



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. This is part 5 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 5: Significantly increase funding for working lands conservation programs

How are “working lands conservation programs” different from other conservation programs?

Working lands conservation programs focus on lands *in agricultural production*. Other conservation programs are referred to as “set-aside” or “retirement” programs which take land out of production -- for example, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). In the Northeast, our land base is so tight that set-aside programs are not very popular. Working lands conservation programs help producers and farmland owners by funding conservation and preservation activities on active land. These programs include: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP); Conservation Security Program (CSP); Forest Lands Enhancement Program (FLEP), Forest Legacy Program (FLP) and a few others.

Why are these programs important to the Northeast? Northeast producers want to practice conservation on their working lands. Because the majority of N.E. farms and farmland are around metropolitan areas, farm conservation programs provide multiple benefits—helping farmers meet conservation goals and improve farm economic viability, while addressing environmental regulations and providing critical environmental, recreational and cultural benefits to millions of people.

According to the last Census of Agriculture, the Northeast is losing farmland at a faster rate on average than the U.S. Less than 19 million acres of cropland and pasture remain in the Northeast, representing just 14.5% of the region’s total land area. With a regional average of over 60% of the region’s land base in forest (over twice the national average), working private forests are a critically important part of the landscape. Where farm and forest land values and development pressures are high, conservation programs such as FRPP and FLP help protect land from development.

Why are we asking for increased funding for conservation programs? Quite simply, the demand for conservation assistance programs in the Northeast far exceeds the available funds. Also, many federal conservation programs do not directly meet our region’s needs. As mentioned above, the CRP, which currently constitutes 68% of all farm conservation program spending, does not work well for most of the Northeast. On the whole, the Northeast is underserved by current federal conservation efforts. While 22% of farmers nationally receive conservation payments, just 8% of Northeast benefit from these critical programs. The “regional equity” provision in the last Farm Bill helped to address this inequity by guaranteeing a baseline of funding to “under-served” states.

What can the next Farm Bill do to strengthen the Northeast’s conservation efforts? The 2007 Farm Bill offers an opportunity to increase the amount of funds available for conservation purposes and to tailor national programs to address regional needs more effectively and more equitably. All states should receive a minimum base funding allocation for working lands conservation programs. Allocation formulas should reflect states’ characteristics such as population density, intensity of land use, land values, cost of conservation practices, and state matching funds. Annual expenditures (authorizations and appropriations) should increase for federal farm and forest conservation programs that are most in demand and most effective in the Northeast.

See the full Agenda for other proposed policy reforms and innovations. Visit www.northeastagworks.org.

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