



Farm Bill Resource Guide

What Is This Document?

This document is intended to provide a list of resources and basic information to reference as we head into the next Farm Bill. This is by no means a comprehensive list of resources, but rather a starting point. American Farmland Trust hopes that this document will be something you can reference as questions around various aspects of the Farm Bill arise.

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Farm Bill Overview Resources

General Overview

[The 2018 Farm Bill](#)

This 529-page document is the 2018 Farm Bill that was signed by Congress and enacted into law.

[The Farm Bill – A Citizen’s Guide](#) (Imhoff, D., & Badaracco, C. (2019). *A Citizen’s Farm Bill*. In *The Farm Bill* (pp. 199-200). Island Press, Washington, DC.)

This book gives a general overview of the Farm Bill, the history of food policy, an analysis of key policy issues found in the Farm Bill, ideas for reforming the Farm Bill, and an outlook at the future of food policy in the United States.

[USDA - Farmers' Guide to Farm Bill Programs](#)

This PDF gives a list of all the Farm Bill programs that were funded in the 2018 Farm Bill.

[USDA ERS - Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018: Highlights and Implications.](#)

This resource was put together by the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) and covers core research and data of the breadth of USDA programs that are touched by the Farm Bill.

[National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition - 2018 Farm Bill Overview](#)

This link has a short video that provides a holistic overview of how the Farm Bill impacts every aspect of our food system from seed to plate. NSAC also provides an overview of Farm Bill basics and what the Farm Bill covers. In addition, the site links to webinars NSAC put together for advocates who want to influence Farm Bill legislation.

[CRS - What is the Farm Bill?](#)

This 2019 Congressional Research Service (CRS) document gives an overview of the Farm Bill, including a title-by-title summary of the most recent Farm Bill. For history buffs, there is a great infographic with selected Farm Bill policy dates and related laws. It also provides an overview of how much the Farm Bill costs; how Farm Bill programs have evolved over time; and how allocations for the legislation changed over time.

Short Videos

[National Farmers Union - The Farm Bill](#)

This is a high-level 2-minute overview.

[Oklahoma State University - 2019 U.S. Farm Bill: What is the Farm Bill?](#)

This 5-minute overview of the Farm Bill and the legislative process was produced by Oklahoma State University. For their full Farm Bill video series, follow this [link](#).

Racial Equity in the Farm Bill

[Michigan State University - Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System](#)

This detailed 2021 document contains resources for learning more about the inequities within our food system.

[National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition - Racial Equity in The Farm Bill](#)

This overview from NSAC discusses racial equity in agriculture policy, and highlights some of the Farm Bill programs that have set asides and incentives for socially disadvantaged producers.

[CRS - Defining a Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher](#)

This recent document from the Congressional Research Service contains a brief history of programs and policies intended for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFR), as well as recent census data.

[CRS - The Pigford Cases: USDA Settlement of Discrimination Suits by Black Farmers](#)

Although not directly related to the 2023 Farm Bill, this CRS report provides background on the discrimination cases that brought racial equity and agriculture into the national spotlight.

[Heirs' Property Retention Coalition - What is Heirs' Property?](#)

The 2018 Farm Bill included a new program called the Heirs' Property Relending Program to help heirs' property owners resolve their titles. This resource provides background on this topic.

Data and Other Resources for the Farm Bill

[NRCS - Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act Data Viewer](#)

This website provides an overview of how much funding was allocated to state USDA National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices for Conservation Programs from 2005-2020.

[NASS - Land Values 2021 Survey](#)

This annual survey conducted by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) outlines the 2021 Farm Real Estate Value by State. It also provides information and data analysis about land value trends in the United States dating back to 2007.

[CRS - Agriculture and Related Agencies: FY2021 Appropriations](#)

This summary highlights USDA's FY2021 appropriations (except for the Forest Service). The FY2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260) includes funding for conservation programs and activities at USDA. Agricultural conservation programs include both mandatory and discretionary spending. Most conservation program funding is mandatory and is authorized by the Farm Bill. Other conservation programs—mostly technical assistance—operate with discretionary funding through annual appropriations.

[American Farmland Trust - Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective](#)

In the last 15 years, over 11 million acres of the nation's agricultural land has been paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize the future of farming. Despite the reduction in housing starts brought about by the 2008 Great Recession, our data show a renewed uptick in development that has resulted in 19 acres per day, or 7,000 acres per year of New England agricultural land being lost or threatened between 2001 and 2016. This report presents new information on the state of New England's farmland and a framework for action that provides potential pathways forward.

