

## Farm Bill Will Offer Support for All Citizens

**T**he Farm Bill is a collection of programs designed to build a continuum of support for all of our citizens. In addition to support for natural resource conservation efforts by America's farmers and ranchers, its provisions involve food assistance for poor households and safety net and risk management support for those who grow our nation's food and fiber.

Seventy-six percent of the total Farm Bill budget is devoted to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other direct food assistance initiatives. Today, about 43 million citizens receive such aid.

The 2014 Farm Bill continued a history of reform of U.S. agricultural policy. Since the 1970s, Congress has moved to eliminate most programs that guaranteed payments or income levels for farmers and has replaced them with much more market-oriented policies.

Our farmers and ranchers confront an array of challenges, from extreme weather to pests and disease to competition from cheap, largely unregulated imports. The Farm Bill provides the majority of risk management support for farmers by providing them the option to purchase insurance to cover losses. The farmer must suffer a significant loss, on average about 25 percent, to receive any benefit.

In other words, like anyone else in private business, no individual farm owner is assured an income, but due to the importance of food security and other dividends agriculture provides, the public is asked to share some of the risk.

Risk management helps keep the retail price of food in the U.S. far below that paid by residents in most other nations. According to USDA, the average household in this country spends less than 10 percent of its income for food.

But farmers provide more than

food. They are the first caretakers of our natural resources, maintaining greenspace, wildlife habitat, and freshwater recharge areas throughout our nation.

The 1981 Farm Bill was the first to include conservation provisions. For the past dozen years, conservation spending has been in the \$5–6 billion range. While outlays are on an upward trend, there is a clear trend away from funding for retirement land programs to one with an emphasis on working-lands, which now comes in at more than \$3 billion of the total. It should also be noted that much of this federal assistance is tied to cost-share programs, which require farmers to supplement, if not fully match, the federal dollars they receive.

With the large amount of acreage in agricultural production in the United States, substantial environmental progress is achieved through conservation efforts on working lands. With limits on available funding for all programs, cost-share and incentive mechanisms that leverage private-sector investment are important in achieving national environmental goals.

In general, working-lands programs achieve environmental benefits at a lower program cost, since land remains in production. A wide range of environmental concerns can be addressed on the vast area of U.S. farmland and ranchland in active production. Improved practices can help maintain the long-term productive capacity of agricultural resources and the viability of agricultural activities.

It is clear that voluntary conservation practices have worked — and worked well. According to peer-reviewed research by Field to Market, a broad-based alliance of grower,

environmental, and agribusiness organizations, momentous progress has been achieved since the first conservation programs were initiated in the 1981 bill.

Field to Market statistics show astounding reductions in agriculture's environmental footprint over the last 35 years. For example, for corn on a per unit of output basis, land use is down 41 percent, soil loss is down by 58 percent, irrigation water and energy use per unit of production are down 46 percent and 41 percent respectively, and greenhouse gas emissions are down 31 percent. Similar numbers, albeit some higher, some lower, hold for barley, cotton, soybeans, rice, sugar beets, and wheat. These represent nearly all of the major

row crops and over 225 million acres of land.

This is a positive story to share, and as new methods and technological innovations come on line, farmers and ranchers will continue on a path of continuous improve-

ment regarding their stewardship of natural resources. In fact, many innovations offer clear advantages for both the environment and the economy.

Congress has wisely adopted Farm Bills periodically for more than 60 years to construct a safety net for citizens in need, for children, for domestic food production, and for natural resource protection. The bill's safety net helps farmers achieve success across the board, and enhanced care for the environment is among its primary goals. It is wise for the next Farm Bill to continue that trend.

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