

Agriculture's Role in 30x30: Partnering with Farmers and Ranchers to Protect Land, Biodiversity, and the Climate

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American Farmland Trust views our nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters as essential allies in the effort to reach the 30x30 goals for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation. The lands that they manage are critical for wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, food security, clean water, and rural prosperity. The U.S. needs bold, new approaches to enlist their help at the vast scale required to effectively protect biodiversity and stabilize the climate. We will need to both: 1) protect vulnerable working lands from being permanently converted to development; and 2) support landowners' voluntary efforts to implement conservation practices, particularly in biodiversity hotspots, key connectivity corridors, and areas with high carbon sequestration potential. To be successful, these policies must embrace USDA's legacy of voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led conservation and be strategically targeted.

In brief, we recommend that the Biden Administration take the following actions:

1. Commit to protecting and conserving 30 percent of working farmland and ranchland by 2030:

- Use voluntary agricultural conservation easements to permanently protect at least 5 percent of farmland and ranchland from development by 2030, ensuring that it can continue producing food in perpetuity.
- Incentivize adoption of conservation measures on these permanently protected acres and an additional 25% of farmland and ranchland, with a specific focus on conserving biodiversity and/or implementing natural climate solutions.

2. Take immediate action to accelerate working lands protection and biodiversity conservation using USDA's existing programs and authorities:

- Appoint a high-level USDA 30x30 coordinator and offer support to state agencies.
- Develop a mechanism to account for all acres protected and conserved via federal programs; encourage and enable voluntary reporting on complementary non-federal efforts.
- Use geospatial data to improve targeting of existing conservation cost-share programs, including by expanding the successful Working Lands for Wildlife program.
- Increase capacity to provide conservation technical assistance, through additional NRCS staffing, partnerships with third-party organizations, and Civilian Climate Corps workers.

- Streamline the administration of federal working lands protection programs to enable dollars to be put on the ground more quickly and efficiently.

3. *Fight the loss of working lands to development:*

- Dramatically expand investment in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE) and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).
- Strengthen the Farmland Protection Policy Act and ensure that it covers new federal investments in renewable energy.
- Create new tools to reduce the conversion of our best agricultural land and incentivize the transfer of land to the next generation of producers.

4. *Launch a targeted effort to protect wildlife habitat on working lands:*

- Provide major new funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) to establish an initiative focused on protecting and conserving private working lands in biodiversity hotspots and wildlife movement corridors.
- Expand the toolbox of incentives for rural landowners to protect wildlife habitat.

[American Farmland Trust](#) is a national organization founded in 1980 that works to protect farmland, promote environmentally sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. AFT has helped permanently protect over seven million acres of farmland, helped tens of thousands of small and mid-sized farmers adopt better conservation practices, and helped thousands more stay in business. AFT plays a unique role at the intersection of agriculture and the environment and has built a reputation as a convener, a trusted broker, and a source of reliable information.

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BACKGROUND

The Biden Administration's Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad lays out the bold goal of "conserving at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030." This aligns with a global call for biodiversity protection and climate mitigation that is often referred to as "30x30."

American Farmland Trust views our nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters as essential allies in the effort to achieve the 30x30 goals for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation. The lands that they manage are critical for wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, food security, clean water, and rural prosperity. The U.S. needs bold, new approaches to enlist their help at the vast scale required to effectively protect biodiversity and stabilize the climate. We will need to both: 1) protect vulnerable working lands from being permanently converted to development; and 2) support landowners' voluntary efforts to implement conservation practices, particularly in biodiversity hotspots, key connectivity corridors, and areas with high carbon sequestration potential. To be successful, these approaches must be strategically targeted to the areas of most need and embrace USDA's legacy of voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led conservation. They must also recognize the needs of indigenous peoples, rural communities, historically underserved groups, and future generations, while drawing on the generational knowledge of long-time land stewards.

