Farm Bill 2018
Issue Brief:
Conservation Stewardship Program

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Acknowledgements

This issue brief is published by Wild Farm Alliance (WFA) with contributions from Mary Ellis, University of Montana, Missoula. Mary conducted interviews with Montana farmers and ranchers who either have or are currently participating in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Since 2000, Wild Farm Alliance has initiated policies that support farm stewardship, educate farmers about on-farm biodiversity conservation, and assist them with its practical implementation.

Our mission is to promote a healthy, viable agriculture that protects and restores wild nature.

WFA’s work is centered on engaging and empowering those involved in the food and farming movement, including everyone from farmers to consumers.

Learn more and get involved: www.WildFarmAlliance.org
"CSP has been extremely beneficial for us as producers, and as conservation minded stewards."

-Montana Cattle Rancher & Grain Farmer

Overview

Conservation has long been an important cornerstone of agriculture. Farmers understand the need for conserving the soil, biodiversity, and ecological functions in order to maintain a healthy and viable farm. The Farm Bill, a massive program that helps farmers and ranchers, began in 1933. But it took over 50 years for the Farm Bill to have a specific conservation title.

In 2002, the Farm Bill provided funding for the first iteration of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), then called Conservation Security Program. Unlike most other Farm Bill programs that are designed to maximize production, this one was initiated to pay farmers to actively manage and maintain current on-farm conservation activities, expanding and improving them, and adopting new ones that support critical natural resources.

Since the inception of CSP, advocates have fought to increase funding, while opponents worked to eliminate the program entirely. The 2018 Farm Bill is no different. Right now, in the halls of Congress, the efficacy of CSP and other conservation programs of the Farm Bill are being debated.

This report looks briefly at the history of Farm Bill conservation programs and then specifically at CSP. Interviews conducted with Montana farmers and ranchers with experience in using CSP highlight how these programs are working on the ground.
We conclude that CSP not only offers farmers and ranchers financial incentives to establish whole farm conservation efforts, but also provides a myriad of significant, complementary benefits to the environment.

In the spring 2018, Mary Ellis, a graduate student at University of Montana, conducted in-depth interviews on the experiences of Montana farmers and ranchers currently enrolled in CSP.

While many benefits and challenges of CSP came up during interviews, prominent themes were identified, including: the wildlife benefits of CSP, ranchers experiences with grazing and CSP, how resource conserving crop rotations are working for farmers and ranchers, and finally proposed improvements to the program. We dig deeper into these themes further into this issue brief.

CSP’s underlying premise is extremely valuable to promoting farming with the wild, even with its needed improvements. Keep reading to learn more and then help Wild Farm Alliance ensure this important program remains a cornerstone of our national agriculture policy.

**The Farm Bill**

The Farm Bill is an omnibus piece of legislation that governs how food is grown to how people, who may need assistance, get the food to their plates. It is passed approximately every 5 years and is made up of titles, including conservation. These titles contain all of the program areas covered by the Farm Bill, ranging from commodities to energy and forestry to nutrition.

Read more about the twelve Titles of the most recent 2014 Farm Bill from the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) - [http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/what-is-the-farm-bill/](http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/what-is-the-farm-bill/)

Funding for conservation programs, an important feature of the modern Farm Bill, did not come about until 1985, with the addition of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Sodbuster and Swambbuster. Sodbuster was an early version of Sodsaver, protecting native grasslands from conversion, and Swambbuster protected wetlands from conversion.
In the 2014 Farm Bill, approximately $26.1 billion (around 5 percent) of the total funding went towards conservation. This small percentage is a huge boost for farmers across the country who are looking to adopt more conservation efforts on their farm.

In 2002 the Conservation Security Program was born. Although, originally it was only available to producers in select watersheds, the program ultimately expanded in 2008 to include producers throughout the country, and changed its name to the Conservation Stewardship Program.

**Threats to Conservation: Farm Bill 2018**

In the 2014 Farm Bill, approximately $26.1 billion (around 5 percent) of the total funding went towards conservation. This small percentage is a huge boost for farmers across the country who are looking to adopt more conservation efforts on their farm.

The current Farm Bill is set to expire at the end of September 2018 and Congress is steadily working towards a final goal of passing this legislation.

