



**CONGRESSIONAL
WESTERN CAUCUS**
THE VOICE FOR RURAL AMERICA

2023 Farm Bill Reauthorization Priorities

Introduction

What is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill authorizes multiyear wide-ranging policies that cover agricultural commodities, crop insurance, conservation, forest health, agriculture research, and domestic and international food aid programs. Typically renewed every five years, the Farm Bill impacts agriculture policy over multiple years. The original Farm Bill in the 1930s was only two titles and focused on commodity programs to support farm income as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal legislation in the Great Depression. The two original titles have now expanded to the 12 titles that made up the 2018 Farm Bill, the *Agriculture Improvement Act*. The Farm Bill gives Members of Congress a consistent opportunity to make changes to agriculture policy and to update these policies to meet the ever-changing needs of agriculture.

Why is the Farm Bill important?

The Farm Bill impacts all Americans whether they live in rural America or not, so it is vital that this legislation be carefully crafted to promote American agriculture, preserve our premiere research institutions, improve forest health to prevent catastrophic wildfires, and provide a safety net to help Americans get back on their feet when in need.

The economic impact of U.S. food and agriculture industries is \$8.6 trillion in direct and indirect output, and these industries create jobs for 23 million Americans, while an additional 23 million Americans work in jobs created by farming and ranching activities.¹

The output from these farms and ranches feeds and clothes Americans and protects our national security by ensuring a stable food supply chain. One does not need to look far in this time of global turmoil to see the disasters that could occur if food security is threatened – Sri Lanka riots, the war in Ukraine upending world wheat markets, countries like China and India banning the export of wheat and other commodities, or farmer protests in Belgium and the Netherlands. Even here in the U.S., supply chain bottlenecks have delayed the on-time delivery of farm inputs like seed, fertilizer, livestock feed, and diesel to farmers and ranchers while natural disasters from freezes to hurricanes to wildfires have damaged crops and killed livestock.

Additionally, Farm Bill conservation policy is helping farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners conserve resources while increasing their farm yields. American farmers have increased production by nearly three-fold since the 1940s while farm inputs, such as land usage and equipment, have remained mostly level. Farmers and ranchers are implementing the use of cover crops and crop rotation, changing tillage practices, and using precision technology to select the best fertilizer for soil conditions and to determine placement and quantity in the field. Forest landowners are improving management of the trees that produce timber, pulp and paper products, and chips and pellets for biomass energy while also providing conservation benefits that improve soil and water health, air quality, and wildlife habitat.

The Farm Bill also contains domestic and international food aid programs to support those in need with programs ranging from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to Food for Peace.

¹ [Feeding the Economy, 2023. "U.S. Food and Ag Industries: Economic Impact in the United States"](#)

What is the Congressional Western Caucus' interest in the Farm Bill?

The Congressional Western Caucus is comprised of 100 Members of Congress who represent a wide array of districts across the United States, each with their own unique agricultural practices and needs. Western Caucus Members are united in ensuring a healthy farm economy, which will boost rural success and support urban needs for food, fiber, and fuel. The Farm Bill must work for farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, consumers, and those in need.

Farm Bill Priorities

Supporting Production Agriculture

Production agriculture and the farmers and ranchers that work in it keep food on our shelves and are vital for food security and thereby national security. Ensuring a healthy farm economy is a top priority. The Farm Bill is an opportunity to update the commodities programs, and crop insurance policies that meet the needs of a wide range of crops to maintain strong safety net support for farmers in difficult economic times.

The major commodity crops (including wheat, corn, soybeans, cotton, peanuts, rice, dairy, and sugar) are produced across the country and have extensive networks for distribution and international trade. The main field crop support programs are Price Loss Coverage (PLC), Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC), and Marketing Assistance Loans (MAL). The dairy program protects a portion of the margin between milk and feed prices while the sugar program provides a combination of price support, limits on imports, and processor/refiner marketing allotments.

