



## Conservation payments in the 2018 Farm Bill for practices in the NRCS working lands programs

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Under the conservation title of the 2018 Farm Bill, the working lands programs, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) are both retained. These two programs provide financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers across the country. These programs assist with improving natural resource conservation and increasing farm profitability.

Despite talks to combine these programs into one or reduce funding to these programs, in the final version of the Farm Bill the budget for the CSP program is allocated at \$700 million in 2019 and increasing to \$1 billion in 2023. At the same time, additional funding was made available for the EQIP, as much as a billion dollar increase, and so did other conservation programs such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

The CSP that was authorized to enroll a set number of acres, where producers enroll their entire farm and already addressed two priority concerns and are committed to addressing more concerns would be eligible to enroll acres in the program. Payment rate was determined on a case by case basis but no more than \$18 per acre. Under the new Farm Bill, CSP is funded on a dollar basis, like EQIP, rather than on an acreage basis. The average payment requirement is eliminated. In addition, automatic graduation to CSP from EQIP is eliminated, which means those farmers that have implemented EQIP eligible conservation practices on working lands would have to enroll in CSP as new program enrollees. It is important to allow farmers to account for the practices that have been already implemented and provide an opportunity to demonstrate continued improvement in conservation activities. The change proposed in the new Farm Bill does not fully do that.

Similar to CSP that promotes comprehensive conservation strategy, changes were proposed to EQIP to move in the direction of CSP, where the emphasis is laid on the suite of practices rather than a single practice contracts. Nevertheless, the conservation title funding did not significantly improve over the last Farm Bill. The conservation title funding was reduced by as much as \$6 billion in the 2014 Farm Bill. No increases were proposed to fill that gap, i.e., the conservation title is funded at \$60 billion over the ten-year window of the bill. As we all know reduction to conservation-program budget means lower payments to cost-share programs, practices, and initiatives.

Some of the practices of the soil health initiative are widely promoted. They include cover crops and conservation tillage. Other practices include conservation cover and conservation crop rotation. Although no significant changes in the total budget allocation for the programs is noticed in the first five years, the payment amounts (unit costs) have been slightly lower for cover crops and slightly higher for conservation tillage practices. The 2019 payment rates for the practices are shown in the table.

**Table 1. Cost-share payments for EQIP practices**

Practice	NRCS practice code	2018-19 payment structure
<b>Cover crops, single species</b>	340	\$48.60/ac
<b>Cover crops, multiple species</b>	340	\$54.60/ac
<b>Reduced tillage</b>	345	\$17.45/ac
<b>Tillage &gt; 20in</b>	324	\$15.29/ac
<b>No-Till/Strip-Till</b>	329	\$14.78/ac

Another program that is very much relevant to Louisiana is the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The program funds wetland restoration projects and farmland protection projects. The funding for ACEP is authorized at \$450 million per year for all five years of the Farm Bill and beyond.

While the new Farm Bill makes strides in the right direction for the conservation of natural resources on working lands, long-term funding for these important programs is not even close to its pre-2014 levels. Although the existence of a Farm Bill itself provides a lot of solace to the farming community, restoring conservation goals on working lands can be an uphill battle at current funding levels.



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