

# Agricultural Conservation Programs

*Strengthening Stewardship on the Landscape*

## Expand, Improve and Simplify Working Lands Programs

Nearly half the land in America is working land—farms and ranches. The stewardship of this land affects us all each day and has consequences for our children. But existing conservation programs are under-funded and unnecessarily complicated. American Farmland Trust proposes a combination of improvements that will:

- Increase the amount of conservation on working lands and reduce the backlog of needs by doubling funding for working lands conservation programs such as EQIP and farmland protection;
- Improve the effectiveness of conservation programs by creating a cooperative conservation program to engage producers and other stakeholders in locally led projects;
- Expand stewardship by engaging private financial resources in a conservation loan guarantee program;
- Strengthen delivery of technical assistance; and,
- Simplify the conservation application process and improve environmental performance.

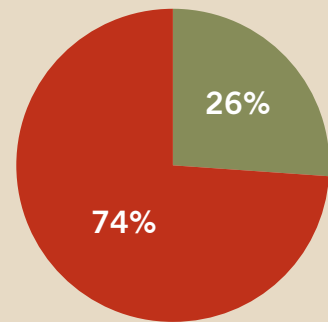
**Voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs for farmers and ranchers are the key to cleaner water, improved air quality, expanded wildlife habitat and protected farmland for future generations.**

## Status Quo: Patchwork of Underfunded Programs

Current conservation funding levels are not sufficient to address the needs of producers or the landscape. USDA estimates that over 60 percent of the nation's crop, pasture and range land currently needs some form of conservation treatment. Additionally, farmers and ranchers cannot effectively use the "alphabet soup" of federal programs due to their complexity and inflexibility. As a result, more runoff of topsoil, nutrients and chemicals pollutes our rivers and wetlands.

Farmers and ranchers typically do a good job in managing land, and they want to be good stewards. However, they need help. Currently, three out of four farmers and ranchers are turned away when applying for financial assistance for conservation programs. Many more simply don't bother to apply due to the lack of funds and the confusing and often redundant application process.

**Three out of four farmers who apply for conservation funding are turned down**



151,000 Unfunded Applications  
52,000 Funded Applications

Source: NRCS  
\*2004 total applications for EQIP, FRPP, GRP, WHIP and WRP programs

## We Can Revolutionize the Conservation Efforts of America's Farms and Ranches

The following recommendations from AFT will provide significant improvements in conservation to help get the job done:

- Increase investment in environmental quality.** The nation must bolster conservation so we deliver the benefits of healthy land to all Americans. Doubling the funding level for working lands conservation programs will significantly reduce the backlog of needs.
- Improve effectiveness through cooperative conservation.** A competitive grants program that promotes collaborative efforts by producers, districts and non-profits in locally led projects would utilize existing conservation programs to focus efforts on priority concerns—getting the *right practices* in the *right places* at the *right time*. (Also see the separate program description.)
- Expand stewardship through a conservation loan program.** Through a conservation loan guarantee program, USDA could incorporate private dollars as a source of capital for producers seeking to implement conservation systems on their operations. (Also see the separate program description.)
- Improve performance.** Existing conservation programs must be refined to improve cost effectiveness and environmental performance, thereby producing more environmental benefits for each dollar invested. For example, in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), priority should be given to offers with the most efficient means of producing the intended environmental benefits.
- Improve technical assistance.** USDA staff resources are stretched to the limit by the growing workload for applying conservation systems. The increased use of competitively bid, third party technical services providers (TSPs) can help address these needs. Use of multi-year agreements with TSPs will help stabilize technical assistance for producers.
- Simplify assistance for producers.** The current onerous paperwork process—involving multiple forms, redundant entries of information and confusing program regulations—takes away from the land management activities of farmers and ranchers. Advanced technology and streamlining of the process could save manpower, improve accuracy and simplify the process for producers.
- Provide fair treatment for all states.** A simple floor of \$15 million per state of working lands conservation funding insures that producers in all states are able to obtain financial assistance in equitable fashion, particularly where the resource concerns are shaped so greatly by the expanding influence of urban and suburban population growth.

### Working Lands Conservation Programs

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)  
 Conservation Security Program (CSP)  
 Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)  
 Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)  
 Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)  
 Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

For more information about this or any of the policies recommended in *Agenda 2007*, please visit AFT's Web site at [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org) or send an email to [info@farmland.org](mailto:info@farmland.org).

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