[American Farmland Trust - Farms Under Threat: The State of the States](#)

Farms Under Threat provides actionable information on the location and quality of agricultural land, the threats posed by development, and state-level policies that can help protect farmland and rangeland. This first-of-its-kind assessment was created by American Farmland Trust and Conservation Science Partners, including NRCS, to empower farmers, citizens, and policymakers to protect the agricultural land base. See below for state-specific Farms Under Threat summaries:

Connecticut

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

Maine

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

Massachusetts

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

New Hampshire

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

Rhode Island

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

Vermont

[Agricultural Land Policy Scorecard Highlight Summary](#)

[Agricultural Land Conversion Highlights Summary](#)

[New England Food Policy - Building a Sustainable Food System](#)

This report contributes to efforts across New England to promote a regionally focused, healthy, economically vibrant, resilient, just, and sustainable food system. The report is intended to help guide citizens, organizations, and policymakers in pursuing supportive public policies and removing policy barriers. It focuses on public policy issues in five areas: land, food production, food safety and processing, markets, and waste streams. The report focuses on state-level policy but also draws attention to federal policy challenges.

[CRS – Summary of the Commodity Credit Corporation \(CCC\)](#)

The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) has served as a mandatory funding mechanism for agricultural programs since 1933. The CCC Charter Act enables the CCC to broadly support the U.S. agriculture industry for authorized purposes and programs including commodity and income support, natural resources conservation, export promotion, international food aid, disaster assistance, agricultural research, and bioenergy development.

Farm Bill Conservation Programs Overview

What's the purpose of conservation programs?

The reality is that some farming practices can degrade natural resources and the environment. Sediment, nutrient, and pesticide runoff and leaching, for example, can impair water quality. Other practices can preserve and enhance our natural heritage and provide substantial benefits through careful management of agricultural land. Enhancing wildlife habitat on agricultural land—for example, by providing nesting material for migratory birds—can help increase wildlife populations. USDA's conservation programs help agricultural producers improve their

environmental performance with respect to soil health, water quality, air quality, wildlife habitat, and greenhouse gas emissions.

How do conservation programs work?

To improve environmental outcomes, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps producers implement voluntary conservation programs and covers some or all of the cost of various practices. NRCS offices are located in nearly every county in the nation and work closely with a wide range of farmers and ranchers. These programs are funded through the Farm Bill. Annually, the federal government spends about \$6 billion on conservation programs, but many of the programs are still unable to meet demand.

Conservation Program Summaries

The [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program \(ACEP\)](#) provides long term or permanent easements for preservation of wetlands and the protection of agricultural land (cropland, grazing land, etc.) from commercial or residential development. ACEP works through partnerships with American Indian tribes, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations like land trusts.

The [Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\)](#) generally provides 10-15 year contracts to remove land from agricultural production. Most of the land enrolled in CRP was in crop production prior to CRP enrollment and is now planted with grass or trees. A large majority of CRP contracts enrolled whole fields or whole farms. Increasingly, however, CRP contracts fund high-priority, partial-field practices such as filter strips and grass waterways, rather than whole-field or whole-farm enrollments. Up to 2 million acres of grassland can also be enrolled in CRP if the landowner agrees to keep the land in grazing use rather than tilling it for crop production or converting it to any other use.

The [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#) supports ongoing and new conservation efforts for producers who meet farm-wide requirements on working agricultural and forest lands. Farmers and ranchers must demonstrate a high level of stewardship to be eligible for the program and must agree to further improve environmental performance over the life of the CSP contract (up to 5 years). Participants receive financial assistance for adopting new conservation practices and for stewardship, based on previously adopted practices and the ongoing maintenance of those practices. The entire farm must be enrolled, and conservation requirements must be met throughout the farm.

Through [Conservation Technical Assistance \(CTA\)](#), USDA provides ongoing technical assistance to agricultural producers who seek to improve the environmental performance of their farms.

The [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) provides financial assistance to farmers who adopt or install conservation practices on land in agricultural production. Common practices include nutrient management, conservation tillage, cover crops, field-edge filter strips, and fences to exclude livestock from streams.

The [Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#) provides assistance to partners to solve problems on a regional or watershed scale. RCPP can fund a wide range of activities (like those funded by other USDA programs) including land retirement, easements, partial-field practices (e.g., filter strips and grass waterways), and conservation practices on working land (e.g., cover crops and nutrient management).

Other Conservation Program Resources

[American Farmland Trust - Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Informational Sheet](#)

This resource provides an overview of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program's two enrollment options: Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE). ACEP–ALE provides matching funds to eligible entities to buy conservation easements on farm and ranch land. This fact sheet provides information about ACEP–ALE implementation and final allocations to states by fiscal year.