There can be both synergies and tensions between biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation on private lands. At the farm level, there are mostly synergies: 24 out of the 27 conservation practices recommended by USDA NRCS to improve wildlife habitat also improve soil health and sequester carbon. These practices can be prioritized through cost-share programs in areas where critical wildlife corridors must be maintained (AFT 2020a). However, the rapid deployment of renewable energy facilities needed to combat climate change could conflict with 30x30 efforts if this new development does not consider the need to protect high-quality agricultural land and preserve wildlife habitat connectivity. Solar power development poses a particular threat to high-quality farmland, which is typically flat, dry, open, and close to existing infrastructure – the very characteristics that make land highly suitable for solar development. These tensions could be addressed with planning grants to states and communities to identify lands suitable for renewable energy, and a strengthened Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) with required mitigation for the conversion of prime agricultural land.

Although the recommendations in this document focus on wildlife and biodiversity conservation, the proposed efforts would also help meet Biden Administration's climate goals. American Farmland Trust will outline recommendations specific to climate-smart agriculture in comments responding to the March 16, 2021 Federal Register "Notice of Request for Public Comment on the Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad." These goals will extend beyond the 30x30 initiative, since we believe that agriculture can and must implement climate-smart agricultural practices on far more than 30% of the acres in production.

The role of private lands in biodiversity conservation

Roughly 60 percent of the land in the United States is privately owned and many, if not most, wildlife species rely on these lands for habitat and foraging. Although the areas of greatest biodiversity and carbon sequestration are mostly composed of private lands – such as rangelands, grasslands, and private forests (Rosa and Malcom 2020) – only a fraction of privately held lands is protected. About seven million acres, or less than 1 percent of our agricultural land, is permanently protected. Between 2001 and 2017, 11 million acres of farmland and rangeland were converted to urban and highly developed land use or low-density residential land use (Freedgood et al. 2020). Another 6.5 million acres of forest were converted over that same timeframe. A significant portion of this conversion occurred in ecoregions or states of biodiversity significance (Martinuzzi et al. 2013; Jenkins et al. 2015; Rosa and Malcom 2020).

Development has a detrimental effect on biodiversity because it removes habitat, increases disturbances, reduces connectivity, and makes it harder for many species to thrive (Wilson and Peter 1988). In contrast, private working lands have the potential to provide habitat and shelter for wildlife while maintaining their productivity, if they are protected from development (AFT 2020a). Private working lands can serve as buffers between core wildlife habitat (natural lands) and developed areas (Blann 2006; Hamilton et al. 2013). They can also help connect natural areas by providing landscape linkages (Anderson et al. 2016). These connectivity corridors permit the daily and seasonal movements of animals within home ranges and facilitate dispersal and genetic interchange between populations. For example, in south Florida, cattle ranches that preserve patches of forestland have been critical for the conservation of the endangered Florida panther and the Florida black bear.

Intensively cropped areas can maintain thriving wildlife populations when perennial habitat is interspersed throughout the mosaic of the agricultural landscape, through the use of windbreaks, shelter belts, and filter strips that significantly increase wildlife movement (Kostyack et al. 2011, Garibaldi et al. 2020). Precision agriculture tools can now identify exactly which parts of a farm are not profitable for crop production and therefore are ideal for conversion to pasture, woodland, or pollinator habitat while saving farmers money (McConnell and Burger 2016). However, economic tradeoffs can make it difficult for farmers and ranchers to support wildlife conservation efforts on their own. By changing management practices or taking land out of production, they may lose money, particularly over the short-term, if yields decrease and/or crop damage from wildlife increases (AFT 2020a). Farmers and ranchers must be supported as they face these costs and risks for the benefit of society.

