



2018 Farm Bill Talking Points – Oregon USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

- The President signed the 2018 Farm Bill into law on Dec. 20, 2018. The 2018 Farm Bill, like the others before it, demonstrates strong congressional support for private lands conservation.
- It will help the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) continue streamlining, targeting and simplifying our programs, and will help us fulfill the Secretary’s additional goal of improving overall customer service.
- Every five years, Congress authorizes a Farm Bill that provides support for conservation programs alongside commodity programs, crop insurance, and food security. The Farm Bill programs are the single largest funding source for private land conservation in the United States.
- After a new Farm Bill is signed into law, NRCS staff at the national headquarters must interpret the new law and write policy specific to how the agency will implement conservation programs identified in the Farm Bill. This process takes time.
- The agency is currently developing policy based on the 2018 Farm Bill. States can expect to receive policy, implementation guidance and messaging within the coming months. Therefore, preliminary communications about the Farm Bill will be somewhat limited in detail, as policy is still being developed nationally.
- It’s also important to note that while the Farm Bill “authorizes” funds for specific programs, it doesn’t “allocate” those funds, meaning actual budgeted amounts for programs may be less than the authorized amount.
- No new NRCS **programs** were added, and none were eliminated, so we will continue to offer the types of assistance producers have come to expect, and even improve upon them. Let me talk you through some of the details:
 - The Conservation Title increases funding for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and direct funding for Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).
 - Robust support for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) remains, despite a reduction of funding levels over a budgetary baseline, essentially replacing an acreage cap in favor of yearly funding authorizations.
 - Agricultural Conservation Land Easement (ACEP) program, Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) will provide entities who will hold easements more flexibility and control over land stewardship

requirements and other management actions.

- RCPP contains improvements to make it more efficient and effective. Impediments are removed, enabling NRCS and partners to better manage funding throughout the duration of projects.
- **Grasslands** receive some focus through the new Grassland Conservation Initiative within CSP and the continued incentives to protect grasslands of special environmental significance within ACEP.
- **Wildlife** resource concerns are supported through the Working Lands for Wildlife effort, through ACEP-Wetland Restoration Easement (WRE), and through increased funding levels through EQIP.
- **Organic and transitioning to organic producers** no longer have an annual payment limitation under EQIP and can receive \$140,000 over the course of the Farm Bill compared to \$80,000 on a rolling 6-year period under the 2014 Farm Bill. Additionally, CSP provides a special allocation to States based upon the extent of organic production occurring within the State.
- **Urban growers'** concerns will receive increased consideration under the Conservation Innovations Grants (CIG) and the availability of additional funding for soil tests and related activities.

Soil Health and Water Quality/Quantity

Soil health and water quality and quantity are priorities of the agricultural community, and the Conservation title of the Farm Bill underscore congressional support for these areas of focus.

- **For soil health:**
 - EQIP expands opportunities for Conservation Activity Plans to include soil health planning, planning for resource conserving crop rotations, and precision conservation management planning. Soil testing was also added as an eligible practice under EQIP.
 - CSP expands conservation activities to include soil health planning, and highlights building soil organic matter through the adoption of resource conserving crop rotations.
- **For water quantity:**
 - EQIP modifications improve water conservation and irrigation efficiency by allowing payments for scheduling, distribution efficiency, and soil moisture monitoring; irrigation related structural or other measures that conserve surface or ground water; and making assistance available for producers who want to transition to water conserving crops and crop rotations.
- **For water quality:**
 - NRCS will continue to address water quality concerns through EQIP, CSP and RCPP.

- This Conservation Title also requires collaboration with community water systems and state technical committees.
- A minimum level of 10 percent of conservation program funding, other than CRP, is to be used for source water protection.

New and Anticipated Concerns

- EQIP assistance will be available for new and anticipated resource concerns.
- It specifically recognizes that producers are facing resource concerns created by extreme weather events and enables NRCS to help assist producers adapt to and mitigate against increasing weather volatility.
- The Conservation Title also expands NRCS's ability to assist Animal Plant Health Inspection Service with resource concerns creating by the growing feral swine population in several regions of the country.
- This Farm Bill will help us reach more producers and give them key information so they can make the best decisions for their land and their bottom line.
 - The benefits of conservation are clear to us, because we've seen it on our farms and on our ranches. But we need to let other producers know about how conservation can help their operation. And, this Farm Bill supports ways for us to do that, through on farm demonstration trials, and collaboration with community colleges, commercial enterprises, and other partnerships.
 - It supports NRCS conservation programs and innovative technologies as well as ways for producers to assess their economic impacts before incorporating them within their own operations.
 - The Conservation Title expands data availability and accessibility while protecting producer confidentiality.
 - In particular, the Secretary must identify data regarding the use and impact of conservation practices on farm and ranch profitability and report those findings.
 - A focused NRCS team of natural resource specialists will work to provide more information about the outcomes of implementing conservation measures.

