



# Conservation through the Farm Bill Arkansas

AR Game and Fish Commission



*The Service assists in developing proposals for special NRCS initiatives to benefit endangered species such as the Ozark Hellbender.*

NRCS



*The Service promotes Farm Bill programs that restore pollinator habitats on agricultural lands. Pollinator habitats benefit the monarch butterfly, an at-risk species.*

USFWS



*The Service assists NRCS in implementing WRE plans, which restores bottomland hardwood forests, improves water quality, and restores wetlands.*

## What is the Farm Bill?

Every five years, Congress passes a bundle of legislation, commonly called the "Farm Bill" that sets national agriculture, nutrition, conservation, and forestry policy. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for implementation of the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill is the primary mechanism for providing wildlife conservation assistance to private landowners as well as addressing other resource concerns including soil and water. The programs are voluntary incentive-based and are administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

## What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) role in the Farm Bill?

The Service provides technical assistance to NRCS through the State Technical Committee meetings on a variety of issues relating to the Farm Bill and its programs to improve NRCS practices to benefit federal trust resources such as threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, and species of concern.

### Service Roles:

- Comments on national and state programs and standards
- Promotes USDA programs to private landowners
- Identifies significant statewide natural resource concerns
- Develops ranking criteria for evaluating applications
- Provides technical guidance on

conservation practices, including new practices

- Reviews payment caps and rates
- Evaluates Conservation Practice Physical Effects tool for effects on resource concerns
- Consults on the effects program activities' have on listed species
- Contributes data to State Resource Assessment
- Provides USDA technical assistance on threatened and endangered species

## Who are the Farm Bill Partners?

Partners represent a variety of agricultural interests and natural resource sciences and occupations including soil, water, air, plants, livestock, wetlands, and wildlife. Partners include the Service, conservation districts, state fish and wildlife agencies, U. S. Forest Service, and non-profit organizations.

## What is the private landowner's role in the Farm Bill?

Because over 80% of Arkansas is in private ownership, landowners are a key partner in conserving natural resources of the Natural State. Many USDA Programs benefit wildlife. When landowners install wildlife-friendly conservation practices, they provide habitat for game species, threatened and endangered species, and migratory birds. Conservation practices are wide ranging and include installation of field borders around crop fields, controlling livestock access to riparian areas, and installing firebreaks to prepare forestland for prescribed burning.



### What conservation programs are available under the Farm Bill?

#### Farm Service Agency

■ **CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP)** is the largest voluntary private lands conservation program in the U.S. In exchange for a annual rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. The long-term goal is to reestablish valuable land cover to improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat. Contracts are 10-15 years.

To be eligible, a producer must have owned or operated the land for at least 12 months preceding the first year of the contract period, unless:

- The new owner acquired the land due to the previous owner's death;
- The ownership change occurred due to a foreclosure; or
- FSA is otherwise satisfied that the new owner did not acquire the land for the purpose of placing it in CRP.

**Continuous CRP** is focused on environmentally sensitive land. Offers are not ranked against each other. Environmentally sensitive land may include agricultural land prone to erosion, pasture or cropland that borders river or stream banks, or field margins etc. Financial assistance includes 50-90% cost-share, 10-15 year rental payments, and \$100-\$150/acre one-time-Signing Incentive Payment for select practices.

**General CRP** sign-up only occurs when the Secretary of Agriculture announces USDA will accept bids for enrollment. General CRP sign-up is competitive and offers are ranked against each other on a national level. Financial assistance includes 50% cost-share and 10-15 year rental payments.

### Natural Resources Conservation Service

■ **AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAM (ACEP)** is a new conservation easement program in the 2014 Farm Bill. that combines three separate, previous easement programs (Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program). The program is divided into two parts.

■ **WETLAND RESERVE EASEMENT (WRE)** provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands that were in agricultural production.

**Geographic Area Rate Caps** pay \$2,900/ac and \$2,100/ac for irrigated and non-irrigated croplands respectively in the MS River Valley; \$2,400/ac and \$2,000/ac for irrigated and non-irrigated croplands respectively in the AR River Valley; \$2,000/ac and \$1,800/ac for irrigated and non-irrigated croplands respectively in the Gulf Coastal Plain; \$750/ac for woodland waterbodies; and 80% of the appraisal for the rest of the state.

**Permanent Easement** are in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100% of the GARC and between 75-100% of the restoration costs.

**Term Easements and 30-Year Easement** Term easements are governed by Arkansas laws and 30-Year Easements expire after 30 years. Both pay 50-75% of the GARC and restoration costs.

■ **AGRICULTURAL LAND EASEMENTS (ALE)** conserve grazing lands and protect farms from development, specifically to ensure farm viability for future generations. NRCS provides up to 50% of the fair market value (FMV) of the easement. NRCS may contribute up to 75% of the easement's FMV on Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance. Eligible partners include Indian tribes, state and local governments, and non-profits that have farmland or grassland protection programs.

■ **CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)** helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resources

concerns. Participants earn annual land use payments for additional and already existing conservation activities. Supplemental payments are available when a resource-conserving crop rotation is installed. Contracts are for five years. Contracts may be renewed if participants successfully fulfilled the initial contract and agree to achieve additional conservation objectives. The 2014 Farm Bill increased flexibility to enroll land coming out of the CRP.

■ **ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVE PROGRAM (EQIP)** is a voluntary conservation program that provides farmers and ranchers with financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on working agricultural lands. The program addresses water and air quality, ground and surface water, soil erosion and sedimentation, and wildlife habitat. The 2014 Farm Bill folded the former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program into EQIP. At least 5% of Arkansas' EQIP funds are allocated to wildlife.

■ **REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (RCPP)** promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to increase restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife etc. to producers and landowners. Assistance is delivered in accordance with the rules of EQIP, CSP, ACEP and Healthy Forest Reserve Program. Funding for RCPP projects is allocated to Critical Conservation Areas, national, and statewide categories.

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