

Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018

Summary of RCPP

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, more commonly known as the Farm Bill, provides enhanced funding and creates new opportunities for private landowners, conservation organizations, state and local governments to work together to achieve conservation outcomes on a landscape or watershed scale through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Funding

- Increases annual funding for RCPP to \$300 million and repeals the 7 percent donor program requirement.
- Creates new opportunity for funding up to 15 projects annually through Alternative Funding Arrangements or Grant Agreements to achieve conservation benefits on a regional or watershed scale.
- Directs the Secretary to allocate 50 percent of the funds based on a state or multistate competitive process to be administered by the Secretary at the local level.
- Directs the Secretary to allocate 50 percent of the funds to projects for Critical Conservation Areas.

Policies

The Farm Bill includes multiple provisions to make RCPP more flexible:

- Requires the Secretary to issue regulations to carry out this program.
- Directs the Secretary, to the maximum extent possible, to reach out to historically underserved producers — including beginning farmers and ranchers, veteran farmers and ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and limited-resource farmers and ranchers – to encourage them to participate in this program.
- Retains exemption from the Adjusted Gross Income limitation.
- Allows direct contracting through RCPP so that it is no longer necessary to go through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) or Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
- Requires the Secretary to submit a report to Congress summarizing progress on achieving conservation benefits and other related project outcomes.
- Similar to the 2014 Farm Bill, the Secretary can enter into partnership agreements of up to five years with an eligible partner to advance projects that achieve conservation benefits. These agreements may be renewed.
 - Clarifies that eligible partner contributions to a project may include direct funding, in-kind support or a combination of the two.
 - Outlines the duties of the Secretary, including:
 - Establishing a timeline to carry out these duties;
 - Identifying a program coordinator for each state who will be responsible for providing assistance for this program;
 - Establishing guidance to help eligible partners with the assessment requirements; and
 - Ensuring partnership agreement conservation benefits are achieved.

- Requires the Secretary to simplify the application process and give higher priority to projects that involve building new partnerships with local, state and private entities and include a diversity of stakeholders in the project; delivering a high percentage of applied conservation; and implementing the project consistent with existing watershed, habitat or other restoration plans.
 - Allows partners to count activities starting at the announcement of the project rather than beginning that count after the partnership agreement is signed.
- Authorizes the Secretary to enter into agreements directly with eligible producers.
 - Allows eligible partners to submit applications on behalf of producers and to bundle applications to achieve greater conservation benefits and makes bundled applications a priority.
- Enhances Opportunities for Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)
 - Defines a CCA as a geographical area that contains a critical conservation condition that can be addressed through the program.
 - Defines Priority Resource Concerns as natural resource concerns within a CCA that can be addressed through:
 - Water quality improvement actions such as reducing erosion, promoting sediment control and addressing nutrient-management activities impacting large bodies of water of regional, national or international significance;
 - Water quantity improvement actions related to drought; groundwater, surface water, aquifer or other water resources; or water retention and flood prevention;
 - Wildlife habitat restoration; and
 - Other natural resource improvements as determined by the Secretary.
 - Requires the Secretary to identify one or more priority resource concerns that apply to each CCA and outline conservation goals and outcomes to demonstrate progress addressing the priority resource concern.
 - Adds the inclusion of one or more Priority Resource Concerns to the list of geographical area priorities for funding under this program.
- Creates New RCPP Grant Opportunity (funds 15 projects per year)
 - Funding goes directly to the eligible partner, who works with producers to provide technical and administrative assistance to achieve conservation benefits on a regional or watershed scale on projects such as:
 - Agricultural or non-industrial private forest production that benefits multiple producers and addresses natural resource concerns such as drought, wildfire or water quality improvement on the land covered by the project;
 - Development and implementation of watershed, habitat or other area-restoration plans;
 - Use innovative approaches to leverage federal funds in conservation with private financial mechanisms, in conjunction with agricultural production or forest resource management such as performance-based payments to producers or support for an environmental market.