



Updated February 29, 2024

Farm Bill Primer: Budget Dynamics

Congress is considering a new farm bill because provisions in the 2018 farm bill (P.L. 115-334) began expiring at the end of FY2023 (CRS Report R47659, *Expiration of the 2018 Farm Bill and Extension in 2024*). In November 2023, Congress enacted a one-year extension for FY2024 and the crop year 2024 (P.L. 118-22, Division B, §102).

Farm Bills from a Budget Perspective

Federal spending for agriculture is divided into two main categories—mandatory and discretionary spending:

- **Mandatory** spending is authorized primarily for the farm commodity programs, conservation, crop insurance, and the nutrition assistance programs. A farm bill authorizes outlays for mandatory programs when the law is enacted and follows budget enforcement rules.
- **Discretionary** appropriations are authorized, but not provided, for most other programs, including rural development, research, and credit programs. A farm bill sets program parameters. Funding may be provided in subsequent appropriations acts that follow separate budget enforcement rules.

Some farm bill programs have received both types of funding. Discretionary appropriations are the primary source for many programs, but mandatory spending usually dominates the farm bill budget debate and is the focus here.

Importance of Baseline to the Farm Bill

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) **baseline** is a projection at a particular point in time of what future federal mandatory spending would be under the assumption that current law continues. The baseline is the *benchmark* against which proposed changes in law are measured.

When a bill is proposed that would affect mandatory spending, the **score** (cost impact) is measured in relation to the baseline. Changes that increase spending relative to the baseline have a *positive* score; those that decrease spending relative to the baseline have a *negative* score.

Increases in a bill’s total cost beyond the baseline may be subject to budget constraints, such as pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) rules. Reductions from the baseline may be used to offset costs for other provisions that have a positive score or used to reduce the federal deficit. The annual budget resolution determines whether a farm bill is held budget neutral or can increase or must decrease spending.

Recent Farm Bills’ Budget Positions

Over the past two decades, farm bills have had both positive and negative scores relative to their baselines. The 2002 farm bill had a positive score and increased spending by \$73 billion over 10 years under a budget resolution

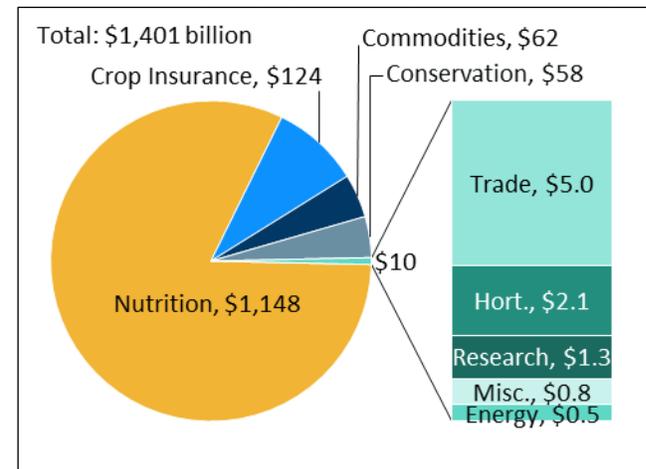
during a budget surplus. The 2008 farm bill was budget neutral, although it added \$9 billion to outlays over 10 years by using offsets from a tax-related title. The 2014 farm bill had a negative score, reducing spending by \$16 billion over 10 years. The 2018 farm bill was budget neutral and offset reductions in some titles with increases in others.

CBO’s February 2024 Baseline

In February 2024, CBO released a new baseline that updates spending projections. The May 2023 baseline may remain the scoring baseline until a spring baseline is released, at the discretion of the Budget Committees.

Farm bills have 5-year and 10-year budget projections according to federal budgeting practices. Converting the baseline into farm bill titles and adding funding indicated in law for other farm bill programs, CRS estimates that the baseline for all farm bill titles is \$682 billion over 5 years (FY2025-FY2029) and \$1,401 billion over 10 years (FY2025-FY2034) (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Farm Bill Titles with Mandatory Baseline
(billion dollars, 10-year projected outlays, FY2025-FY2034)

