Introduction
Farm bill “working lands” conservation programs help farmers adopt, expand, and continue conservation practices, often benefiting their farms’ short and long-term productivity and providing “ecosystem services” for all. These ecosystem services include conservation of water, air, and soil quality, pollination, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, and biodiversity conservation. These services are vital to environmental and human health, and they have real economic value.

While many farmers value the benefits of good stewardship of their lands, some conservation practices provide minimal economic benefits to individual farmers. A farmer who wants to switch from traditional farming practices to practicing increased conservation may face prohibitive costs. Farm bill conservation programs not only help farmers learn about opportunities and strategies, but they also help farmers meet costs.

By preserving and expanding farm bill conservation programs—such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)—the farm bill can help address public health concerns and provide economic benefits to farmers.
Key Points

- Through farm bill conservation programs, participating farmers are rewarded for good land stewardship no matter what crop they grow.
- Agriculture accounts for 80 percent of U.S. water use; too often, water is used excessively and inefficiently for irrigation and livestock.
- Fertilizers and manure (used to compensate for unhealthy farming practices) pollute U.S. rivers, lakes, and groundwater.
- Conservation programs have successfully reduced nitrogen runoff, as well as sediment, phosphorus and pesticide loss from fields.

Public Health Concerns

- Diminishing supplies of water and soil pose threats to farmers, communities, and food security.
- Fossil fuel–based inputs (fertilizers and pesticides) contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, which increase the likelihood of extreme weather.
- Agricultural runoff has been linked to toxic algal blooms and to elevated nitrates in drinking water, which is associated with some cancers.
- Pesticide exposure has been linked to cancer and other health issues. Conservation practices that reduce the need for pesticides can also reduce the chance of harmful exposures for workers and consumers.

Critical Legislation

While most “working lands” programs support public health, one aspect of EQIP does not. The farm bill orders that EQIP reserve 60 percent of program funds for livestock operations. Often these funds help industrial food animal production facilities comply with environmental regulations while growing even larger. As such, these EQIP funds allow these facilities to avoid paying the true costs of their environmental impacts and enable their continuation and expansion, leading to other environmental and public health harms that currently are not regulated.

Action

- Protect and increase funding for farm bill working lands conservation programs, specifically EQIP and CSP.
- Eliminate the set-aside of funds within the EQIP program for livestock production.

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.

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