Introduction

Several farm bill programs have provided financial support, or subsidies, for farmers, paid for by taxpayers. One such program is the Direct Payments program, often referred to as “farm subsidies.” Another such program is the crop insurance subsidy program, which subsidizes the cost of insurance premiums. Historically, farmers who benefitted from these programs have had to enter into contracts with American taxpayers—to earn financial support, they were required to enact basic conservation measures on some of their lands. Until 1996, crop insurance subsidies required these measures, but now they are the only program exempt from this requirement.

We are at a critical juncture now. Over the next several years, many of these programs will be phased out—except for the crop insurance subsidies, which will become the largest farm safety net program in the farm bill. As the other subsidy programs shrink or end, land previously covered by conservation compliance requirements will be left vulnerable. There will be no financial incentive for farmers to conserve their lands—unless taxpayer support for farmers’ crop insurance premiums is tied to conservation compliance.
Key Points

- Conservation compliance requirements protect wetlands, which reduce potential negative impacts of flooding. One acre of wetland can store roughly one million gallons of water.
- Conservation compliance requirements protect soils. Healthy soil is the foundation of a stable food supply, it sequesters carbon, and it preserves water and soil nutrients.
- USDA research found that 25 percent of the decline in soil erosion between 1982 and 1997 was attributed to conservation compliance.

Public Health Concerns

- Wetlands and healthy soils filter water. Declines in soil health and wetlands threaten water quality, enabling more contaminants to enter our groundwater, waterways, and drinking water.
- Depleted soil often causes farmers to use synthetic fertilizers that can lead to nutrient “runoff” that pollutes drinking water.
- Loss of topsoil and soil quality reduces crop yields, leading to higher food prices.
- Depleted soils may sequester less carbon than healthy ones, contributing to climate change, which challenges food and water security, and contributes to disease, heat stress, and other health problems.

Critical Legislation

To protect public health and the environment—and to reduce government costs—Congress should tie crop insurance premium subsidies to conservation compliance. Without this contract, taxpayers will make four pay-outs. The first pay-out is the crop insurance subsidy itself. The second is the rise in insurance costs as the lack of conservation compliance creates more agricultural loss. The third is the cost of environmental damage resulting from unsound farm practices such as converting wetlands into cropland. And the fourth is the health costs associated with environmental damage.

Action

- Members of Congress should ensure that conservation compliance measures are tied to taxpayer-supported crop insurance premium subsidies to protect public health and the environment and to reduce government spending.
- Members of Congress should ensure sufficient funds are available to USDA to enforce conservation compliance requirements, and USDA should ensure compliance is occurring.

Who We Are

Based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an academic center that conducts and promotes research and communicates information about the complex inter-relationships among food production, diet, environment and human health.

Contact: Senior Policy Advisor, Bob Martin at rmartin@jhsph.edu