The 30x30 goal is the culmination of a decades-old global effort to stem the loss of biodiversity before it is too late. From the start, leading researchers and agencies have recognized that private lands play a critical role. Globally, the U.N. Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) has emphasized the importance of engaging sectors like agriculture to protect habitat, reduce landscape fragmentation, and mitigate impacts on protected areas and protected area networks (CBD 2018). The seminal scientific paper that first called for a 30x30 goal also reinforced the importance of private lands (Dinerstein et al. 2019). Here in the U.S., legislative proposals and executive orders in South Carolina, California, New York, and Colorado have all called for including working lands in state 30x30 strategies. On January 26, 2021, over 400 officials from 43 states signed onto a letter supporting the national 30x30 goal and calling for increased support for the voluntary conservation efforts of private landowners. Likewise, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs)¹ have also endorsed the need for a broad definition of protection that includes working/private lands and water, along with public protected areas and Indigenous lands and waters. These groups emphasize the importance of using a combination of permanent easements, medium-term easements, and short-term incentive programs. This is consistent with the broader philosophy of 30x30, which emphasizes making quick progress by using a wide range of approaches.

USDA tools for protecting and conserving wildlife habitat

Through its many conservation programs, USDA has developed a broad and flexible toolbox for land protection and conservation, working with states, communities, and NGOs to engage private landowners. This history of innovation positions USDA to play a lead role in achieving the 30x30 goal. Existing programs are already helping farmers implement individual wildlife-friendly conservation practices and systems (EQIP², CSP, HFRP); ensuring that working lands are protected from development (ACEP-ALE) and maintained in perennial cover (ALE Grasslands); and retiring sensitive lands either temporarily or permanently (CRP, CREP, ACEP-WRE, HFRP; Conservation Contract program). The vast majority of the activities supported by these programs have concurrent benefits for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

The wildlife conservation benefits of the land retirement programs are well documented (Allen and Vandever 2012). Conservation cost-share and land protection programs have also made a significant contribution. Permanent easements on farmland and rangeland are purposely focused on protecting the land resource over the long term by preventing the property from being broken up into smaller parcels and limiting development. Specific management practices are not and should not be required in easements, but rather incentivized through various arrangements. Landowners who have protected their land in perpetuity appear amenable to

¹ Including, but not limited to, Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, The Land Trust Alliance, The Center for American Progress, the Western Landowners Alliance, the Center for Western Priorities, and The World Wildlife Fund.

² EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentive Program; CSP, Conservation Stewardship Program; ACEP-ALE, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements; HFRP, Healthy Forests Reserve Program; CRP, Conservation Reserve Program; CREP, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program; ACEP-WRE, Wetland Reserve Easements.

such arrangements. For instance, among participants in the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP), the precursor to ACEP-ALE, 41 percent had applied practices to protect or improve wildlife habitat (AFT 2013).

USDA also has models for integrating across these programs to achieve species conservation at the landscape level. The NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife Program is an agency-led effort to target threatened species that heavily utilize working lands. It brings together easements and other conservation practices to ensure that habitat and corridors are maintained or restored. Likewise, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) provides a framework for comprehensive efforts led by NGOs and other local partners. This structure may be especially valuable since some rural Americans, who generally care deeply about conservation, may be reluctant to partner directly with the federal government or national NGOs (Bonnie et al. 2020). They prefer programs led at the state and local levels that foster collaboration with communities.

The role of states and local governments

State and local governments also make decisions that affect the 30x30 goal. Their role in directing development through land-use planning and zoning is critical, but too often ignored. They also fund land protection and conservation programs for both working lands and natural areas, including purchase of agricultural conservation easement programs. In addition, states can help preserve agricultural land and keep it viable through “agricultural district” programs, current use taxation, farm link programs, and leasing of state agricultural land to farmers and ranchers. AFT recently analyzed these six key state policy areas and found that every state can do more to protect farmland and ranchland and support producers (Freedgood et al. 2020). As the Biden Administration recognizes the importance of protecting and conserving land for biodiversity and other purposes, it would be remiss to ignore these important state and local roles. Indeed, we believe that the federal government can do more to support proactive state and local policies through financial incentives and technical assistance, especially since local governments and decision-making bodies are often under-resourced and sometimes staffed by volunteers.

