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Farm Bill Primer: Conservation Title

The conservation title of a farm bill generally contains reauthorizations, amendments, and new programs that encourage farmers and ranchers to voluntarily implement resource-conserving practices on private land. Starting in 1985, farm bills broadened the conservation agenda to include addressing multiple natural resource concerns. Although the number of conservation programs has increased and techniques to address resource problems continue to emerge, the basic approach has remained unchanged: provide financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to implement conservation systems supported by education and research programs. As Congress considers authorizing the next farm bill, areas of possible interest in the conservation title may include funding, status of program authorization, and policy changes for conservation programs.

Conservation Program Portfolio

Farm bill-authorized conservation programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and can be grouped into the following categories: working lands programs, land retirement programs, easement programs, partnership and grant programs, and conservation compliance (see the **text box** and CRS Report R47478, *Agricultural Conservation and the Next Farm Bill*). Most farm bill conservation programs are authorized to receive mandatory funding (i.e., do not require an appropriation in annual appropriations laws).

Other types of agricultural conservation programs—such as watershed programs, emergency land rehabilitation programs, and technical assistance—have been authorized outside the farm bill. Most of these programs have permanent authorities and receive appropriations annually through the discretionary appropriations process. These programs generally are not addressed in farm bill legislation unless amendments to the program are proposed.

Title II (Conservation) of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 farm bill; P.L. 115-334) reauthorized and amended portions of most farm bill-authorized conservation programs, although there was a focus on the large-cost programs, namely the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Status and Recent Changes

In August 2022, Congress passed a budget reconciliation law (P.L. 117-169; 2022 law). As part of this 2022 law, Congress provided additional funding to EQIP, CSP, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and extended the authority for those programs through FY2031. Conservation programs not included in the 2022 law had authorities that expired with other farm bill programs at the end of FY2023. Congress enacted three one-year extensions that extended the expired conservation programs' authorities, among others, through FY2026 (P.L. 118-22, Division B, §102; P.L. 118-158, Division D, §4101; and P.L. 119-37, Division E, §5002).

Selected Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Working lands programs allow private land to remain in production while agriculture producers implement various conservation practices to address natural resource concerns specific to the area.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

Land retirement programs provide payments to private agricultural landowners for temporary changes in land use and management to achieve environmental benefits.

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—includes Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP); Farmable Wetland Program; Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR30) Pilot; Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP); and Transition Incentives Program (TIP)

Easement programs voluntarily impose a permanent or long-term restriction on land use in exchange for payment.

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

Partnership and grant programs use partnership agreements and grants to leverage program funding with nonfederal funding.

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials, Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (Feral Swine), and Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPAHIP)

Conservation compliance prohibits or limits a producer from receiving selected federal farm program benefits (including crop insurance premium subsidies) when conservation program requirements for highly erodible lands, wetlands, and production on native sod are not met.

- Highly erodible lands conservation ("Sodbuster"), wetland conservation ("Swampbuster"), and "Sodsaver"

In July 2025, Congress passed another budget reconciliation law (P.L. 119-21; 2025 law) that repealed unobligated funds from the 2022 law for EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and RCPP and redistributed the funds provided to the four programs. The 2025 law distributed a greater percentage of funds to EQIP, CSP, and ACEP and a lower percentage to RCPP than those provided under the 2022 law. P.L. 119-21 also repurposed some of the rescinded conservation funding to other conservation programs that did not receive funding in the 2022 law, such as the Watershed Protection and Flood

Prevention Operations program (see CRS In Focus IF13114, *Agricultural Conservation After Enactment of the FY2025 Budget Reconciliation Law (P.L. 119-21)*).

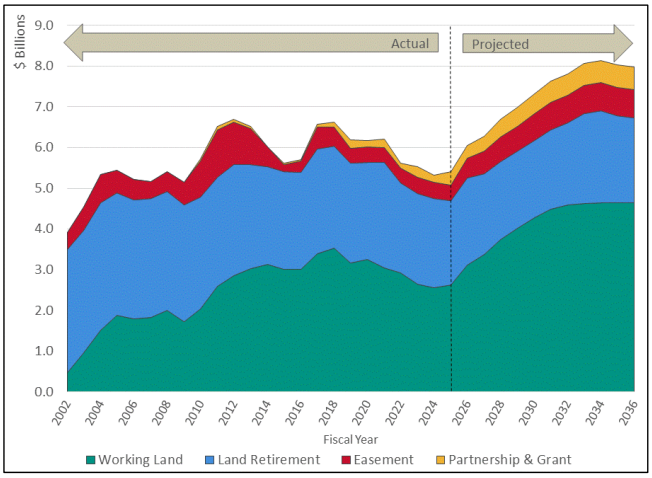
In the 119th Congress, the House passed the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 (H.R. 7567; House farm bill). The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry reported the Agricultural Act of 2026 (S. 5526; Senate farm bill) favorably. The House and Senate farm bills would reauthorize many of the expiring conservation programs, authorize new programs and initiatives, and alter funding for some programs, namely EQIP and CSP.

