



Fisheries in the Farm Bill Coalition

Recommendations for fisheries conservation through the 2023 Farm Bill

Organizations: American Catfishing Association, American Sportfishing Association, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Bass Anglers Sportsman Society, The Bass Federation, Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, Coastal Conservation Association, Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, International Game Fish Association, Major League Fishing, National Professional Anglers Association, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Trout Unlimited, The Walleye Federation

Summary: America’s farmlands are intrinsically linked with the nation’s waters and fisheries. Conservation programs in the Farm Bill have long worked with farmers, ranchers, and landowners to restore fisheries – working to stem hypoxia in the Gulf, prevent harmful algal blooms in the Midwest and conserve stream flow in western states.

The Farm Bill’s Conservation Title enables farmers to voluntarily enhance water quality and mitigate runoff and sedimentation through programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays landowners to put acreage into conservation, particularly on lands more valuable to fish and wildlife than they are agriculturally productive, incentivizing wetlands recovery, riparian buffer conservation and restoring aquatic vegetation. The VPA-HIP, meanwhile, incentivizes landowners to open their lands to fishing and outdoor recreation, often on lands and waters conserved through other Conservation Title programs. Despite the scale of the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill and the broad impacts on fisheries and fishing access, angling organizations have not historically advocated for maintaining or improving Farm Bill programs for aquatic resources.

In 2022, leading sportfishing and outdoor recreation groups organized a coalition to support a strong Conservation Title and Forestry Title that benefits fish and aquatic habitat, while also elevating fish and fish habitat as priorities within existing and future programs.

Priorities: With the Farm Bill set to expire in 2023, Congress has a unique opportunity to advance fisheries conservation and growth in the recreational fishing and outdoor recreation sectors. The *Fisheries in the Farm Bill Coalition* calls on House and Senate leaders to improve conservation deliverables and build upon the most successful, voluntary private lands conservation program in the world by:

- Ensure fish and wildlife conservation is a priority equal to soil and water conservation in all USDA conservation programs.
- Emphasize the value and eligibility of Conservation Title programs for fish and aquatic resources.
- Ensure that benefits for fish and wildlife through Conservation Title programs are measurable, are purposeful, and committed during initial planning by the State Technical Committees.
- Streamline the application, contracting and reporting processes across all programs to ensure the maximum conservation benefits and incentives for farmers, ranchers and landowners are realized.

Overarching Items:

- Ensure fish and wildlife conservation is a priority equal to soil and water conservation in all USDA conservation programs.
- Insert the words “fish and” in language text wherever the word “wildlife” occurs, or define wildlife in a manner that is inclusive of fish and other aquatic life, in order to emphasize the value and eligibility of the programs for fish and aquatic resources

Conservation Title

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program:

- Reauthorize and explore opportunities to increase investments in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).
- Identify additional funding for stewardship of wetland easements.
- Prioritize lands enrolled in USDA conservation easements for other Farm Bill conservation programs (i.e., CSP, EQIP, RCPP).
- Exempt Farm Bill easement programs from Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations.

Conservation Compliance:

- Maintain and fully implement existing wetland and highly erodible land compliance and Sodsaver provisions.

Conservation Reserve Program:

- Reauthorize the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and improve incentives to fully utilize current acreage caps.
- Maintain fish and wildlife benefits as co-equal program priorities with soil and water resources.
- Restore competitive rental rates and adjust ranking criteria to maintain program interest and integrity while minimizing overlap with most productive agricultural acres. Lands with the highest risk of conversion should be prioritized.
- Identify wetlands as an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) ranking factor for Grassland CRP.
- Ensure that emergency haying and grazing do not unduly compromise fish and aquatic habitats.
- Reauthorize the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Program (SAFE) and include statutory provisions that will ensure the program remains a part of Continuous CRP.
- Implement the 2018 FB drought provision that made CREP eligible to address regional drought concerns by allowing continued grazing use of non-irrigated range land or other conditions consistent with a state’s drought or water conservation program.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program:

- Maintain the requirement that at least 10% of EQIP funding be dedicated to fish and wildlife conservation practices and contracts and that benefits are measurable.
- Ensure the 10% fish and wildlife set aside is purposeful and committed during initial planning by the State Technical Committees.
- Move the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) from CRP to CSP and expand the program nationwide and eligibility to include cropped wetlands.
- Modernize the PL-566 program to make it more competitive and support the development and implementation of nature-based solutions and multi-benefit water projects.

