

June 2018

Digging Deep into the Proposed 2018 Farm Bill: The Conservation Stewardship Program and How It Builds Soil

Congress is currently debating changes to the Farm Bill, which governs the vast majority of agricultural policy in the United States. One proposed version would decrease funding for conservation programs and eliminate the Conservation Stewardship Program. Read on to find out more about the Farm Bill, the Conservation Stewardship Program, and what the latter does for our soil and our health.

The Farm Bill

Since the middle of the 20th century, government subsidies to US farmers have been wrapped into legislation known as the Farm Bill. Approximately every five years, Congress makes changes to the Farm Bill and gives it a new name. The most recent version passed in 2014 and is called the Agricultural Act of 2014 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2018).

The programs legislated and funded by the Farm Bill are described briefly below to give a general sense of the scope of the bill. These data are based on the 2014 Farm Bill – a.k.a. the Agricultural Act of 2014 – which will cost approximately \$500 billion over five years (USDA Economic Research Service, 2018).

- SNAP: The supplemental nutrition program that replaced food stamps accounts for approximately 80% percent of all Farm Bill spending.
- Crop Insurance: About 8% of Farm Bill appropriations funds crop insurance programs, wherein taxpayers subsidize insurance premiums for farmers who buy private insurance to protect against crop losses and drops in the prices for crops that do make it to market (USDA Risk Management Agency, 2013).
- Conservation programs: Discussed in more detail in the next section, conservation programs receive roughly 6% of Farm Bill spending.
- Commodity programs: Constitute the final large category of Farm Bill spending, receiving about 5%. Commodity programs include free insurance for farmers against producer price drops, loans that can be paid back with excess crop instead of cash, and a requirement that the US government purchase surplus dairy from farmers when prices drop below a certain threshold (USDA, 2015).
- The remaining 1% of funding goes to a variety of other programs including trade and research.

Conservation Programs

There are basically two types of conservation programs in the Farm Bill. The first pays farmers to stop farming part or all of their land in order to conserve water and other resources while allowing ecosystems to regenerate. The second supports conservation practices on land that is still cultivated for food (USDA Farm Service Agency, n.d.). These aptly called “working lands programs,” of course, have potential to actually affect how we raise food, which is why organizations like the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future find them to be of particular importance.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The largest working lands program (and largest conservation program overall) is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, n.d.). Under the CSP, farmers and ranchers can apply for funding to implement any of hundreds of environmental enhancement activities, including cover cropping, crop rotation, rotational grazing, and integrated pest management (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2017). These activities are designed to support a range of goals including creating or improving wildlife habitat, improving water and air quality, conserving water, and reducing atmospheric greenhouse gases (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2018).

This particular post focuses on cover cropping and crop rotation, both of which activities can improve soil quality. If you’ve noticed that improving soil quality is not listed as a goal above, that’s because improving soil is an intermediary step to improving air and water quality and conserving water.

References

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This publication contains personal opinions and insights that do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health or the Center for a Livable Future.