



## **Farmers and Ranchers Working Together to Address Environmental Issues: Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative**

**American Farmland Trust calls for a competitive grant program to deliver conservation funding to producers and places that need it most by encouraging cooperative action to solve resource problems.**

### **Introduction**

Many natural resource concerns arise beyond the borders of individual farms or ranches. In many cases, the only effective way to address a specific resource concern is through special projects involving many producers and others in a coordinated effort. However, most agricultural conservation programs are not structured to encourage this type of cooperation. Locally led joint projects designed to address critical environmental issues can encourage innovation, while increasing on-the-ground support and yielding greater conservation benefits.

Cooperative conservation partnerships would improve the effectiveness of current farm conservation programs by engaging the *cooperative efforts of local producers* in getting the *right practices* into the *right places* at the *right time*. Producer groups and other organizations would compete for conservation funding based on innovative cooperative conservation projects. This initiative could revolutionize the delivery of conservation funding and yield substantial environmental benefits by focusing assistance on critical resource problems and producers who can make a real difference. Twenty percent of conservation funding from farm bill programs would be dedicated to these cooperative conservation partnerships.

### **Justification for a Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative**

Private agricultural and forestlands occupy nearly 70 percent of the contiguous United States. These lands provide the foundation for a strong, healthy and competitive agricultural sector. They also provide multiple environmental benefits including wildlife, groundwater filtration, carbon sequestration, open space and clean air and water. Since the 1930s, the federal government has played a role in the conservation of natural resources related to agricultural production. Historically, conservation programs focused on maintaining the productivity of farmland through efforts such as soil conservation. More recently, however, the scope of conservation programs has broadened to include water quality, water supply, air quality, soil quality and wildlife habitat. With so many resource concerns spread over such a broad geographic area, the challenge is to get conservation funding to the producers who need it the most in order to have the largest impact. Cooperative conservation partnerships help local producers and other stakeholders make that happen.

In order to more effectively and efficiently make use of conservation dollars, the program is based on the following principles: 1) local efforts involving multiple producers are the best means of prioritizing and addressing local conservation needs; 2) competitive grants of conservation dollars allow the most important conservation needs to be funded; 3) farmers

working cooperatively on common problems can achieve a critical mass that increases the environmental benefits of conservation programs; and 4) all federal conservation programs should work in concert in order to solve real problems, as they are identified by locally led efforts.

This approach would dramatically improve the delivery of conservation funding by allowing producers and organizations to compete for conservation dollars that implement innovative cooperative conservation projects. The initiative will deliver conservation funding for special projects or watersheds that can best focus assistance through collaborative efforts that yield substantial environmental benefits. The program would be a significant shift from the separate program-by-program and farm-by-farm approach of current programs.

Eligible applicants will include groups of producers, conservation districts, watershed councils, farmer coops, recognized tribes, state and local agencies, and non-governmental organizations that can implement conservation projects in specific geographic areas. The cooperative structure of the funding process will help ensure local support for the project and direct the funding most efficiently to achieve the environmental goal. Criteria for projects could include the number of partners; amount of local support; comprehensive planning; clear environmental objectives; evaluation plans; and leverage of non-federal resources. Conservation assistance dollars would be allocated through a request for proposals process carried out at both the national and state level to ensure that area-wide concerns, as well as state and local resource concerns, could fairly compete for grant assistance.

Project grants will provide enhanced planning, technical and financial assistance in a way that helps communities and producers solve specific resource concerns. Overlaid on current USDA conservation programs, these grants will integrate and coordinate the application of conservation assistance in geographic areas of environmental sensitivity such as watersheds.

Projects will engage particular producers or groups of producers willing to undertake special intensive conservation initiatives. Projects may include specific incentives or rewards for collective action by multiple producers directly related to the resource concerns where focused collaborative action is needed to adequately achieve the desired environmental outcome. Twenty percent of farm bill funding provided each year for working lands conservation programs, plus an appropriate amount of acreage-based conservation programs, would be reserved for grants under this new provision. Projects would leverage this USDA funding, as well as other federal, state, local and other governmental funds, including provisions for in-kind support where appropriate.

Awards could be made on an annual or multi-year basis and would include monitoring and evaluation of environmental improvements. At completion, USDA would be able to point to specific improvements that resulted from the project, such as better water quality or improved water conservation in a drought prone area. In addition, the participants will tell others what they were able to accomplish by working together and by finding better ways to make conservation assistance work to address resource problems.

For more information on *Agenda 2007*, AFT's recommendations for the 2007 Farm Bill:

<http://www.farmland.org/programs/campaign/default.asp#agenda>

For specific details on the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative:

[http://www.farmland.org/programs/campaign/documents/AFT\\_Agenda2007\\_CooperativeConservation\\_May06.pdf](http://www.farmland.org/programs/campaign/documents/AFT_Agenda2007_CooperativeConservation_May06.pdf)

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