Specialty crops – defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and nursery crops (including floriculture) – while much smaller in number of acres grown, are high-value crops. There are over 350 different specialty crops, including apples, grapes, hops, onions, potatoes, spinach, so it is important to maintain program flexibility to support the unique needs of each crop as they face their own challenges. Previous Farm Bills have supported the production and research of these specialty crops through the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). Farm Bill programs also support some non-traditional forms of agriculture including hemp, organic marketing, and local food promotion.

A second important piece that supports production agriculture is the crop insurance program. The Farm Bill must maintain the strength and integrity of crop insurance policies and make updates to encourage additional participation.

While crop insurance is permanently authorized by the Federal Crop Insurance Act of 1938, the Farm Bill gives Congress the opportunity to make improvements to this vital tool to help farmers and ranchers manage risk. Additionally, the Crop Insurance title supports premiums for farmers to protect against losses in yield, crop revenue, or whole farm revenue. It also provides the Risk Management Agency (RMA) with the authority to research, develop, and modify insurance policies.

The Farm Bill can also ensure that standing disaster programs continue to assist producers whose crops were damaged or destroyed by natural disasters while reducing the need for ad hoc disaster assistance.

The permanent disaster programs help prevent the need for ad hoc disaster programs and include the Noninsured Crop Assistance Program (NAP), Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), Livestock Forage Disaster

Program (LFP), Tree Assistance Program (TAP), and Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP). In recent years, ad hoc disaster assistance has seen major outlays that while necessary to counter losses from hurricanes, freezes, wildfires, and other weather events, have made it hard to accurately predict spending levels. Strong standing disaster programs combined with crop insurance policies that work well for farmers and ranchers can reduce the need for this ad hoc spending.

Agricultural trade continues to be important for American farmers and ranchers as additional markets allow them to grow their businesses, and American agricultural products are an important part of the global supply of food. Fiscal Year 2022 ended with record exports (\$196.4 billion), driven by both high commodity prices and strong demand. But global agricultural markets are highly competitive, and USDA is forecasting an agricultural trade deficit for fiscal year 2023 even though the U.S. has historically posted an agricultural trade surplus. The Farm Bill must ensure that agricultural exports are supported through market promotion and that U.S. food aid continues to support American producers. It should reauthorize and consider expanding the Market Access Program (MAP), which is the main export promotion program and helps producers promote American agricultural products and increase exports. Additionally, the Foreign Market Development Program (FMD) plays an important role in establishing new international markets for American agricultural products in foreign countries alongside the Emerging Markets Program, and Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops.

American agriculture is different than it was a decade ago, and American farmers and ranchers have always been at the forefront of innovations and new technology. The Farm Bill must ensure that American agricultural research continues to provide innovative technology to farmers and ranchers, so they can continue to increase farm yields and be competitive in world markets. Land Grant Universities play a critical role in continuing agricultural research and support both commodity and specialty crop research and pest detection and eradication programs.

Additionally, the Farm Bill can play an important role in protecting animal health. The currently ongoing highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak across the country only serves to underscore the importance of proactive animal health measures including combating contagious animal diseases such as African Swine Fever Virus and Chronic Wasting Disease. The Farm Bill includes programs such as the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program, and the National Animal Vaccine and Countermeasures Bank.

The Farm Bill can also advance policies that can help producers expand operations and beginning farmers enter the industry. Ensuring loan limits are in line with rising land and equipment costs could be a pathway to assist. The Farm Bill can also ensure the Farm Credit Administration can continue to do its work without imposing unhelpful Dodd-Frank era reporting standards, such as the proposed rule on Small Business Lending Data Collection.

Improving Voluntary Conservation Programs

Rural Americans manage their lands, waters, and natural resources for the benefit of current and future generations. Those who are closest to the land—whose quality and way of life depend upon healthy ecosystems—care most about the land and know best how to maintain its productivity, legacy, and uses for years to come. We have decades of proof that conservation of working lands has benefited the farmers, ranchers, and rural communities that rely on healthy land and clean water.