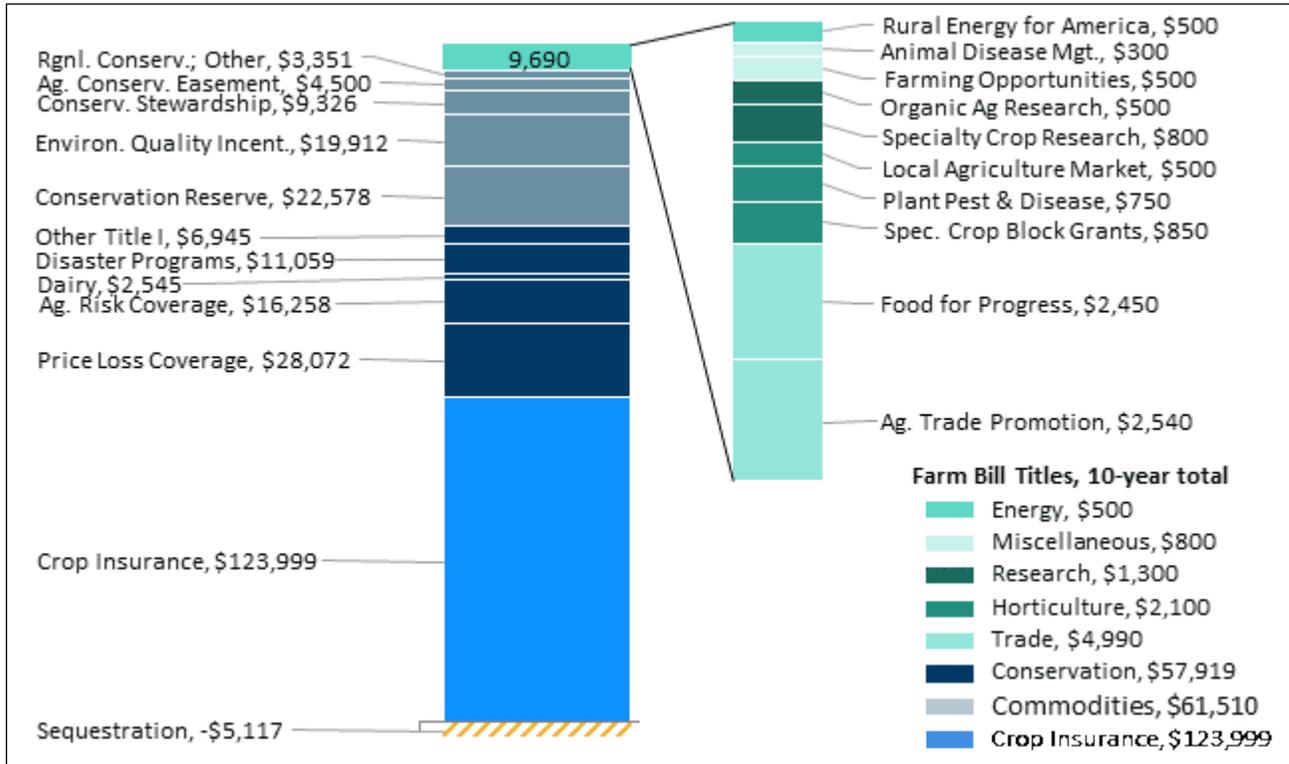


Source: Created by CRS using the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) February 2024 baseline for the five largest titles and amounts indicated in law for programs in other titles.

The relative proportions of farm bill spending have shifted over time. In the 2024 projection, the nutrition title is 82% of the farm bill baseline, compared with about 76% in 2018. The increase in the nutrition title since 2018 (73%) reflects consequences of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, inflation, and administrative adjustments in the Thrifty Food Plan. For the non-nutrition agriculture programs, current projections are that outlays would be \$253 billion over the next 10 years (**Figure 2**), \$43 billion or 20% greater than the projection in 2018 (CRS In Focus IF12047, *Farm Bill Primer: What Is the Farm Bill?*).

Figure 2. Agriculture Programs with Baseline in the Farm Bill

10-year projected outlays (excluding the nutrition title), FY2025-FY2034, millions of dollars



Source: Created by CRS using the CBO February 2024 baseline and amounts indicated in law for programs in other titles.

Extension of the Farm Bill in 2024

The one-year farm bill extension for FY2024 and the 2024 crop year authorizes programs with a mandatory spending baseline and provides new mandatory funding for some programs without a baseline. For the programs with a baseline, Congress did not need to offset the spending.

Programs Without Baseline

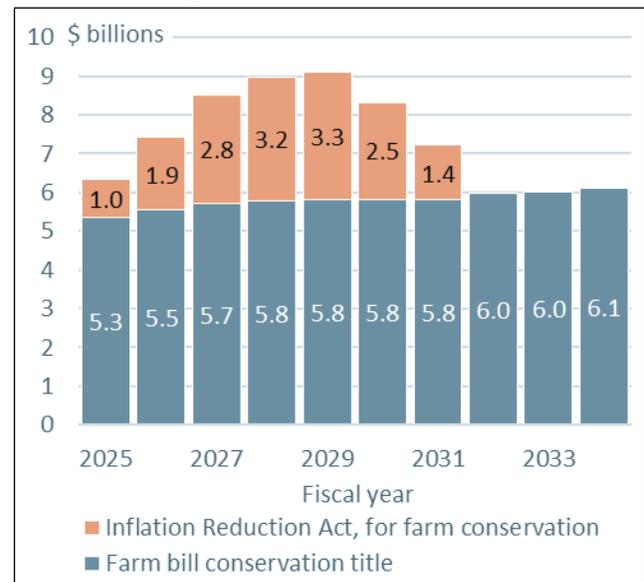
Twenty-one programs received mandatory funding in the 2018 farm bill but did not have a baseline beyond their expiration in FY2023. The farm bill extension for FY2024 provided \$177 million of one-year mandatory funding to 19 of the programs without baseline, with an offsetting rescission of unobligated balances from another program (CRS In Focus IF12115, *Farm Bill Primer: Programs Without Baseline Beyond FY2024*).

Effect of Supplemental Funding

Supplemental spending is not part of the baseline but may be discussed because of its size in recent years. Unobligated balances may be cancelled or repurposed as a budgetary offset for additional spending in new legislation. In FY2019 and FY2020, the Trump Administration increased outlays by over \$25 billion to producers affected by retaliatory tariffs. From FY2020 to FY2022, Congress and the White House provided supplemental pandemic assistance of over \$30 billion to farms and over \$60 billion for nutrition assistance. Since 2018, Congress has authorized more than \$19 billion of ad hoc disaster assistance for agricultural losses. In 2023, the Biden Administration announced \$2 billion for trade promotion and food aid from its authority to use the Commodity Credit Corporation. In addition, P.L.

117-169 (referred to as the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, or IRA) added over \$17 billion for conservation and energy title programs. The IRA funding is not regular farm bill funding; new budget authority is provided until FY2026, and outlays may not occur after FY2031 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Conservation Funding: Baseline in the Farm Bill and Funding in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022



Source: Created by CRS using the CBO February 2024 baseline.

Jim Monke, Specialist in Agricultural Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.