We recommend that the Biden Administration take the following actions in support of the 30x30 initiative:

1. Commit to **protecting and conserving 30 percent of working farmland and ranchland by 2030** (including permanently protecting 5 percent of working lands with agricultural conservation easements).
2. **Take immediate action to accelerate working lands protection and biodiversity conservation** using USDA’s existing programs and authorities.
3. **Fight the loss of working lands to development** by proposing legislation to **dramatically expand ACEP-ALE and HFRP** and **strengthening the Farmland Protection Policy Act**.
4. **Launch a targeted effort to protect wildlife habitat on working lands** by proposing legislation to **provide major new funding for the RCPP** to establish an initiative

focused on protecting and conserving private working lands in biodiversity hotspots and wildlife movement corridors.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Accounting for both “protection” and “conservation” in the 30x30 effort

Much of the literature on 30x30 uses the terms “protection” and “conservation” interchangeably. We think it is important to distinguish between these terms and we recommend that the associated activities be treated differently in accounting for acres in the 30x30 goal.

We use “protection” to mean the use of an easement, contract, or other instrument to ensure that a parcel of land is not developed for a set amount of time. This could be for a term of 10-30 years or permanently (through an agricultural conservation easement). We believe that all “protected” land should be counted toward the 30x30 goal because protection preserves the land’s potential to support biodiversity and sequester carbon, whether it is currently in active production or is retired.

In contrast, we use “conservation” to mean the implementation of a management practice to address a resource concern on a parcel of land, such as enhancing wildlife habitat by installing riparian buffers. We believe that land treated with conservation practices in targeted wildlife habitat conservation areas should be counted toward the 30x30 goal. Since wildlife and carbon benefits are only meaningful if they are maintained over time, a new mechanism is needed to reward the continued use of practices after cost-share contracts end. Flexible, lost-cost conservation leases could achieve this goal while also rewarding early adopters.

Both protection and conservation should count toward the 30x30 goal, regardless of whether they are completed in concert with private organizations or local, state, or federal governments. All federally funded projects should be tracked as they are deployed and there should be a voluntary national system for tracking non-federal activities. The accounting system should avoid double-counting (e.g., if an acre is both protected and conserved).

1. Commit to protecting and conserving 30 percent of working farmland and ranchland by 2030.³

This commitment should come in two parts. First, the Biden Administration should commit to permanently protecting 5 percent of farmland and ranchland from development using voluntary conservation easements. With about 7 million acres already protected, another 40 million acres are needed to reach this goal. Permanently protecting farmland is a critical step to ensuring that there is abundant food production capacity to meet the needs of a rapidly growing global population. In addition, the habitat this land provides will never be lost to development. And since average emissions of greenhouse gases from urban areas are 58-70 times higher (per acre) than those from crop production, protecting 40 million acres will be equivalent to taking 109 million cars off the road each year (Arjomand and Haight 2017; AFT 2018).

³ AFT does not have a recommendation for a commitment to conserving private forest land, but we recognize that this is also a critically important element of the 30x30 strategy.

Second, the Biden Administration should commit to incentivizing private efforts to apply targeted conservation measures to these permanently protected acres and an additional 25 percent of farmland and rangeland. These conservation practices should focus on conserving biodiversity and implementing natural climate solutions. This effort, deployed through expanding existing cost-share programs, CRP, and RCPP, would conserve another 235 million acres of agricultural land.

All told, this commitment would protect and conserve 275 million acres of the United States—a sizable step toward achieving the 30x30 goal. This bold statement would catalyze new efforts at the federal, state, and local levels and make it clear that working lands are an integral part of the nation's land protection strategy. To ensure rapid progress, the commitment should include annual benchmarks, with one-eighth of the goal achieved each year from 2022 to 2029. The following recommendations will help the Biden Administration realize this commitment.

2. Take immediate action to accelerate working lands protection and biodiversity conservation using USDA's existing programs and authorities.

Through its many conservation programs, USDA has developed a broad and flexible toolbox for land protection and conservation, working with states, communities, and NGOs to engage private landowners. This history of innovation positions USDA to play a lead role in achieving the 30x30 goal.

