



A Northeast Farm Bill Agenda

Background: The Northeast has an unprecedented opportunity to shape the 2007 Farm Bill to be more responsive to our region. Groups from across the Northeast have been working together to agree on and advance ten “must have” policy priorities. These are parts 6 and 7 of a 10-part series in which we look at each priority in more detail. The full Agenda is available at www.northeastagworks.org.

Priority 6: Provide appropriate conservation program flexibility to address national, state and local resource concerns and priorities.

Priority 7: Provide more technical assistance with greater flexibility in how it can be used.

Why is program flexibility important for the Northeast?

Northeast farms have unique characteristics and needs. They are on average $\frac{1}{4}$ the size of farms nationally, with diverse climate, soils and production systems. The Northeast region needs farm and forest conservation programs that are flexible enough to address resource challenges specific to a state or region. A one-size-fits-all approach inhibits innovation and often ignores state- or multi-state-level conservation priorities and resource concerns. Northeast states that direct state resources toward water and air quality concerns, combating sprawl and protecting working lands should be recognized by -- and work in tandem with -- federal conservation programs.

How has the Northeast fared in past Farm Bills in terms of conservation funding and technical assistance?

Conservation funding historically has been unevenly distributed across regions. Eligibility rules make some programs (e.g., CRP, WRP) less attractive to most Northeast producers. The 2002 Farm Bill acknowledged and addressed inequities with a “regional equity” provision that targeted Northeast (and several other) “underserved” states with additional dollars for certain conservation programs. The Conservation Security Program (CSP) was introduced in the 2002 Farm Bill. It is a “green payment” entitlement program that theoretically rewards all farmers – regardless of where or what they produce -- for their conservation activities. Funding constraints along with certain eligibility rules and formulas have thus far limited CSP’s broad value to Northeast producers. Similarly, federal spending for the Conservation Technical Assistance Program and technical assistance from Farm Bill programs have not adequately met Northeast producers’ needs.

What changes are needed in the next Farm Bill to address the Northeast’s needs?

The 2007 Farm Bill offers a critical opportunity to increase the amount of conservation funds and technical assistance services that Northeast farmers can access. Among the proposals put forward are ones to increase funding for programs like CSP, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Conservation Technical Assistance Program. These increases in funding must be accompanied by increased flexibility in the Farm Bill rule-making and implementation processes. Given the typical Northeast farm’s numerous, small fields and diversity of soil types and other natural resource conditions, delivery of technical assistance for Farm Bill programs such as CSP is often significantly more complex than for the type of farm operations found in the Midwest. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff in the region should have the funds, tools, and flexibility they need to serve the region’s diverse farms and farmers.