Funding for Conservation

The conservation title is one of the larger non-nutrition titles of the farm bill, accounting for over $73.0 billion in projected 11-year mandatory funding (FY2026-FY2036), according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). Spending for agricultural conservation programs generally has increased from $2.3 billion in FY2002 ($3.9 billion when adjusted for inflation) to an estimated $5.2 billion in total outlays in FY2025 (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Farm Bill Conservation Program Actual and Projected Mandatory Spending, FY2002-FY2036

Outlays in billions of dollars (actuals adjusted for inflation)



Sources: CRS, using Congressional Budget Office (CBO) baseline data, FY2003-FY2026; and Office of Management and Budget, Table 10.1: "Gross Domestic Product [GDP] and Deflators Used in the Historical Tables: 1940-2031," April 2026.

Notes: FY2002-FY2023 are actual spending levels; FY2024 and FY2025 are estimates. FY2002-FY2024 are adjusted for inflation to 2025 dollars using the GDP price deflator. FY2026-FY2036 are projected spending levels in current-year dollars. Figure does not include sequestration or supplemental funding.

The majority of the funding increase has occurred in the working lands programs, specifically EQIP and CSP. Changes made to these programs in P.L. 119-21 result in a projected increase over the next 11 years (through FY2036). Funding for land retirement programs, namely CRP, has remained relatively constant over time when adjusted for inflation and is projected to continue at similar levels. Funding for easement programs and partnership and grant programs has historically fluctuated; however, P.L. 119-21 provided additional and increasing funding authority for both program types through FY2036.

The CBO scores of both H.R. 7567 and S. 5526 estimate that the bills would decrease mandatory spending for the conservation title by $1 million over 11 years (FY2026-FY2036) and $19 million over 10 years (FY2027-FY2036), respectively.

Expiring Programs and Provisions

Authorities for conservation programs not included in the 2022 or 2025 reconciliation laws expired with other farm bill programs at the end of FY2023 and subsequently were extended through FY2026. The largest conservation program that expired at the end of FY2026 is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP provides financial compensation for landowners to voluntarily remove land from agricultural production for multiple years, for the benefit of soil and water quality and wildlife habitats. CRP enrolls land based on a total, nationwide acreage cap (27 million acres in FY2026, as extended). CRP outlays are approximately $2.0 billion annually, according to CBO. With expired authority, CRP cannot enroll new acres or reenroll expired acres.

Other provisions contained within the conservation title of the 2018 farm bill have expired, which could affect the function of agricultural conservation programs, regardless of their funding. For example, the 2018 farm bill limited the total amount of funding a producer may receive under both EQIP and CSP for the duration of the farm bill authorization (FY2019-FY2023). When the 2018 farm bill first expired and was extended through FY2024, the extension applied to the payment limits for both programs. This created a longer window of time that total payments would be calculated, thus possibly excluding producers at or near the limit. With each subsequent farm bill extension, the EQIP and CSP payment limit has been excluded, resulting in both programs having no payment limit for FY2025 and FY2026. Some advocacy groups have expressed concern that without payment limits, EQIP and CSP contracts may shift toward larger farming operations. Others counter that all farms, regardless of size, should be allowed access to conservation programs. Both H.R. 7567 and S. 5526 would reset the payment limits for EQIP and CSP to a new five-year window (FY2027-FY2031).

Policy Changes for Conservation

While P.L. 119-21 amended many conservation programs authorized to receive mandatory spending, the reconciliation process was limited to changes to mandatory spending that resulted in a budgetary effect and excluded policy changes to discretionary spending programs. Therefore, both H.R. 7567 and S. 5526 include a number of policy amendments for conservation programs that previously could not be addressed as part of reconciliation. These proposed changes include authorizing new programs, shifting priorities, and creating new requirements for participants and USDA. For additional analysis of these proposed changes, see CRS Report R48918, *The 2026 Farm Bill: Comparison of the House-Passed and Senate Committee-Reported Bills with Current Law*.

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