- Maintain and improve upon 2018 Farm Bill EQIP changes to allow NRCS to enter into contracts with water management entities (WME) (e.g., ditch companies, acequias, irrigation districts) to facilitate watershed-level conservation benefits. Specifically, NRCS should identify existing EQIP conservation practice standards (CPS) that ensure compliance with 2018 statutory directives of “conserve water, provide fish and wildlife habitat, or provide for drought-related environmental mitigation.” NRCS should develop a new CPS for “water conservation” for WME-eligible projects consistent with the statutory directive. [16 U.S.C. Section 3839aa-2\(h\)](#).
- Support the establishment of community-level water plans and water sharing agreements through Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) awards.
- Dedicate funding through CIG On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (OFT) for projects wholly or partially benefitting water quality, fish/fishery healthy, or mitigating runoff and/or projects that utilize nature-based solutions and regenerative agriculture.
- Maintain and expand Conservation Incentive Contracts that allow funding for proposals to transition to water-conserving crops, crop rotation and deficit irrigation practices.
- Add “improved aquatic and fish habitat” as an official purpose of EQIP.

Regional Conservation Partnerships Program:

- Reauthorize the Regional Conservation Partnership Program as a standalone program.
- Add fish passage/stream connectivity as a priority resource concern for critical conservation areas.
- Make all NGO owned land eligible for RCPP easements unless it is subject to an easement or deed restriction the provides similar protections.
- Prioritize funding for conservation investments that help insulate producers from the risks posed by extreme weather events (e.g., drought, flood, wildfire) and increase ecological resiliency via nature-based solutions.
- Improve the RCPP program by streamlining the application, contracting, and reporting processes; remove the statutory prohibition on partners recovering indirect and administrative costs; and recognize partner activities and costs related to the project incurred prior to application and execution of the partnership agreement as partner contributions.

Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program:

- Reauthorize and increase mandatory funding for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) to \$150 million.
- Increase incentives or prioritization for landowners enrolled in other farm bill conservation programs (CSP, CRP, EQIP, etc.).
- Make nonprofit angling organizations eligible to apply for VPA-HIP grants in states without sufficient state agency capacity.

Forestry Title

- Require the Forest Service to consider incorporating outdoor recreation into the design phase of restoration projects developed under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 or any other restoration authority authorized in the Farm Bill.
- Reauthorize and strengthen the Water Source Protection Program. Include stream, riparian, and wetland restoration within the definition of “forest management activities”.
- Commit funding for collaborative planning at local levels in forest landscape programs to enhance watershed restoration.

Other Priorities and Considerations:

- Conservation programs and practices should address species and habitats identified in state, regional, and national conservation initiatives, including State Wildlife Action Plans.
- Ecologically appropriate and diverse stands of native plants should be used in USDA conservation programs and practices wherever practicable.
- Reauthorize, streamline, and fund the Source Water Protection Program (SWPP) and the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) to improve delivery and rural community participation.
- Reauthorize the Good Neighbor Authority, Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and prioritize water infrastructure and aquatic habitats within the programs.
- Create a State & Tribal Soil Health Grant Program to provide matching grants (similar to State Wildlife Grants) for development and implementation of soil health strategies that will deliver multiple resource benefits (climate, water, fish, etc.)
- Establish a state block grant program for states and partnerships (i.e., the National Fish Habitat Partnership) that specifically addresses aquatic resource conservation needs with landowners.
- Reauthorize the Fisheries Restoration and Irrigation Mitigation Act to protect habitat connectivity and install fish screens to protect from mortality in irrigation diversion.
- Direct the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to prepare plans to protect fisheries under drought conditions while maintaining water delivery.
- Insert the words “and water conservation” in certain sections describing irrigation practices and irrigation efficiency.
- At a minimum, reauthorize funding at current levels for the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act provisions in the Farm Bill. Prioritize funding to multi-benefit projects within PL-566, particularly those that use natural infrastructure.
- Expand the list of Conservation Practice Standards to include additional practices to improve water quality and restore aquatic habitat.