Overview of 2018 Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Kevin Nelms
Area Wildlife Biologist
Greenwood, MS
Conservation Programs

$5.82 Billion

USDA

NRCS

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Farm Service Agency
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Provide incentives to landowners who face threats to soil, water, air and related natural resources on their land.
Statewide Resource Concerns

- Water Quality - Sedimentation
- Water Quality - Animal Waste
- Water Quantity
- Grazing Lands
- Sustainable Forestry
- **Wildlife – must be 10% minimum**

County Work Groups Address Local Needs:
- Prioritize statewide concerns
- Select conservation practices
Example Forestry Practices

- Prescribed Burning
- Firebreak
- Site Prep
- Mechanical Mulching
- Forest Stand Improvement
- Weed and Invasive Species Control

Example Wildlife Habitat Practices

- Prescribed Burning and Firebreak
- Levee and Water Control Structure
- Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management
- Native Grass Conversion and Planting
- Strip Disking
Comprehensive conservation program to address resource concerns by:

• Maintaining and improving existing conservation activities
• Implementing new conservation enhancements
• “Payment for Performance”

Eligible lands include:

• cropland
• grassland
• improved pastureland
• forestland
Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

- Administered by the Farm Services Agency with technical assistance from NRCS and MFC
- Acreage cap of **27 million** acres – currently 24 million ac

- Eligible land is:
  - Owned for previous 12 months
  - Planted to an agricultural commodity 4 of 6 years from **2012-2017**
  - Some marginal pasturelands
CRP General Sign-up Practices

Apply only during general sign-up

- Permanent Grasses and Legumes
- Tree Planting, Pine or Hardwood
- Permanent Wildlife Habitat
- Grass Already Established
- Trees Already Established
- Wildlife Food Plot
Conservation Reserve Program

General

- Annual Rental Payments – Based on county rental rates
  Reduced payments to 85% of rental rate

- Restoration Cost-Share – 50%

- Mid Contract Management – required but not cost-shared
Continuous CRP Practices

- Riparian Forest Buffers
- Filter Strips
- Wetland Restoration
- Grass Buffers for Upland Birds
- Bottomland Hardwood Restoration
- Grassted Waterway
- Shallow Water Area for Wildlife

Automatic acceptance if eligible
10 – 15 year contracts
Continuous CRP

- Annual Rental Payments – Based on county soil rental rates
  Reduced payments to 90% of rental rate
- Sign up Incentive Payment – 32.5% of annual payment rate
- Restoration Cost-Share – 50% + extra 5%
- Mid Contract Management – required but not cost-shared
CRP Permissive and Restrictive Uses

- Must maintain cover
- Invasive species must be controlled
- Harvest of game and fish allowed
- Emergency haying and grazing allowed
- Mowing allowed on 20% of total acres annually
- Wildlife management activities encouraged
ACEP has two components –
Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)
Agricultural Lands Easements (ALE)
Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)
Program Purposes and Objectives

• Protect agricultural uses and related conservation values of eligible land by limiting uses of that land
  OR

• Protecting grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring and conserving eligible land
  BY

• Contributing up to 50% of funds to entities for the purchase of easements to protect natural resources and agricultural use of land subject to conversion
The objectives of ACEP-WRE are to protect, restore and enhance the functions and values of wetland ecosystems to attain:

- Habitat for migratory birds, T&E species, and other wetland-dependent wildlife
- Protection and improvement of water quality
- Attenuation of floodwater
- Recharge of ground water
- Protection and enhancement of open spaces
- Protection of native flora and fauna
- Contribution to educational and scientific scholarship
- Provide producers a viable option for marginal lands
Enrollment options:

- **Perpetual easement**
  - land value payment, 100% restoration cost-share

- **30-year easement**
  - 75% land value payment, 75% cost-share
Geographical Area Rate Cap (GARC)

**Delta**
- Cropland - $3,100/ac
- Aquaculture - $2,450/ac
- Pasture - $2,350/ac
- CRP - $1,750/ac
- Woodland - $2,100/ac

**Rest of State**
- Cropland - $2,050/ac
- Aquaculture - $2,450/ac
- Pasture - $2,050/ac
- CRP - $1,700/ac
- Woodland - $1,700/ac

**Coastal**
- Appraisals for all landcover types.
Hydrology Restoration

- not a guarantee
- what topography allows

Tree Planting

Remainder of easement planted to bottomland hardwoods
Easement Reservations

- Easement Deed returns six rights to landowner
  - Title
  - Quiet Enjoyment
  - Control of Access
  - Recreational Uses – undeveloped
  - Subsurface Resources
  - Water Rights

- All other activities require Compatible Use Authorization
  - including management activities
Compatible Use Authorizations

• Five Basic CUAs
  – Food Plots – max. 5% of total acreage
  – Hydrology areas management
  – Roads maintenance
  – Irrigation wells
  – Firebreaks

• Other CUAs considered as requested
Healthy Forests Reserve Program

Restore and protect forests to promote recovery of:

• Threatened and endangered species
• Candidate species and species of greatest concern in SWAP
• Only longleaf priority area in MS, admin. w/ USFWS
Healthy Forests Reserve Program

Eligibility:
• Privately owned forest land
• High likelihood to restore or enhance habitat for red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, or indigo snake

Enrollment options:
• Perpetual easement - land value payment, 100% restoration cost-share
• 30-year easement - 75% land value payment, 75% cost-share
• 10-year cost-share agreement - no easement, provides 50% restoration cost-share
Adjusted Gross Income
for all program eligibility

AGI – 3 year average may not exceed
$900,000 for on-farm and off-farm income
Ranking Program Applications

• Each program has ranking criteria/questions based on environmental benefits
• Ranking questions are developed at the state level (and local for EQIP)
• NRCS ranks applications after the application period deadline
• When funding is received, the highest ranked applications are funded until the money is exhausted
• If an application is not funded, it is eligible for reapplication in subsequent years
Conservation Technical Assistance
To maximize benefits with USDA Farm Bill programs, you should:

1) Determine your objectives - be as specific as possible
2) Seek information about the different programs
3) Involve resource personnel
4) Make decisions based on objectives and not programs
How do you apply for a USDA Program?

• **Step 1** – Sign an application at local USDA Service Center

• **Step 2** – USDA will determine eligibility for program

• **Step 3** – USDA will complete an environmental ranking

• **Step 4** – Applications will be selected for funding
Contact your local USDA Service Center:

• For more information
• Sign up for a USDA program
• Technical assistance
Vacant

Kevin Nelms
kevin.nelms@usda.gov

James Austin
james.austin@usda.gov

Barry Pessoney
barry.pessoney@usda.gov
Questions??

Kevin Nelms
kevin.nelms@usda.gov

More information
www.nrcs.usda.gov/FarmBill