



2007 Farm Bill Policy Recommendation

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

Recommendation

Increase the effectiveness and impact of conservation programs by establishing a competitive grants program that promotes collaborative efforts to better direct and focus conservation assistance resources to critical natural resource concerns. Require that 20 percent of annual dollar CCC funding for conservation, and appropriate acreage amounts for CRP and WRP, be provided for planning, financial assistance, technical assistance, education and outreach through this competitive grants initiative via conservation partnerships.

Rationale

The cooperative conservation partnership initiative will revolutionize the delivery of conservation funding by allowing producers and organizations to compete for conservation dollars based on innovative cooperative conservation projects. The initiative will deliver conservation funding for special projects or watersheds that, through collaborative efforts, can best focus assistance on critical resources that yield substantial environmental benefits, that is, precision conservation.

Eligible applicants would 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 at a specific geographic area. Funding for conservation should flow through these “conservation cooperatives” because they are an effective means for organizing the efforts of multiple farmers and ranchers in a particular place to achieve an environmental goal.

Cooperative conservation partnerships will improve the effectiveness of existing conservation programs by focusing conservation efforts—getting the *right practices* in the *right places* at the *right time*—and by attaining critical mass—getting enough producers doing the right things in a particular place so that their *collective effort* is enough to improve environmental quality. This kind of precision conservation brings advances in science and technology to bear by effectively pinpointing where conservation measures are needed and provides meaningful incentives for producer collaboration.

Overlaid on top of current programs, project grants will provide enhanced planning and technical, financial and educational assistance through the integrated application of conservation programs from USDA and other sources to help communities and producers solve special resource and environmental concerns in geographic areas of environmental sensitivity, such as watersheds or projects within a given state or region. Projects would reach particular producers or groups of producers willing to undertake special intensive conservation initiatives. A percentage of CCC funding provided each year for conservation programs would be reserved for grants under this new provision.



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The cooperative conservation approach described here would constitute a significant shift from the separate program-by-program process that tends to occur now. It would utilize the grant resources—together with other assistance programs, including those from state and local sources—as implementation tools. This approach builds upon and strengthens existing conservation partnership efforts, to the extent that partners employ the necessary technology and collaborative participation needed to effectively focus remedial actions that address critical resource concerns and priorities. This initiative also differs from the limited planning grant program that NRCS established to respond to the President’s Executive Order on Cooperative Conservation on August 26, 2004.

Mechanics

- Establish a competitive grant program in statute in order to promote partnerships and cooperative efforts for conservation. [*Note: This would build on Sec. 2003 of FSRIA of 2002*]
- Designate 20 percent of annually funded CCC conservation programs and a specified portion of acreage-denominated farm bill conservation programs to be available for allocation via the competitive grant program. For example, this would include CRP acres for the continuous signup for buffer practices or for measures under CREP.
- The program would be managed through a RFP (request for proposals) process.
- Projects would require collaborative efforts by multiple producers, other stakeholders, and suitable government entities at the federal, state, and local level.
- Grant awards would be organized around projects or watersheds, at a variety of geographic scales, which are critically important for the treatment of resources of concern. Resource concerns include those identified at the local, state, regional, and national level.
- Funds provided to approved projects could be used for 1) geographic analysis to identify the areas within the project areas that would contribute the most to achieving the objectives of the project; 2) plan development; 3) technical assistance for practice application; 4) financial assistance to producers to offset the costs of implementation; and 5) education and outreach.
- Projects would be based upon comprehensive plans to address the resources of concern using cost-effective solutions drawn from federal, state, local or other programs.
- Projects must include provisions for information and technology that can locate areas where conservation systems and measures can yield substantial benefits—both for the resource of concern and related environmental outcomes.
- Projects must leverage USDA funding with other sources, such as other federal, state, local, and other support, including funding and provisions for in-kind support where appropriate.
- Grant applications would be evaluated and awarded at both the national and state level to insure that multi-state as well as state and local resource concerns could fairly compete for grant assistance to bring about environmental improvements.
- Allocations of ongoing conservation program funds (e.g. EQIP, WRP) to state



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- NRCS offices would not be reduced solely due to having grant projects located within a state or NRCS participation in grant projects. Grant program funding would be over-and-above any funding to states based on the regional equity provision.
- Grant applications would be evaluated using consistent national guidance that would be based on mandated statutory provisions. These would include goals, problem assessment, targeted approach, performance measures, collaboration, local leadership, accountability, project feasibility, cost effectiveness, innovation, leveraging, public outreach, and project monitoring.
 - Funding for grant awards at the national level would include no less than 25 percent or more than 35 percent of total grant program funds in any year. The remainder of funds would be awarded at the state level.
 - Applications and awards can be on either a single year or a multi-year basis, not to exceed three years without further competition for continuation of an award project.
 - Projects may include specific incentives or rewards for collective action by multiple producers directly related to the resource concerns where targeted collective action is needed to adequately achieve the desired environmental outcome.
 - Technical assistance could be provided by many potential sources, including private technical service providers, state agencies, conservation district personnel, NRCS, and qualified personnel from non-governmental organizations, but practices would still meet USDA technical standards.
 - NRCS should devote an increasing portion of funding from the annually appropriated “Conservation Technical Assistance” account to provide specialized manpower, modeling, mapping, financial management, and other technology based assistance to specified projects.

Funding:

This initiative would be funded by using a portion of existing program funds each year for the life of the farm bill, and thus would not require additional funds.