

Policy Recommendations for the 2007 Farm Bill Conservation Title

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition-MSAWG - Conservation and Environment Committee National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture - Stewardship Incentives Committee

1. Ensure that the Conservation Security Program (CSP) is the keystone conservation program for working agricultural land in the Conservation Title.

- a. Retain and strengthen the CSP provisions to achieve its full potential as an open enrollment green payments program available for all farmers and ranchers who meet program conservation requirements.
- b. Provide statutory directives to ensure that the starting point for the CSP application is a comprehensive conservation plan; to require clear financial rewards for highly effective sustainable farming systems and to prevent the administrative addition of confusing and unpredictable qualifiers and limitations for CSP participation.
- c. Provide the funding base to support a nationwide CSP.

2. Cross Cutting Measures to Improve All Conservation Title Programs

- a. Make a comprehensive farm conservation plan the starting point for access to all conservation programs, with additional directives for USDA to develop a unified approach to informing farmers and ranchers about conservation program opportunities and coordinated procedures for simultaneous enrollment in more than one program under a unified, comprehensive conservation plan.
- b. Ensure that all conservation programs use a systems approach with integrated consideration of the entire farm and its relation to the ecological system of which it is a part.
- c. Provide for balanced funding between land retirement programs and working lands management programs.
- d. For all conservation programs, incorporate vigorous program components to reach out to those farmers and ranchers who tend to be left out of participation – both to encourage access to programs, and to encourage consideration of whole farm conservation planning. Outreach programs should target beginning farmers and ranchers, transitional organic farmers, Tribes, other minorities, limited resource producers, and women who require strong technical assistance and financial incentives.
- e. Direct USDA to set national and regional objectives for conserving natural resources and environmental improvements, utilizing each state's Wildlife Action Plan for habitat objectives, with direct Commodity Credit Corporation funding for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of conservation program contribution to achieving these objectives. Funding is also required to monitor and evaluate the technical effectiveness and economic efficiency of conservation practices and incentive mechanisms.
- f. Direct USDA to set a clear process with public input for setting and adding priority resource concerns.
- g. Direct the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to offer extensive training, outreach, research, and demonstrations so staff and partners understand sustainable and organic systems. NRCS should update its manuals and guides to include sustainable and organic farming systems.
- h. Expand training, certification, and oversight of Technical Service Providers (TSPs) by NRCS. Funding must be increased so TSPs can assist the agency in helping farmers develop conservation plans, implement practices, and enroll in programs.
- i. Strengthen conservation compliance, sodbuster and swampbuster prohibitions as conditions of participation in all farm programs. Establish a new sod-saver provision to prohibit commodity,

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insurance, and conservation program payments on grasslands newly converted to cropping for the first time.

- j. Provide for effective participation of NRCS State Technical Committees (STCs) in program implementation. Establish Local Work Groups as STC local subcommittees with the same broad membership and procedures as the STC.
- k. The education assistance component of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) should be re-instituted as a component of all conservation financial assistance programs, with funding available to Extension, nonprofit and community-based organizations, educational institutions, conservation districts, producers and others to increase awareness of conservation program opportunities, enhance producer knowledge of conservation and environmental systems, and other educational activities to increase producer participation and the environmental performance of these programs.

3. Specific Improvements for Other Conservation Programs

- a. Provide up to 25 percent of total conservation program funds in the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, so that state and local efforts can target specific problems and solutions using existing conservation programs in innovative ways.
- b. USDA should expand the Conservation Innovation Grant program to emphasize sustainable and organic system approaches to conservation innovation.
- c. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) should be retained as a major land retirement program for conservation with environmental benefits maximized by continuing competitive bidding, improvements to the ranking criteria, inclusion of sustainable and environmentally benign options for invasive species control, and expansion of partial field enrollments.
- d. At least 20 percent of CRP acreage should be reserved for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and the continuous CRP sign-up component.
- e. Provide a voluntary long-term and permanent easement option within CRP, or within a new easement option program, to create long-term financial savings for the public and to retire the most environmentally sensitive lands from agricultural production. This easement option should focus on protection of wetlands, prairies, grasslands, and other rare and declining habitats whose restoration requires long-term protection.
- f. Haying and grazing should be allowed on CRP land, with the frequency and duration of the activity based on conservation plans designed to meet objectives for native and other wildlife species protection, water quality, soil quality and other purposes.
- g. Direct USDA to actively promote the enrollment in CSP of land coming out of CRP contracts with the retention of significant environmental benefits, and provide for additional CSP incentives if a beginning farmer or rancher is established as the operator on the former CRP land.
- h. Retain the Wetlands Reserve Program with an enrollment directive of no less than 250,000 acres per year nationwide
- i. All land retirement programs (CRP, Wetlands Reserve Program, Grasslands Reserve Program) should offer incentives for landowners to allow public access to the land as part of community development plans for hiking, biking, hunting, fishing and other public recreational amenities.
- j. Restore the EQIP payment limitation of \$150,000 over five years, and restore the ban on funding for new or expanding Confined Animal Feeding Operations.
- k. Harmonize EQIP with CSP by directing EQIP as the entry program for aspiring CSP applicants who need help to meet threshold environmental performance eligibility requirements for CSP.

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- l. Increase the overall proportion of Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program funding (from 15% to 25%) to be used for 15 year contracts with full cost-share for special projects that address listed species and species of concern.
- m. Ensure the benefits of organic systems are properly reflected in CSP and EQIP eligibility, scoring, and payments.

4. Conservation Programs and Agriculture-Based Energy in the Farm Bill

Conservation of natural resources – soil, water, native biodiversity – must be a major focus in agriculturally-based energy production. Federal incentives in the Farm Bill for renewable energy production must be tied to sustainable production criteria before awarding payments of any kind. Foremost, all conservation programs should consider incentives for on-farm energy efficiencies and conservation. The MSAWG/SAC position paper, *Renewable Energy from Farms: Building on the Principles of Sustainable Agriculture to Achieve Sustainable Energy* (msawg.org/positions), guides our response to specific renewable energy policies.

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