

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

Farmers and Ranchers Working Together for the Environment

Cooperation Yields More Conservation Benefits

Many natural resource concerns extend over the borders of individual farms or ranches. Locally led, collaborative projects that address commonly shared environmental issues can lead to greater innovation, build more on-the-ground support and yield substantial conservation benefits. American Farmland Trust proposes a competitive grant program to:

- Engage multiple producers and interested stakeholders in cooperative efforts to address common natural resource concerns;
- Improve the effectiveness of existing conservation programs by focusing conservation efforts;
- Provide essential resources for planning and implementation of conservation measures;
- Emphasize natural resource priorities identified at the local level; and
- Provide enhanced environmental performance for the broader public community.

Status Quo: Partnerships Aren't Encouraged

Most existing agricultural conservation programs are structured to address individual needs on a farm-by-farm basis. They do not take advantage of opportunities for collaborative action to address problems in an area, watershed or region involving multiple producers and other stakeholders. The current a-la-carte programs do not allow for cooperative conservation initiatives that would channel technical and financial assistance to critical natural resource concerns.

The Right Practices in the Right Places at the Right Time

Precision Conservation

Cooperative conservation partnerships will improve the effectiveness of existing conservation programs by focusing conservation efforts—and attaining critical mass with enough producers doing the right things in a particular place—so a *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 providing meaningful incentives for producer collaboration.

Cooperative conservation projects would be in addition to current programs administered by USDA. Project grants will provide enhanced planning, technical, financial and educational assistance in geographic areas of environmental sensitivity such as watersheds or projects within a given state or region. Projects would reach particular producers willing to undertake special intensive conservation initiatives.

Examples of natural resource concerns related to agriculture:

- impacts of drought
- competition for scarce water
- loss of wildlife habitat or corridors
- air quality, i.e. wind-blown soil
- impaired surface waters from sediment and nutrients
- shrinking groundwater aquifers
- areas of widespread erosion

Locally Led Projects

By placing emphasis and resources on local priorities, we can ensure that the initiative will address concerns and solutions identified by local people—an approach that will work. By solving resource problems at this level, the initiative will help minimize conflicts and the need for special earmarks that are frequently used in specifically identified situations.

Although the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative builds upon the planning grant program that USDA established to respond to the President's Executive Order on Cooperative Conservation on August 26, 2004, AFT's proposal also allocates resources for implementing conservation programs in a focused manner, which is critical to achieving genuine environmental improvements.

How It Works

USDA would set aside 20 percent of annual Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funding for working lands conservation programs and an appropriate acreage amount from the Conservation Reserve Program (continuous signup and CREP) and WRP to be devoted to the cooperative conservation initiative.

- 65 to 75 percent of the cooperative conservation funds would be allotted to Natural Resources Conservation Service state offices and state technical committees to make competitive awards of multi-year grants and agreements to address state and locally identified resource priorities in each state.
- 25 to 35 percent of resources would be available for competitive awards from the national office to address multi-state and national resource concerns like the Chesapeake Bay or the Great Lakes.

Applicants could include groups of producers, conservation districts, watershed councils, farmer cooperatives, recognized tribes, state and local agencies, and non-governmental organizations, who can implement conservation projects at a level that more closely matches identified needs. Funding for conservation would flow through these "conservation cooperatives" to focus the efforts of multiple farmers and ranchers in a particular place on achieving overall environmental goals.

The "conservation cooperatives" will be the avenue to integrate planning with implementation, focus technical and financial assistance resources on critical resource concerns, and ensure that needed actions are implemented on areas and farms most critical to solving the problem. Cooperative conservation actions are additive to existing conservation activities across the landscape—thereby increasing the effectiveness and impact of combined conservation efforts.

Project scope can vary—from one with a very focused common issue among stakeholders, like in the New York City Watershed—to greater and more comprehensive projects such as needed to address the Gulf of Mexico hypoxia issue.

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

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AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036 • (202) 331-7300 • www.farmland.org