



Federal Conservation Programs Partnering with New England Farmers

New England Farmers Union

New England farmers take great pride in their land — often held within a family for multiple generations — its bounty, the wildlife it supports and its contribution to the surrounding environment. Faced with thin soils and steep slopes, harsh weather conditions, surrounding towns and nearby cities, New England's farmers need to be good stewards of their land and good neighbors in order to prosper.

In caring for the land and its associated natural resources, our region's farmers have a partner in the federal government. Since the days of the New Deal in the 1930s, the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has worked with New England farmers on controlling soil erosion and improving the health of their soils, to more recently installing water conservation systems, implementing nutrient management plans, protecting farmland and promoting wildlife habitat.

Authorized in the farm bill, federal on-farm conservation programs help New England farmers be good stewards and good neighbors, and the funding received enhances New England's annual share of federal farm bill dollars. Our region's farmers rely on the following federal conservation programs, which are subject to annual appropriations in Congress and will be considered during the reauthorization of the farm bill in 2012.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to help plan and install conservation practices and structures to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and nonindustrial private forestland. In New England, EQIP contracts have helped farmers install manure storage systems, manage milk house runoff, enhance water conservation through improved irrigation systems, restore stream banks and install conservation practices on organic farms or farms transitioning to organic. In 2010, urged on by farmers and local food advocates in New England, NRCS initiated a three-year pilot allowing EQIP dollars to be used for seasonal high tunnel growing structures favored by small vegetable operations to determine their effectiveness in conserving water, maintaining nutrients in the soil, increasing crop yields and reducing the transport of pesticides. Not surprisingly, New England farmers were well-represented in the first year of funding, capturing \$2.95 million (23 percent of the allotted funds) for 347 structures approved. New England farmers' ongoing commitment to conservation and stewardship places a very high demand on EQIP dollars and regularly outstrips the program's available funds. In 2009, for example, while over \$33 million in EQIP practices were approved in New England, close to \$45 million in projects went unfunded.



Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) The New England states have a long tradition of protecting farmland for future generations through voluntary programs to purchase permanent conservation easements on farms. Farmers and landowners have protected more than 256,000 acres of farmland in the region. Massachusetts and Connecticut were pioneers in combating the loss of farmland from development, creating two of the first farmland protection programs in the country in the late 1970s. Since 1995, the farm bill has provided federal matching funds through FRPP to state and local governments and private land trust partners to purchase conservation easements to keep productive farmland in agricultural uses. The program, administered by NRCS, will provide up to 50 percent of the fair market value of a conservation easement. Through 2010, the six New England states have received \$177.2 million in financial and technical assistance from FRPP — 20 percent of the national total.

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) AMA provides cost-share assistance to agricultural producers to voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality and erosion control by incorporating conservation into their farming operations. Producers may construct or improve water management structures



or irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or to improve water quality; and mitigate risk through production diversification or resource conservation practices, including soil erosion control, integrated pest management, or transition to organic farming. AMA is available in 16 states in which Federal Crop Insurance Program participation is historically low, including all six New England states. In 2009, 44 farmers in the region received \$1.1 million (18 percent of the total funding distributed) to support their on-farm conservation strategies. That same year, over \$1.3 million applications went unfunded.

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) With the understanding that farmlands provide critically important cover and food for wildlife, WHIP provides technical and financial assistance to landowners to develop upland, wetland, aquatic and other types of wildlife habitat on their property. In 2009, almost 400 New England landowners applied \$6.8 million to practices to enhance fish and wildlife habitat on their farm and forest lands.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Recognizing that many farmers have practiced good stewardship and conservation on their land for years and generations without federal government support, sustainable agricultural advocates promoted the creation of a new program in the 2002 farm bill that would “reward the best and encourage the rest.” CSP, and its predecessor, the Conservation Security Program, encourages land stewards to improve, maintain and manage existing conservation practices on agricultural land and nonindustrial private forestland, and to improve their conservation performance by installing and adopting new activities and practices. Annual payments to producers are calculated based on current practices and a commitment to install and adopt new conservation activities. Supplemental payments are available for the adoption of resource-conserving crop rotations. Representing the advent of “green payments” in the federal farm bill, CSP distributed over \$320 million in 20,567 contracts covering more than 25 million acres nationwide in 2010. However, in New England the program has been challenged by low payment rates for qualified practices (in 2010 the per acre payment was \$12.73 nationally, but only \$8.00 in New England); the complexity of the sign-up process; a limited number of qualified practices for forestlands; and an inability to enroll rented land in the program without a long-term lease. As a result, only 171 contracts totaling \$767,868 and covering 95,889 acres were

executed in New England — all less than 1 percent of national totals.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) Through WRP, NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with wetland restoration efforts. The goal of the program is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program. This program offers landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection. Through 2009, the New England states accounted for barely 1 percent of the total acres enrolled in WRP nationwide.

Regional Equity The 2002 farm bill included a provision requiring that all states receive a minimum of \$12 million annually in federal conservation funding. This threshold was increased to \$15 million per year in the 2008 farm bill. This equity distribution of conservation funding is critically important to New England states, where prior to 2002 the nature and cost of needed conservation practices regularly placed the region at a competitive disadvantage with other states in accessing conservation program dollars.

Summary

These programs help reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat and reduce damages caused by floods and other natural disasters. They provide tremendous benefits to farmers and consumers in helping to sustain agricultural productivity and environmental quality while supporting continued economic development, recreation and scenic beauty.

What can you do?

- Join New England Farmers Union (NEFU) and add your voice to ours as we work to educate Congress about the importance of these programs. You will receive action alerts about these programs and other issues related to New England agriculture. See www.newenglandfarmersunion.org for membership information.
- Contact the offices of your U.S. representative and senators to remind them how important federal conservation programs are to your state and its farms.
- Learn more about NRCS and its programs at www.nrcs.usda.gov.
- Contact NEFU if you have any questions regarding sustainable agriculture and conservation programs in New England. Email us at info@newenglandfarmersunion.org.

New England Farmers Union *A local voice at the national table*

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