Immediate actions:

- ***Provide federal leadership for national 30x30 efforts on working lands:***
 - Appoint a high-level coordinator for 30x30 efforts within USDA.
 - Offer support to State Agencies in the development and implementation of their own 30x30 plans.
 - Create a national geospatial database to account for federally funded protection and conservation efforts. This should contain information on the location, terms, and duration of easements, contracts, and other instruments. Non-federal entities should be able to voluntarily enter data on their own projects into this system, to ensure that they are accounted for.
 - This database should quantify the acreage of existing USDA efforts that contribute to the 30x30 goal, including:
 - All ACEP easements and corresponding easements from predecessor programs (e.g., FRPP and WRP).
 - All easements and contracts implemented under landscape-scale wildlife conservation initiatives that are still in effect.
 - All CRP and CREP lands.
- ***Expand targeted biodiversity conservation efforts:***
 - Use data on wildlife habitat and connectivity to identify the highest priority private lands for biodiversity conservation through programs such as CSP, EQIP, WRE, CRP, CREP, and HFRP. Use this data to target existing conservation programs by incorporating it into the NRCS Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART).
 - Expand on the successful Working Lands for Wildlife program.

- Expand use of FSA's Conservation Contract Program, which provides forgiveness on FSA loans in exchange for removing sensitive lands from production for 50, 30, or 10 years.
- *Bolster the conservation workforce to support 30x30:*
 - Increase NRCS hiring to make up for staffing shortfalls.
 - Increase the use of partnerships with third party organizations to expand the on-the-ground technical support capacity for participating farmers, ranchers, and foresters.
 - Train and strategically deploy the next generation of conservation workers provided by the Civilian Climate Corps.
- *Streamline the administration of ACEP-ALE to enable dollars to be put on the ground more quickly and efficiently:*
 - Require state NRCS offices to offer continual sign-up periods for ACEP-ALE.
 - Expand use of Buy-Protect-Sell transactions.
 - Pursue program efficiencies to speed the time from application to close by allowing:
 - AGI determinations to be made by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), rather than requiring certification directly by the IRS.⁴
 - Applications to proceed through the process while AGI determinations are pending.
 - Allow ACEP to be administered using a hub-type system that would enable state, regional and national entities to provide technical assistance in the administration of ACEP.

3. Fight the loss of working lands to development.

Farmland, rangeland, and forestland are critical for wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, clean water, food security, and rural prosperity—yet they are being lost at unsustainable rates. The main purpose of ACEP-ALE is to keep high-quality agricultural land from being permanently converted to development. When grasslands and rangelands are preserved on working ranches, they provide excellent wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration while still allowing for active livestock production. Maintaining high-yielding cropland in production lessens pressure to grow crops on land that can provide more wildlife habitat, such as rangeland and pastureland. Protecting agricultural land helps control sprawl, which reduces landscape fragmentation, vehicle miles traveled, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Efforts to protect farmland and rangeland face a new challenge in the form of solar energy installations, which are essential to the fight against climate change, but are often sited without considering their impact on agricultural land. The best agricultural land near cities is often most at risk, since it is usually flat, dry, and open, and therefore straightforward to develop. As the Biden Administration drives forward a massive—and necessary—expansion of renewable energy, smart solar siting practices (AFT 2020b) can help minimize the loss of high-quality farmland, avoid land-use conflicts, and facilitate rapid deployment of renewable energy.

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program protects and restores wildlife habitat in private forests through 10-year restoration agreements, 30-year contracts for Tribes, and 30-year or permanent easements for

⁴ AFT ultimately recommends that ACEP not be subject to AGI limitation to allow for protection of farmland and rangeland based on its productive and environmental benefits, rather than based on the situation of a landowner at a given moment in time.

specific conservation actions on forestlands. Together, these protected lands can provide a buffer between developed areas and core wildlife habitat. ACEP-ALE and HFRP are excellent programs, but their funding is woefully inadequate and must be greatly expanded. We also must use complementary tools that increase flexibility and enable rapid protection.

