



2018 FARM BILL:

CRITICAL FOR BIRDS

Greater Sage-Grouse

Every five to 10 years, Congress rewrites our nation's agriculture policy to set initial funding levels and make policy changes in the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill covers an array of farm-related programs including commodity, trade, nutrition and more. Within the Farm bill, the conservation and forestry titles consist of conservation programs focusing on restoring soils, protecting waterways and enhancing wildlife habitat on private land. In the U.S., 70 percent of land is privately owned, and 50 percent in the lower 48 is managed for agriculture. The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal conservation funding—hundreds of millions of dollars are available to private landowners to keep wetlands, grasslands, and other fragile lands protected. Farm Bill programs are critical to birds and other wildlife—in 2015 alone, almost 9 million acres of wildlife habitat were improved. In the following pages, we explain critical Farm Bill programs important to Audubon's mission.

Priority Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP is a voluntary, cost-sharing and incentives program that provides financial and technical assistance to eligible producers to achieve conservation on lands in crop production, grazing, and forestry.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

HFRP promotes the recovery of endangered and threatened species under the Endangered

Species Act (ESA), improves plant and animal biodiversity, and enhances carbon sequestration, through permanent and 30-year easements, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP):

ACEP combines three easement programs—Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)—to protect and enhance wetlands, grasslands and farm and ranch lands

through easements, financial, and technical assistance.

The Watershed Flood and Prevention Operations Program (WFPO):

Through WFPO, NRCS works with local sponsors to facilitate the construction of small watershed improvements. These are locally-driven, cost shared projects that address critical community needs with multiple benefits.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP):

RCPP promotes innovative

conservation practices that improve the health of working landscapes and rivers through partnership-driven regional projects, addressing multiple natural resource concerns on a meaningful scale.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP):

CSP provides opportunities for landowners to build on their existing conservation efforts while addressing priority resource concerns. Participants receive annual land use payments for the environmental benefits produced across their operation.



Sandhill Crane



Wild Turkeys



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AUDUBON'S CONSERVATION PRIORITIES

The Agriculture Committees will once again face challenging budgetary and policy choices in the development of the 2018 Farm Bill. Given these pressures, the National Audubon Society requests the following funding and policy provisions in the 2018 Farm Bill:

Funding Requests

Retain and Protect \$57 Billion in Farm Bill Conservation Funding:

In 2014, 10 percent (\$6B) in cuts to the Farm Bill's Conservation Title resulted in the largest percentage cut of any of the titles. If this funding was maintained, eight million acres of highly erodible land and thousands of acres of wetlands and grasslands would have been protected, fifteen million acres would have conservation enhancements through CSP, and over \$750 million in EQIP practices would have been used to protect water quality, water quantity, soil health and wildlife habitat.

Double funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP):

Audubon requests an increase in the allocation from covered programs by 100%. This request would increase the 7% allocation from EQIP, ACEP, CSP and HFRP to at least 14%, resulting in a

minimum of \$200 million more in funding, including leveraging, for on-the-ground conservation per year. With RCPP funding cross-sector partnerships address regional and watershed scale natural resource concerns, especially water quality, water quantity and wildlife habitat.

Increase the minimum amount of EQIP used for wildlife to 10%.

Audubon requests an increase of the minimum amount of EQIP funds used for wildlife conservation practices to at least 10% annually, which codifies current NRCS practices.

Provide mandatory conservation program funding to the Watershed Flood and Prevention Operations Program:

While the program secured robust funding for much of its history, it stopped receiving funding in 2010. Funding was restored to the program through the 2014 Farm Bill's RCPP. Opportunities



to make this funding mandatory should be explored.

Increase overall funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to \$500 million per year:

Funding for important habitat and farmland has been less than historic averages. Before 2012, funding averaged over \$700M/year, until it was cut by 65% to only \$250M/year. Audubon requests \$500M/year for this critical program to permanently protect important wildlife habitat, unique farmland, and to include forests within these easement programs.

Reauthorize and provide \$12 million mandatory funding for the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP):

Audubon requests mandatory annual funding of \$12 million (as opposed to discretionary funds) to allow HFRP to be a stand-alone program outside of RCPP.