[American Farmland Trust - Farmland Protection Policy Act](#)

Congress enacted the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) as a subtitle of the 1981 Farm Bill. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is charged with oversight of the FPPA. This fact sheet provides basic information about the Farmland Protection Policy Act.

Overview of Key Agencies and Other Groups

Federal Agencies

[U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#)

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management.

[USDA Organization Chart](#)

This chart shows every USDA office and agency.

[Natural Resources Conservation Service \(within USDA, federal with local offices\)](#)

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was established to improve the health of the nation's natural resources while sustaining and enhancing the productivity of American agriculture. NRCS achieves this by providing voluntary assistance through strong partnerships with private landowners, managers, and communities to protect, restore, and enhance the lands and waters upon which people and the environment depend.

[Farm Service Agency \(within USDA, federal with local offices\)](#)

The Farm Service Agency (FSA), originally established in 1933 to help rural Americans through the Great Depression, is today the service arm of the USDA. FSA administers farm programs,

farm loans, commodity operations, management, and state operations for USDA. FSA provides credit to farmers unable to receive private, commercial credit, with emphasis on providing loans to beginning, minority, and women producers. FSA administers ad hoc disaster programs and delivers commodities for use in humanitarian programs at home and abroad.

State Departments of Agriculture in New England

New England's State Departments of Agriculture are key partners to USDA-NRCS and FSA throughout the region.

- [Connecticut Department of Agriculture](#)
- [Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry](#)
- [Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources](#)
- [New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food](#)
- [Rhode Island Division of Agriculture – Department of Environmental Management](#)
- [Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets](#)

New England Cooperative Extension Service

The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is a nationwide, non-credit educational network that addresses public needs by providing non-formal higher education and learning activities to farmers, ranchers, communities, youth, and families throughout the nation. As part of the US land grant university system, CES works in partnership with USDA'S National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to translate research into practice.

- [University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension](#)
- [University of Maine Cooperative Extension](#)
- [University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension](#)
- [University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension](#)
- [University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension](#)
- [University of Vermont Cooperative Extension](#)

Conservation Districts (typically a county agency with local offices)

Across the United States, nearly 3,000 conservation districts—one in almost every county—work with landowners to conserve and promote healthy soils, water, forests, and wildlife. Conservation districts may go by different names — “soil and water conservation districts,” “resource conservation districts,” “natural resource districts,” and “land conservation committees” — but they all share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources—public and private, local, state, and federal—to develop locally-driven solutions to natural resources concerns. In addition, conservation districts: implement farm, ranch, and forestland conservation practices; conserve and restore wetlands; protect groundwater resources; assist communities and homeowners with planting trees and other land cover;

help developers control soil; and reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

Land Trusts

Land Trusts (typically local or regional, although national land trusts do exist) are charitable organizations that acquire land or conservation easements, or that steward land or easements, to achieve one or more conservation purposes. Find land trust information for your area by searching here: <https://www.farmlandinfo.org/directory>.

Acronyms

Here are some common acronyms you will hear when talking about agriculture and conservation:

Agencies and organizations

FSA.....	Farm Service Agency (federal)
NRCS.....	Natural Resources Conservation Service (federal)
DC.....	District Conservationist (NRCS field staff)
RCD.....	Resource Conservation District (county)
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture
EPA.....	United States Environmental Protection Agency
USFS.....	United States Forest Service
USFWS.....	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS.....	United States Geological Survey

Farm Bill Programs

ACEP.....	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (NRCS)
CREP.....	Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (FSA)
CRP.....	Conservation Reserve Program (FSA)
CSP.....	Conservation Stewardship Program (NRCS)
EQIP.....	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (NRCS)
FRPP.....	Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (Consolidated into ACEP)
GRP.....	Grassland Reserve Program (Consolidated into ACEP)
WHIP.....	Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (NRCS – “old” farm bill, now in EQIP)
WRP.....	Wetland Reserve Program (Consolidated into ACEP and now called “wetland reserve easements”)

Other common terms

CEAP.....	Conservation Effects Assessment Program (study to evaluate effectiveness of NRCS conservation practices)
CIG.....	Conservation Innovation Grant (from NRCS)

CTA..... Conservation Technical Assistance (free assistance for conservation planning – NRCS)
FY..... Fiscal Year
HEL..... Highly Erodible Land
RCPP..... Regional Conservation Partnership Program (from NRCS)
RUSLE2..... NRCS computer program which evaluates soil condition and erosion potential