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

1. The NRCS is a federally funded agency whose primary function is providing technical; planning and financial assistance to farmers, state and local governments and other land users to develop conservation systems best suited to the land.
2. NRCS is responsible for evaluating CRP bids for potential environmental benefits, as well as for designing a conservation plan for each accepted bid.
3. Other responsibilities include administering the WRP and WHIP.
4. The primary contact within the county is the district conservationist. Other employees may include soil technicians, soil scientists, agronomists and engineers.
5. NRCS is involved in evaluating and determining wetland sites for Swampbuster inquiries for the FSA.

SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (SWCD)

1. Districts are local subdivisions of state government organized by citizens under each state's conservation law. They are funded through a variety of sources including county, state, and federal agencies. Additional funding is sought through a variety of federal, state and private grant programs and through donations.
2. Each district is led by a local governing board of supervisors. These supervisors are elected by the general public and volunteer their time to oversee the district programs and the hiring of technical employees to carry out these programs.
3. Districts were created and operate under the premise that local people best know the conservation needs of the county.
4. SWCDs play an integral role in implementing Farm Bill programs at the local level. They also have an approval role for all conservation plans developed by NRCS.
5. Most districts share office space with the NRCS, and occasionally the day-to-day operations are supervised by the district conservationist.
6. Districts also play an important role in implementing watershed plans, school education activities, environmental field days and workshops; ditch maintenance and providing technical assistance concerning animal waste storage, application and spill investigations.



GETTING IT DONE in

the Chesapeake Bay



FARM BILL SUMMARY

WHAT IS THE FARM BILL?

This document is intended to be a summary of the major programs in the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill. All of these programs have pluses and minuses in terms of environmental benefits and impacts to producers, and there continues to be a lot of variation in how these programs are delivered state by state. Many organizations will be debating these programs in preparation for the 2007 version of the Farm Bill, so a thorough review of each program by state is the best method of evaluation.

If you have questions, please call:

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- A Congressional Act that is amended every four to five years, and that addresses commodity price controls, farm loans, conservation requirements, etc.
- The "Farm Bill" provides periodic revisions to these legislative acts.
- The conservation provisions enacted in the last three Farm Bills have provided more fish and wildlife habitat opportunities than any other federal legislation to date.
- Twenty different conservation programs are offered to landowners and farmers, providing \$17.1 billion over the next six years.
- The Farm Bill has great potential to impact Chesapeake Bay restoration throughout the watershed.



THE PROGRAMS influencing WILDLIFE HABITAT & THE ENVIRONMENT

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

1. Voluntary land retirement program aimed at highly erodible farm ground, environmentally sensitive areas, and wetlands for a period of 10–15 years.
2. Original purpose was to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, and provide commodity supply control. The CRP was first implemented as part of the 1985 Farm Bill.
3. Periodic sign-up periods announced by the USDA Farm Service Agency for 2–4 week periods. These sign-ups occur as the budget or expiring acres allow. Can enroll whole fields or partial fields.
4. Land enrolled must be planted to ground cover (grass, trees, or shallow water) and have a cropping history for four out of the last six years.
5. Landowners receive an annual per acre payment and up to 50% cost-share for the establishment of permanent cover.
6. Washington has set a nationwide cap of 39.2 million acres. Currently we are at 34.8 million acres.
7. The FAIR Act of 1996 established the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) and made wildlife habitat an equal scoring partner with soil erosion and water quality practices. CRP is the single most important factor influencing upland wildlife habitat in most ag areas of the U.S.

Continuous CRP

1. Aimed at enrolling small-acreage, high value practices (riparian establishment, grasslands, buffer strips), rather than land types.
2. An additional 20 percent financial incentive, on top of local acreage bid cap, is provided for certain practices. Up to 90% of restoration and establishment costs and a \$10 per acre signing bonus is also provided on certain cover practices.
3. Provides a year-round sign-up period (can enroll in select practices at any time).

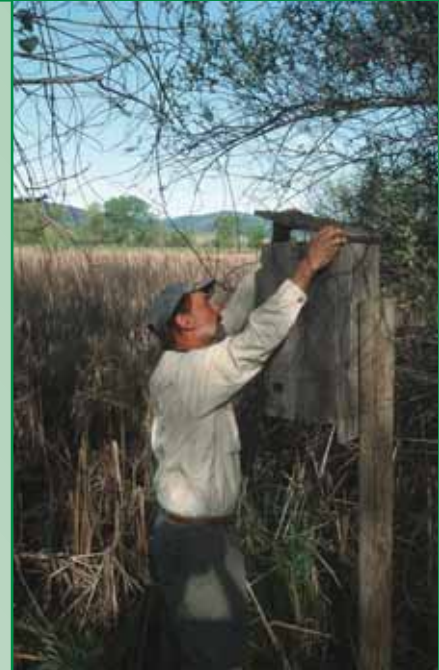


Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

1. Provides financial incentives for wildlife habitat improvements based on land-management, rather than land retirement.
2. Land need not be active in agricultural use to be eligible for WHIP.
3. Approximately \$50 million is allocated annually to the states to be utilized according to their habitat priorities.
4. Landowners' applications are scored and funds distributed according to priority habitat improvements to grassland, wetlands, and riparian areas.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