Policy Requests

Make the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) more effective by reducing administrative burdens:

Audubon fully supports RCPP, but believes technical fixes that reduce administrative burdens will make the program more efficient. These fixes include:

- **Ease the application burden:** The application is complex and long, which limits the number and types of sponsors willing to use this program.
- **Ease the match burden:** The downturn in the rural and farm economy has made funding significant match difficult. The 1:1 match required by NRCS is not in law or regulation and limits use of RCPP.
- **Streamline program funding:** Instead of NRCS tracking spending under each covered program (EQIP, ACEP, etc.), NRCS could be permitted to view these funds as all RCPP

funds once received and spent to meet project goals.

Reauthorize and amend the Healthy Forest Reserve Program:

- Reauthorize and amend the HFRP to ensure land being restored as forest is eligible, include habitat conservation for species of greatest conservation need in State Wildlife Action Plans; ensure forests that already provide suitable habitat but are at risk of conversion are eligible for easements; clarify that forest management is considered a restoration practice, and remove cap on easement funding.

Insert an Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) waiver in conservation and forest titles:

Audubon supports reinstating the AGI waiver option across all conservation programs and allowing single, project-wide AGI waivers for RCPP projects. This would allow the Chief of NRCS

to include the most critical lands in programs to improve habitat, water and air quality, and soil health. The flexibility granted by AGI waivers is needed to meet local and regional natural resource goals, and one-time waivers for RCPP projects will streamline contract approvals and reduce administrative burdens.

Allow cost-share or technical assistance funding for estate planning:

Audubon supports the use of funds in EQIP or Conservation Technical Assistance funds for estate planning or obtaining clear title to land to encourage long-term retention of forest land, especially for minority and socially disadvantaged forest owners, to keep land in production and away from development.

Farm Bill Conservation Programs Benefit Birds



EQIP funding has restored 13,000 acres of critical habitat for the globally threatened **Golden-winged Warbler**, which has declined 66% since 1950.



With \$10 million in RCPP funding, 100,000 acres of rice land was enhanced to create seasonal wetlands for **migratory birds**, while sustaining agricultural production.



WRP funds enhanced 26,000 acres of wetland habitat benefitting water quality and quantity in the Everglades and supporting the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker and the threatened **Wood Stork**.



HFRP and EQIP funds have increased longleaf pine forests by 50%, from 3.4 million in 2005 to 4.7 million in 2017, benefitting over 100 bird species, including the **Northern Bobwhite** quail.



The RCPP-funded **Tricolored Blackbird** Project has helped saved 100% of the vulnerable population last year by working with landowners to protect 57,000 birds across nearly 400 acres.



California's Bobcat Ranch restores native grasses that help Lark Sparrows, **Golden Eagles**, and five species of owls.



Starr Ranch provides habitat for the **Coastal California Gnatcatcher** and Southwest Willow Flycatcher.



Nebraska's Rowe Sanctuary protects tens of thousands of **Sandhill Cranes** and prairie birds like Western Meadowlarks and Upland Sandpipers.



North Dakota's Edward M. Brigham III Alkali Lake Sanctuary supports waterfowl like the **Northern Pintail**.



Arizona's Appleton-Whitell Research Ranch provides habitat for nesting Baird's Sparrows and **Burrowing Owls**.

Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) and the Farm Bill:

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), part of the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) program, restores sagebrush habitat to benefit sage-grouse, and 350 important species. Through EQIP, RCPP and other Farm Bill conservation programs, 1,500 ranchers improved 5.6 million acres of sagebrush habitat across 11 Western states. Audubon supports Working Lands for Wildlife which relies on strong funding for Farm Bill conservation programs to secure habitat for species of concern, such as the Greater Sage-Grouse, Lesser Prairie-Chicken and Golden-winged Warbler, and provides certainty for landowners. Audubon is a core partner in developing policy, creating conservation plans, securing funding and performing conservation for sagebrush habitat. A key priority in the SGI is enhancing sage-grouse habitat by removing juniper. With EQIP dollars, Audubon and other organizations improved 30,000 acres by removing juniper trees. These efforts also improved livestock carrying capacity and enhanced the profitability of local ranches.



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