

The Farm Bill: Helping Landowners Help Wildlife¹

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If you are wondering what you can do to improve conditions for wildlife on your property, a good place to start is to ask what the Farm Bill can do to help you. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (The Farm Bill) offers landowners a variety of resources to help enhance, restore, and protect our valuable natural resources, while improving agricultural productivity and overall land health (Figure 1). Challenging environmental issues related to soil, air, and water quality; multiple-use; soil and water erosion; invasive species control; and wildlife habitat loss are just a few of the many issues facing private landowners, farmers and ranchers everyday. Although the first Farm Bill was originally developed in the 1920s to address commodities programs, it has since evolved to support a diversity of agricultural price supports and related programs to help ensure affordable food, fiber, and other natural resources for our country. The 1985 Farm Bill contained the first conservation initiatives and has been revised about every 6 years to update existing programs and create new ones based on important natural resource priorities and production goals. Our legislators have recognized the increasing need to provide more financial and technical assistance to help landowners address society's production needs

with more natural resource-friendly, sustainable approaches in land management. Our current 2002 Farm Bill will come up for renewal in the year 2007.



Figure 1. The Farm Bill provides technical and financial assistance to landowners interested in enhancing and restoring wildlife habitat and other natural resources, while improving agricultural productivity and overall land health. Credits: C. Giuliano (2006).

The United States Department of Agriculture administers a wide variety of Farm Bill programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Forest Service (FS). A good place to start is a phone

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call to your local NRCS service representative, county extension agent, or county forester to find out which Farm Bill program best fits your land management goals. All of the programs have variable deadlines, specific eligibility requirements, and generally include the development and implementation of a land management plan. A brief summary of the available programs is listed below, followed by contact information.

Farm Bill Programs

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs

The Environmental Quality Incentives

Program (EQIP) promotes environmental quality and agricultural production as compatible goals. Technical assistance and as much as 75% cost sharing are available for qualifying applicants enrolling for 1 to 10 year contracts. EQIP goals include reducing erosion in cropland and forestland, water conservation, improving water and air quality, improvements to rangeland, aquatic, and riparian areas, and incorporating wildlife management into these improvements. This program is highly competitive, and ranking of natural resource priorities from the national level to the local level helps decide how much funding is available from area to area. Each applicant's plan is evaluated by considering such things as cost effectiveness and total environmental benefits, with cost share payments adjusted accordingly. Landowners can submit applications at anytime but need to check with their local NRCS representative for the application review dates, as these can vary.

The Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)

encourages retiring marginal land associated with wetlands from agricultural production by providing technical assistance and financial incentives for enhancement, protection, and restoration of wetlands. Landowners may choose to enroll in 10-year restoration agreements to reestablish degraded or lost wetlands at up to 75% cost sharing. The USDA may pay up to 100% of the costs for enrolling in perpetual conservation easements and their restorations, or up to 75% for 30-year easements. Landowners need to meet special ownership requirements, and the land must be both restorable and suitable for wildlife. The

improvements to wetlands can target a variety of wildlife and improve many environmental conditions such as soil and water quality, greater biological diversity, and reduced flooding. Landowners retain the control of access to their land for undeveloped recreational activities such as hunting and fishing, and can also have more intensive needs approved, as long as they are compatible with the wetland restoration. Florida has over 122,000 acres of wetlands enrolled in the WRP program with an investment of approximately \$96 million. WRP applications are taken at any time by your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office, and are reviewed on March 1. Applications that are not accepted for the current year may be considered for the following program year.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

(WHIP) offers technical and financial assistance to help improve the quality of wildlife habitat on private properties. Improvements can be geared towards a wide variety of both species and habitats. Cost share payments are available for short and long term agreements, and applications are taken at any time. Most landowners enroll in 5- or 10-year agreements, and increased cost share payments may be available for participants who enroll for 15 years or longer. There is no limit to the number of acres a landowner can enroll, and landowners retain private ownership, with some limited use restrictions, while they are in the program.

The Conservation Security Program (CSP)

recognizes those farmers and ranchers that meet the highest levels of conservation and environmental management standards on their operations. This program provides annual payments and technical assistance to operations that have added improvements to existing soil and water quality management beyond the required standards. Contracts are for 5 to 10 years and offer payments between \$20,000 and \$45,000 annually upon completion of the improved conservation treatments.

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

provides technical and financial assistance to landowners to enhance, preserve, and restore grasslands while practicing compatible grazing, haying, and conservation planning. Landowners who

meet certain eligibility requirements may enter into a restoration and/or rental agreement, with up to 90% of the restoration costs being provided by the program upon completion of the restoration plan. Another option is a 30 year or permanent easement contract where the USDA covers administrative costs and provides payments based on land market values. Grasslands with historical or future potential wildlife and ecological value are eligible.