Unfortunately, there are significant threats to conservation programs in the 2018 Farm Bill, specifically CSP. The House Bill (passed June 2018), cuts the farm bill conservation title (that includes programs like CSP and EQIP) by nearly $1 billion - further reducing the already small percentage devoted to conservation. It also combines CSP into EQIP and ignores crucial components like payments for conservation benefits and allows CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations) to be CSP eligible.

Fortunately, the Senate Bill (also passed June 2018) takes a very different approach and does not gut CSP or make any sweeping cuts to the conservation title. When the two chambers come together to reconcile these wildly different bills through conference, it will be critical to ensure conservation programs are not compromised. WFA is working with a national coalition to keep the pressure on our decision makers to approve a Farm Bill that prioritizes conservation.
Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP provides technical and financial assistance for farmers and ranchers looking to maintain and increase conservation efforts on their land. CSP plays an important role in helping producers continue to work their land, while also protecting natural resources.

**CSP is the largest federal conservation program in the country, with 46,000 producers and 70 million acres currently enrolled.**

CSP is different than other federal conservation programs of the Farm Bill because it a whole farm or ranch conservation approach. Recognizing that whole farm/ranch efforts take time, producers can apply for two 5-year contracts through CSP. In their contract producers must take on new conservation activities while also continuing their initial conservation efforts.

Funding priorities for CSP differ depending on where farming takes place. States select "targeted resource concerns" they want farmers and ranchers to prioritize. For example, in Montana top resource concerns include soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat. Other resource concerns include soil erosion, plant health, and air quality. To qualify for CSP, farmers and ranchers must meet the "stewardship threshold" for at least two state resource concerns.
In addition, farmers applying must already be practicing some level of conservation to demonstrate their commitment. However, even when a farmer meets the qualifications for CSP in their state, enrollment is highly competitive. Many applicants are turned away every year.

When farmers do get enrolled, they receive payments for conservation enhancements such as wildlife corridors, cover crops, and rotational grazing. Providing farmers and ranchers with incentives for developing conservation activities, supports vital ecosystem management on agricultural land.

**Any cuts to this program would be a devastating blow to invested and committed farmers and ranchers across the country.**

To learn more about farmers' and ranchers' experiences with CSP, Mary conducted interviews in Montana. The following pages highlight several themes that emerged in the interviews. Farmers and ranchers were excited to talk about benefits they experienced due to the activities they adopted while enrolled in CSP.

These interviews showcase the extraordinary power of providing a "green payment" to farmers and ranchers and the longterm success of enhancements adopted. Ultimately, the producers interviewed want to see this program protected and expanded.

"[CSP] is a different strategy of rewarding and incentivizing good management, which is an important long-term approach...It creates some income for people who are really making sure the grass is in good shape"

-Montana Cattle Rancher
Wildlife Benefits of CSP

Scientists have identified agricultural production as a primary cause of species decline in the U.S. Therefore, the future of many wildlife species is dependent on how agricultural practices evolve. One of the benefits of CSP is that it provides farmers and ranchers the resources and tools needed to support wildlife on their land. Producers interviewed mentioned several ways CSP encourages wildlife:

- **Improving existing and developing new pollinator habitat and wildlife food plots.** Producers are given resources to create habitat for wildlife, such as pollinators and beneficial insects that in turn help with ecological services like crop pollination and pest control.

- **Establishing wildlife friendly habitat such as birdhouses and wildlife corridors.** Producers can fund projects all across their farm or ranch that encourage wildlife, and attract beneficial birds and wildlife that aide in pest control and reduce the need for pesticides.

- **Creating on-farm safety measures for wildlife.** An important part of CSP is adopting activities that lower the risk of farm land to surrounding wildlife, like installing wildlife escapes in water tanks.

- **Encouraging establishment of native species through rotational grazing and other conservation efforts.** Interviewees' land ethic is an important part of their operations. At the same time they also recognize the need to make sure cattle are getting adequate nutrition. Through rotational grazing and planting of native species, they are finding a way to do both.

- **Connecting farmers and ranchers to technical assistance through Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS).** The technical assistance provided by NRCS provides the local support producers need to intensify their conservation efforts when establishing wildlife areas.

“We have found technical expertise or assistance in putting the practices we had in mind onto the ground. Like, how wide does a conservation strip need to be to provide adequate pollinator habitat?”