- **Historically Underserved producers, including veteran farmers**, who are beginning farmers and ranchers and limited resource producers, will receive our continued support and priority assistance.
- The Farm Bill is an important tool. But it doesn't work without the dedication of the folks in the field, the NRCS field staff and the farmers and ranchers that use it to make the best decisions for their land and operations.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program

- We are taking applications for all Farm Bill conservation programs including EQIP applications. EQIP has a continuous signup.
- The next EQIP application batch date for Oregon is April 19, 2019. This applies to locally-led Conservation Implementation Strategies, select RCPP projects, and the Sage Grouse Initiative. All other state initiatives have already obligated funds in prior batch dates and will not use the April 19 cut off period.
- Currently we are developing contracts from early FY2019, but cannot obligate EQIP contracts until further notice. We anticipate being able to do this soon.

Conservation Innovation Grant

- Oregon plans to offer a state CIG in FY19, we will announce the request for proposals potentially later this spring. Continue to encourage producers or partners interested in CIG to consider submitting a proposal.
- National CIG: There is an anticipated release of the Request for Proposals (RFP) coming this spring
- Existing CIG grantees may continue to submit request for payment

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

- There is an anticipated Announcement for Program Funding (APF) coming this spring

Conservation Stewardship Program

- 2018 Payments are proceeding as normal
- Modifications can be submitted
- We will take applications, however, not sure if and how these will carry over to the new Farm Bill program

Agriculture Conservation Easement Program

- The 2018 Farm Bill reauthorized (ACEP) with some amendments and authorized funding at \$450 million per fiscal year (FY) for FY's 2019-2023.
- National Easement Programs Division (EPD) is developing FY 2019 guidance and anticipates releasing to the States by early March. Oregon will develop state specific guidance upon receipt of the EPD guidance, by mid-March.
- NRCS should continue to complete activities associated with prior year ACEP enrollments (including WRP) as well as new and unfunded applications as described in NB 300-19-8 and for Oregon, specifically OR 300-2019-05
- FY 2019 ACEP Ranking Worksheets are now posted to the Oregon NRCS public website.

- States are not authorized to take further action on any agreements that were not fully executed by the date of enactment of the 2018 Farm Bill.
- The National Easement Staging Tool remains available to State-level users and records must continue to be accurately maintained.
- Full year ACEP allocations will be distributed to States soon after the publication of the ACEP FY 2019 program implementation guidance as possible.
- We anticipate ACEP to roll out in 3 phases:
 - Phase 1: ACEP implementation through the end of FY 2019 under transition authority (bulletins)
 - New enrollments
 - New obligations
 - Additional allocations for ACEP and Repealed Easement Program Funds
 - Treatment of Existing Unclosed Enrollments
 - Easement Administration Actions
 - Entity Certification
 - Forthcoming guidance:
 - In general, high-ranking applications that meet and conform to eligibility criteria in existing ACEP regulation and policy will most readily proceed in FY 2019
 - Extent to which applications and enrollments may deviate from existing ACEP regulation and policy in FY 2019 will be governed by Phase 1 guidance or deferred until FY 2020 as necessary (and described in Phase 1 guidance)
 - WRE: Unclosed easements must use the Warranty Easement Deeds approved for use under the 2014 Farm Bill
 - ALE: New attachments to fund new parcels CANNOT be added to existing ALE agreements entered under the 2014 Farm Bill
 - Information on applicable provisions of the existing regulations and supplemental guidance for FY 2019 administration where existing regulations are inconsistent or silent on new provisions.
- Phase 2: Development and publication of ACEP interim regulations and policy by beginning of FY 2020.
 - Updating and developing business tools
 - Training on new or changed policy and procedures
 - Serves until final regulations are published
- Phase 3: Development and publication of Final Rule and associated policy updates
 - Serves for the remainder of the 2018 Farm Bill
 - Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) for FY 2019-generally, requirements for enrollment remain the same as prior years, the 2018 act did not change any Average AGI rules that were previously in effect
 - FSA has updated the CCC-941 to reflect new Farm Bill, dated 1-24-19, both forms are acceptable for FY 2019, landowners do not need to re-submit/file if they have already filed.

Strategic Approach to Conservation (SAC)

- While some programs will change, one thing that remains unchanged is Oregon's focus on the SAC. As we continue to roll out and implement the new Farm Bill, Oregon will continue implementing a SAC, which relies heavily on the locally-led planning process to target priority natural resource concerns in communities across our state.
- By using a strategic approach, NRCS Oregon targets specific, locally-led projects called Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS). Each CIS in Oregon was created with input and support from local partners and landowners utilizing the Local Work Group process. Each CIS offers conservation practices that target a priority natural resource concern within a specific watershed or landscape. This way of doing business has enabled Oregon to capitalize on additional funding and capacity to deliver voluntary conservation on private lands – for example, through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.