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRLP) is designed to protect working agricultural land from being converted to non-agricultural uses, such as commercial or housing developments. The program provides matching funds to eligible organizations with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements from the landowners. Landowners are paid up to 50% market value of the perpetual conservation easement in a one-time payment. Each state has a priority list that may be based on soil erosion criteria, historical and archaeological significance, and spatial relationships to other protected areas. In addition to several other eligibility requirements, you should check with the NRCS for any upcoming enrollment deadlines, as these vary each year depending on each states priority list.

The Conservation of Private Grazing Land (CPGL) is a technical assistance program for owners of private grazing lands who volunteer to improve land management, water resources, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, biodiversity, and long-term sustainability of their grazing lands. This program helps address such concerns as erosion, drought, overgrazing, and invasive species, and the laws and regulations that affect grazing management--the largest agricultural land use practice in the US. No cost sharing funds are involved.

USDA-Farm Service Agency Programs

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides up to 50% cost share assistance and annual rental payments to help landowners convert highly erodible cropland and other environmentally sensitive agricultural land to more stable land cover. Planting certain vegetative covers can improve soil

and water quality, and at the same time improve habitat conditions for a variety of wildlife species. Landowners can contract for 10 to 15 years, and with the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (see below), be eligible for additional financial benefits in targeting state specific natural resource management concerns.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) combines the existing CRP program with additional support. These programs are targeting very specific environmental goals or correcting existing environmental problems such as phosphorus runoff, sedimentation, or pollutant reductions. For example, in Florida, CREP is targeting the restoration of environmentally sensitive land in the Florida Everglades, its estuaries, and river lagoon systems. These restoration efforts aim to improve water quality and wildlife habitat by reducing agricultural pollution in specific river systems, reducing phosphorus loading in the Everglades Protection Area, and restoring degraded wildlife habitat. CREP provides additional financial benefits not available through CRP for participating landowners, and may offer extensions on existing contracts or an option to enroll in a permanent easement contract, to eligible participants.

USDA-Forest Service Programs

The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) provides up to 75% cost sharing, along with educational and technical assistance, to non-industrial forest landowners, to help landowners manage timber production, wildlife habitat, recreation, and aesthetics, while enhancing their property's environmental value by protecting water quality and listed species. Landowners must enroll a minimum of 10 acres. They can typically enroll up to 1000 acres a year, or up to 5000 acres, if there are significant public benefits. Each state sets its own cost share rates based on their states priorities, so be sure to check with your state or local forester for more information on the priorities for your area. Applicants must submit an application for approval, develop and incorporate an appropriate multiple resource management plan, and agree to participate in the program for at least 10 years.

The **Forest Legacy Program (FLP)** promotes the conservation and preservation of forestlands that are threatened by conversion to non-traditional forest uses. This program protects forests by acquiring lands through donations and purchases and offering permanent conservation easements to approved landowners. Traditional forest uses such as timber management, hunting, fishing, and hiking are compatible with FLP management. Each state has a committee that prioritizes forest acquisition goals based on such features as ecological uniqueness and immediate non-forestland conversion of the property. Check with your county or state forester for more information on your state's goals.

The **Forest Stewardship Program (FSP)** is a voluntary program geared to help private forest owners manage their forestlands for multiple use objectives such as timber, forage, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetics. The program promotes long-term ecological, social, and economically responsible practices, with educational and technical support from the Forest Service. Successful forest stewards receive certification and public recognition for their participation in the program, as well as continued support from the Forest Service. Funding may also be available to help the landowner prepare a Forest Stewardship Plan for his/her property. Landowners must have at least 25 acres to qualify and may cooperate with adjacent landowners.

Contact Information

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (Florida State Office)

2614 N.W. 43rd Street
Gainesville, FL 32606-6611
352-338-9500
352-338-9574 (fax)
<http://www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov>

USDA-Farm Service Agency (Florida State Office)

P.O. Box 141030
Gainesville, FL 32614-1030
352-379-4500
352-379-4580 (fax)
<http://www.fsa.usda.gov>

USDA-Forest Service

Southern Region Office
1720 Peachtree St.
Suite 760S
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-347-4177
404-347-4821 (fax)
Conservation Programs Manager for Florida
850-414-9907
850-921-8305 (fax)

USDA County Offices via the web:

<http://offices.usda.gov>

County Foresters via the web:

http://www.fl-dof.com/field_operations/county_foresters

County Extension Offices via the web:

<http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/extension>

Additional Sources of Information

NRCS Farm Bill:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002>

Farm Service Agency, CRP, & CREP:

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd>

USDA Forest Service Landowner Assistance Programs:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa>

Maps of Allocations to States by Program:

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/2005_allocations

Similar State Programs

In addition to these federal programs, if you are interested in improving wildlife habitat conditions on your property specifically for wildlife considered "at-risk," Floridas Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), administered by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, provides funds and technical assistance for landowners. Information on this program can be found at:
<http://www.floridaconservation.org/lip>