The Farm Bill must ensure that conservation programs remain voluntary, with needed flexibility for the unique needs of the different regions throughout the country. The Conservation title covers voluntary programs that

incentivize and help cover the implementation cost of natural resource conservation efforts on farms, ranchlands, and forest lands through working lands programs or land retirement and easement programs on the most sensitive habitat areas. These conservation programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Given the drought conditions across the West, this includes ensuring that water conservation, groundwater sustainability, drought practices, and innovative irrigation solutions continue to be covered for producers. It should also ensure that the Conservation title is focused on programs that work well and are proven effective – rather than siphoning funding and technical staff for unproven climate projects – and that conservation practices are not tied to crop insurance policies because a one-sized-fits-all approach will disrupt the tailored method already reflected in current crop insurance policies.

Enhancing Forest Health and Active Management

The West has faced some of the most destructive wildfires in our nation’s history just in the past several years and our national forests have never been in more urgent need of increased management and restoration. This has resulted in a sharpened focus on how the Forestry title can improve federal policy to address this crisis.

Rural and forested communities nationwide can either benefit from forest management activities or suffer from the impacts of mismanaged forests, including catastrophic wildfire. For decades, forest health has declined as active forest management has stalled or stopped completely due in large part to over-litigation. Over-litigation slows or stops necessary forest management and many acres tied up in lawsuits have now been completely burnt, destroying the forests and devastating downstream watersheds. Some of these forests will take hundreds of years to recover.

Both the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills included expansions of the Forestry title that created authorities for insect and disease management, as well as collaborative programs such as the Good Neighbor Authority and Stewardship Contracting. While these improvements were a critical first step, there are still many policies that can be streamlined and optimized.

The Farm Bill should increase the pace and scale of vegetation management work on public lands to improve forest and habitat health to help prevent catastrophic wildfires. It should expand the Good Neighbor Authority to empower both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to collaborate with local partners, allow Tribes and counties to retain timber receipts, and allow non-federal entities to use revenues generated on non-Federal lands in accordance with conditions specified in Good Neighbor Agreements. Additionally, it should streamline and expedite permitting for forest management projects in order to encourage economic generation in rural communities, create resilient forests, and protect wildlife habitat.

Strengthening Rural Communities through Development

The Farm Bill must ensure that the Rural Development title continues to help rural communities grow and thrive by supporting programs for water storage infrastructure projects and emergency grants following a natural disaster and by encouraging public-private partnerships to provide capital for rural businesses and communities.

The Rural Development title covers programs that promote rural economic growth through broadband expansion, rural housing, rural health programs, utility programs, and infrastructure development. Broadband is critically important to rural America given the digital world we have entered, where everything from precision agriculture to allowing rural businesses to compete with the increasingly digital marketplace relies on broadband access. Federal grant and loan programs have helped expand broadband access, but many rural areas are still unserved or severely underserved. Estimates on the digital divide show that 17 percent of rural Americans lack access to the Federal Communications Commission's broadband minimum speed standards. The Rural Development title can be used to unleash American ingenuity by continuing to connect Americans.

Rural Development also includes the Rural Energy Savings Program, the Emergency Community Assistance Water Program, and revolving water and wastewater loan funds.

Conclusion

American farms, ranches, and forests produce the food, fiber, and fuel that provide for the world. The Congressional Western Caucus recognizes that a healthy farm economy in America is vital for food security, both at home and abroad. The Farm Bill will play an important role in rural America for multiple years, so the Western Caucus will work to ensure that rural voices are heard through the development of the 2023 Farm Bill. These high-level priorities will do much to assist rural communities, and we look forward to continuing to engage with farmers, ranchers, industry stakeholders, and members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees as they work to draft the Farm Bill.