Legislative proposals:

- *Increase investment in ACEP-ALE and HFRP and streamline administration:*
 - Protect another 40 million acres of working farmland and rangeland through ACEP-ALE by 2030. We estimate that this will cost \$8 billion per year in 2022-2029, for a total of \$64 billion.
 - AFT has not established a goal for new activities through HFRP since our organizational focus is on farmland and rangeland, but a commensurate increase in funding is needed.
 - Prioritize ACEP-ALE and HFRP projects that directly benefit socially disadvantaged producers and communities.
 - Streamline the administration of ACEP by eliminating AGI eligibility requirements, adjusting valuation rules, and allowing coverage of transaction costs.
 - Give producers and landowners on eased land priority access to voluntary conservation funding since carbon sequestration and habitat improvements on their land are less likely to be overturned by development.
 - Increase funding for the Forest Service's Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (Community Forest Program) to help communities acquire and protect private forest lands that are threatened by conversion.
 - Increase Conservation Technical Assistance funding to support this work.
- *Reduce conversion of agricultural land and stabilize the land base:*
 - Strengthen the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) to reduce conversion of agricultural land from federally funded infrastructure projects, especially as federal investment in infrastructure ramps up.⁵
 - Apply the strengthened FPPA to new federally funded renewable energy projects to ensure that solar and wind energy installations minimize impacts on the nation's most productive farmland and other resources.
 - Institute a mitigation requirement for conversion of our highest quality agricultural lands, similar to wetland mitigation requirements.
 - Provide federal grants to enable states and communities to plan for agriculture in the following ways: developing farmland protection plans; addressing land access needs for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers; land use planning to retain agricultural land and manage growth; planning to balance the demands of agriculture and renewable energy development; and food system and economic development planning to provide new economic opportunities for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities.

⁵ Additional ideas on how the Administration can strengthen FPPA using existing authorities can be found here: <https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AFT-Strengthening-the-Farmland-Protection-Policy-Act.pdf>.

- Create a “Debt for Working Lands” program that provides FSA debt forgiveness in exchange for 10–20-year non-development contracts (modeled off of the Conservation Contract program).⁶
- Create a Farm Viability program that invests in agricultural businesses in exchange for 5–15-year non-development contracts (modeled on various successful state programs), with priority for socially disadvantaged populations.
- Raise the cap and allow for sale of easements for 2032A Special Use Valuation, which provides an estate tax exemption, provided that the land remains in agriculture for 10 years.
- Provide a capital gains exclusion on sale of land to a qualified farmer, to incentivize keeping land in agriculture as it passes to the next generation. Similar to 2032A, the exclusion would be conditioned upon the land remaining in agriculture for at least the next 10 years.
- Provide incentives to states to amend current use taxation programs to include penalties for withdrawal are reinvested in farmland protection programs.
- Expand eligible uses of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Forest Legacy program to enable third party, non-governmental entities to purchase and hold conservation easements funded under these programs.

4. Launch a targeted effort to protect wildlife habitat on working lands.

In addition to ramping up working land protection and conservation across the board, special attention is needed in biodiversity hotspots and wildlife movement corridors. Conservation science can identify where these critical wildlife areas intersect with working farms, ranches, and forests. Urban growth modeling can further identify where these areas are most at risk of conversion to development. AFT is developing both of these data resources through our *Farms Under Threat* initiative, a partnership with NRCS. Once the highest priority areas are identified, implementation should be locally led to maximize buy-in and leverage local knowledge. The most efficient approach to protecting and conserving this land for wildlife will utilize a flexible combination of different approaches to address specific concerns, including the following: development pressure, landscape fragmentation, lack of suitable cover, lack of food resources, disturbance from agricultural operations, and pesticide exposure. A combination of easements and conservation practices will be needed. When endangered species are involved, it may be important to provide assurances against future regulations if landowners undertake actions that help species recover on their land (Hansen et al. 2018).