1. GRP is a voluntary program to help landowners and operators restore and protect grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, shrubland, and certain other lands while maintaining the areas as grazing lands.
2. GRP was established in 2002, and has a two million acre cap. Sign-ups are continuous.
3. No limit on enrollment, but must have at least 40 contiguous acres. Enrollment options include 30-year and permanent easements; or 10, 15, 20, or 30 year rental agreements. Cost share restoration is available (up to 90% for unbroken grasslands, or up to 75% for previously cropped grassland or shrubland).



Farmers provide valuable wildlife habitat as well as producing food and fiber. Photo courtesy of NRCS.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

1. Geared toward state involvement (financially and technically) in focusing set-aside efforts in a specified watershed or watersheds to address a specific resource need. All the practices (grass filter strips, wetland restoration, riparian establishment and protection) provide wildlife habitat benefits, both aquatic and terrestrial.
2. States must provide at least 20% for the cost of additional financial incentives for practice implementation.
3. Practices are based on rules set for the Continuous CRP program. Eligible land must be farmed four out of the last six years and must be located in the watershed where resource need is identified. Whole fields may be accepted, but must be approved through an agreement with USDA.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

1. Provides financial assistance to owners with eligible land, of which 50 percent must be classified as agricultural wetland (hydric soil), to restore and protect wetlands.
 - a. **PERMANENT EASEMENT**—easement payments generally are 100 percent of appraised land value up to \$2000/acre (some exceptions). USDA pays 100 percent of restoration costs.
 - b. **30-YEAR EASEMENT**—easement payment generally is 75 percent of appraised agricultural value based on maximum \$2000/acre cap; USDA pays 75 percent of restoration costs.
 - c. **RESTORATION COST-SHARE AGREEMENT**—no incentive/easement payment; 10-year agreement; USDA pays 75 percent of restoration costs.
2. Authorized to enroll up to 2,275,000 acres nationwide by the year 2007. Currently, approximately 1,662,000 acres enrolled nationwide in WRP on ~8,400 projects. Approximately half of the acres required restoration.
3. Landowners still control access to land enrolled in WRP and retain hunting and fishing rights. Land can be sold, but purchaser inherits the deed restrictions listed on the easement. Must own land for one year before eligible for enrollment.

Conservation Security Program (CSP)

1. The new program is from the 2002 Farm Bill.
2. The voluntary program provides financial and technical assistance to promote conservation of soil, water, air, energy, plant, and animal life on "working lands."
3. Objective is to assist producers maintain conservation stewardship and implement additional conservation practices.
4. Currently offered in select watersheds across the nation, including several watersheds in the Chesapeake Bay. Producers submit self assessment of their working lands to determine eligibility.
5. Three tiers of eligibility are available depending on conservation practices. Soil quality practices include crop rotations, cover crops, tillage practices, prescribed grazing, and wind barriers. Water quality practices include conservation tillage, filter strips, terraces, grassed waterways, managed access to waterways, nutrient and pesticide management, prescribed grazing, and irrigation management.
6. Tier I contracts for 5 years @ \$20,000/year.
Tier II contracts for 5–10 years @ \$35,000/year.
Tier III contracts for 5–10 years @ \$45,000/year.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQUIP)

1. EQUIP offers contracts on working farms that provide incentive payments and cost sharing for environmental conservation practices such as manure management systems, pest management, erosion control, and other practices to improve and maintain the health of natural resources.
2. EQUIP contracts run a minimum of one year and a maximum of 10 years, and are implemented based on an environmental quality incentives plan of operations developed by the producer, NRCS, and the SWCD.
3. EQUIP may cost share up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation parties. Incentive payments may be provided up to three years to encourage producers to carry out management plans.
4. National priorities include reducing non-point pollutants such as nutrients, sediments, pesticides, or excess salinity, especially in impaired watersheds consistent with Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). Priorities include the reduction of contamination of groundwater and the conservation of ground and surface waters. Other priorities include reduction of emissions, soil erosion and sedimentation, and the promotion of at-risk species habitat recovery.