-Montana Cattle Rancher & Grain Farmer
Many Montana ranchers are taking advantage of the financial and technical assistance provided by CSP. Overall, ranchers cited CSP as playing a vital part in growing and intensifying their conservation efforts. The ranchers we interviewed mentioned numerous benefits when these activities were implemented on the ground:

- **Supporting the development of long-term approaches to grassland management.** Part of CSP is to help ranchers strengthen skills and practices so they can continue conservation activities after their contract is over and ensure long-term stewardship management.

- **Rewarding and incentivizing good management practices for their cattle and pastures.** Ranchers said they believe CSP is supporting "best practices" for grassland management, and provides funding for priority activities.

- **Encouraging the use of nutrient testing for cows.** This testing allows ranchers to use less supplements and/or change management efforts while meeting appropriate nutrient levels.

- **Providing a stable source of income to continue conservation efforts, even during a challenging year.** One rancher mentioned that payments from CSP are the reason he can continue his conservation activities when yearly profits are low.

- **Encouraging ranchers to keep better records, improving the tracking of changes across several years.** While some monitoring and tracking protocols can be intensive, producers found the information to be useful when making decisions from year to year.

"Forced me to do some better record keeping...I can look back and say 'wow yeah I knew things were changing, but now it is documented changes.' Our very best field over here, it went from about one and a half ton per acre to seven tons per acre."

-Montana Cattle & Sheep Rancher
CSP supports farmers and ranchers in developing and adopting conservation enhancements such as crop rotation and cover crops. Several Montana farmers and ranchers interviewed mentioned the following benefits of implementing these activities:

- **Providing farmers and ranchers income for ecosystem services rendered through enhancements like cover crops and crop rotations.** Several producers said CSP rewards them for the services they are providing their community, such as increasing soil quality or decreasing soil erosion.

- **Giving farmers and ranchers space to experiment with activities and trials (such as multiple cover crops) that they may not have otherwise tried, in order to learn more about what works best on their land.**

- **Supporting and encouraging farmers and ranchers to increase crop diversity.** One interviewee said he feels CSP affirms the activities he has always found important, like increasing crop diversity, and pushes him to better those efforts.

- **Helping farmers and ranchers buy higher quality cover crop seed,** resulting in better germination rates. In addition, higher quality cover crop can increase overall soil health.

"I think the biggest impact to conservation is to not tear up the grass in the first place...there are ways to graze our cattle more effectively that improves organic matter and cover, which allows us to use what available moisture we do get and hold it more efficiently."

- *Montana Cattle Rancher*
Challenges and Improvements Needed for CSP

While most farmers and ranchers interviewed described an overall positive experience with CSP, they offered suggestions for improvements to make the program stronger and more accessible. Some areas that were identified as needing improvement include:

- **Simplifying the paperwork.** Producers mentioned spending a lot of time filling out paperwork and reporting on their efforts, and hope to see this simplified in the future so they can spend more time working on their land.

- **Allowing producers a chance to give input in program development.** Ranchers and farmers stated that they would like to see more collaboration between policy makers and producers.

- **Increasing the flexibility in the program to make it more adaptable for specific situations.** Producers said that some conservation efforts do not make sense for their operation due to their unique environmental conditions.

- **The required monitoring for some conservation enhancements is very intensive and can be hard to manage for ranchers.** Ranchers cited challenges with trying to keep up with the required monitoring and record keeping for CSP activities, sometimes having to hire extra help to complete monitoring protocols.

- **Continuing to work on improving the connection between CSP requirements and organic certification requirements.** A few interviewees mentioned having a hard time meeting both sets of standards and would like to see more collaboration between the two federal programs.

"If they are thinking about continuing it, at some point they should bring producers and other people into this, into the discussion of what would be a really good program."

-Montana Cattle Rancher
Your voice matters. The 2018 Farm Bill is not yet finalized, so now is the time to tell your members of Congress just how important conservation is and specifically the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Wild Farm Alliance, is working with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and other sustainable and organic agriculture advocates to ensure Congress does not gut our important conservation programs in the 2018 Farm Bill.

Visit www.WildFarmAlliance.org/Farm_Bill_2018 to learn what actions you can take right now.

Calling or emailing your members of Congress might seem like a small action, but the impact is big. Thank you for adding your voice to this important work!

"I think CSP is the sort of program that we need to be doing more of, not less...[CSP] is one of, if not the best thing, from our perspective, that USDA does.”

-Montana Cattle Rancher & Grain Farmer