Legislative proposals:

- *Propose legislation to provide major new funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP):*
 - Establish an initiative focused on protecting and conserving private working lands in biodiversity hotspots and wildlife movement corridors. This initiative should support many locally led efforts across the country.

⁶ A Debt for Working Lands Program would be similar to the Conservation Contract Program, but instead of providing loan forgiveness for removing sensitive lands from production, the Debt for Working Lands Program would offer loan forgiveness for keeping valuable farmland in production. This program concept is described here: <https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AFT-Creating-a-Debt-for-Working-Lands-Initiative.pdf>.

- Provide substantial new funding and do not remove funding from existing conservation programs.
- Streamline the RCPP procedures to facilitate faster transactions.
- Prioritize projects that directly benefit socially disadvantaged producers and communities.
- Ensure meaningful partnerships with Tribes that acknowledge their traditional knowledge and sovereignty. This includes pursuing free, prior, and informed consent when projects have the potential to impact treaty rights and traditional access to lands for hunting, fishing, and cultural practices.
- Leverage the full suite of existing USDA conservation programs as needed to address the resource concerns limiting biodiversity in the initiative area. The available tools should include short-term easements (e.g., CRP and HFRP), permanent land retirement (e.g., CREP and WRE easements), permanent protection from development on working lands (e.g., ALE and HFRP easements), and incentives for implementing wildlife-friendly practices (e.g., EQIP and CSP contracts).
- Give producers and landowners on eased land priority access to voluntary conservation funding.
- Increase Conservation Technical Assistance funding to support this work.
- *Expand the toolbox of incentives for rural landowners to protect wildlife habitat:*
 - To ensure that wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration are maintained over time, develop a new option for low-cost, 10-year conservation leases. These leases would provide lower annual payments and could be applied either following completion of a cost-share contract (e.g., EQIP or CSP) or to maintain conservation benefits already present due to a landowner's voluntary management.
 - Enable broader use of short, 5–10-year conservation leases, similar to HFRP restoration agreements or the former WHIP program, which provided technical and financial assistance to landowners to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.
 - To build in durability for shorter term contracts, consider either the Right of First Refusal to renew, options to purchase at perpetuity, or the use of habitat leases to secure wildlife habitat for a longer term once it has been restored to a fully functional level (similar to the approach used by CSP and CRP-grasslands).
 - Critically examine and, if necessary, improve the current cooperative approaches to engage private landowners in providing habitat and protecting endangered species (e.g., Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances).

AFT's efforts in support of 30x30

- Since 1986, AFT has been using mapping to target and prioritize land protection efforts. Our latest effort, *Farms Under Threat*, is a partnership with Conservation Science Partners and USDA NRCS. The [Farms Under Threat database](#) depicts the agricultural and forested landscape at 10-meter resolution, including both land cover and land quality (productivity, versatility, and resiliency). It identifies exactly where industrial, urban, and residential development is converting and fragmenting the rural landscape.
- We are currently mapping important wildlife corridors on agricultural lands to help identify priority areas for farmland protection to conserve critical habitat, support the Working Lands for Wildlife initiative, and identify marginal lands in connectivity pathways. These resources will enable high-resolution targeting of protection and conservation. Maps should be available by December 2021.
- We are also mapping future threats from development and climate change to 2040 to help identify areas of high threat that need protection. These analyses should be available in 2022.
- AFT is building a Protected Agricultural Lands Database (PALD) to document farmland protection easements, many of which are not otherwise accounted for in databases of protected land. Our beta version of PALD includes over 6 million acres, over 12,000 parcels/features, and more than 625 easement holders (about 61-68 percent of State PACE acreage and 70-78 percent of land trust acreage).
- AFT launched the [National Agricultural Land Network \(NALN\)](#) in 2020 to grow the capacity and momentum needed to elevate agricultural land protection across the country. Membership includes 338 organizations and individuals (as of 2/22/2021). NALN members can help identify ways that conserving wildlife habitat can be incentivized within or as a complement to agricultural land protection projects.

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