

PARTNERING FOR GEORGIA'S NATURAL RESOURCES: THE 1996 FARM BILL

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Abstract. Conservation provisions of the 1996 Farm Bill contain numerous changes that range from simplifying existing conservation programs, improving their flexibility and efficiency, to increasing the number of agencies required to implement the measures that help protect the natural resources of Georgia. New programs to address high priority environmental protection goals have been created from this legislation. Additionally, Federal agencies, namely the Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS], will work cooperatively with other federal, state and local agencies, as well as an active State Technical Committee, to identify and prioritize resource concerns in Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

Most conservation programs within the US Department of Agriculture have traditionally been administered by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, now known as the Farm Services Agency [FSA]. The Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS], along with Soil and Water Conservation Districts [SWCD], provided technical assistance to FSA by working with landowners on the implementation of conservation measures. These traditional partnerships have been good for Georgia's natural resources.

Conservation planning assistance through this partnership to date has covered 15,125,485 acres, or 45 percent of the 33.5 million acres of privately owned land in Georgia, with conservation plans. Additionally, there are over 184,000 acres of land receiving flood prevention benefits from the installation of 351 floodwater retarding structures [USDA-NRCS]. Furthermore, there have been numerous animal waste management systems installed on dairy, poultry, swine, and other livestock operations greatly reducing the amount of nutrients delivered to our State's water bodies. Even with these and other accomplishments, much of the focus in the past has been placed on programs.

The 1996 Farm Bill [Bill] has diversified the delivery of conservation programs in Georgia, and across the country. Many conservation programs for which FSA has traditionally held program responsibility are now the responsibility of NRCS. Those programs for which NRCS now has program leadership include the existing Forestry Incentives Program [FIP] and Wetland Reserve Program [WRP]; along with newly created programs that include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP], which encompasses the old Agricultural

Conservation Program and Water Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitats Incentives Program [WHIP], and the Farmland Protection Program. FSA maintains program leadership for the Conservation Reserve Program [CRP], and the Agricultural Market Transition Program. Collectively all of these programs will continue to have a significant and positive impact on Georgia's natural resources.

One of the exciting new aspects of the '96 Bill is a requirement, for agencies within the US Department of Agriculture to develop new relationships with non traditional partners. For example, WHIP will create new opportunities for NRCS, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources - Wildlife Resources Division, Partners in Flight, and other groups to work cooperatively in identifying areas where wildlife resource concerns exist, and then develop solutions to address those resource concerns. These new partnerships will serve to further enhance resource protection and restoration.

CONSERVATION DELIVERY

Under the 1996 Bill, States will compete with one another to obtain funding for major conservation programs like EQIP. To provide a fair and consistent means by which States can compete, Congressional Sub-Committees have provided guidelines for the submission of proposals. Four broad parameters serve as the basis for these guidelines: 1) Resource Concerns [RC's] must be clearly identified; 2) Geographic Priority Areas [PA's] must be identified and ranked; 3) An interagency format must be used; and 4) The process must begin and end at the local level.

In response to these guidelines NRCS in Georgia has enhanced an established State Technical Committee [STC]. The STC consists of professional resource managers who represent a variety of disciplines in the soil, water, plant, and wildlife sciences. The function of the STC is to make recommendations, and provide guidance, on issues related to the administration of many conservation programs for which NRCS has responsibility. The STC functions are advisory with no implementation or enforcement authority.

A major role of the STC will be to review proposals from Local Work Groups [LWG's]. LWG's, also consisting of resource managers from a variety of disciplines in the soil, water, plant, and wildlife sciences, are responsible for initiating the locally led conservation program delivery process. Through this process local people assess their natural resource conditions and

needs, set goals to solve those needs, identify programs and other resources that can address those needs, develop proposals and recommendations, implement solutions, and measure their success. The conservation delivery process will begin and end at the local level, and states will compete with one another for conservation funding under the following guidelines:

- Soil and Water Conservation District [SWCD] convenes local work group which SWCD chairs. Members include County Committee, FSA, and other partners. Their task is to conduct Conservation Needs Assessment, establish local priorities, and make program policy recommendations based on resource information..
- NRCS State Conservationist, with the advice of State Technical Committee, completes Conservation Needs Assessment, sets state priorities, and makes program policy recommendations.
- NRCS Regional Office integrates local and state priorities and recommendations into Regional Strategic Plans. Information feeds into National Strategic Plan.
- Funds allocated to Regions/States based on resource needs described in National Strategic Plan, with FSA concurrence.
- NRCS determines allocations for the local level with State Technical Committee advise. FSA State Committee concurs with the determination and issues allocations.
- SWCD and NRCS deliver technical assistance and approve conservation plans. FSA County Committee approves contracts and makes payments to participants based on completion of practices identified in the contract.
- Continuous needs assessment and program improvements based on evaluation of achievements.

Through this, process resource concerns will be funded, with an emphasis placed on the priority areas within Georgia where those resource concerns are highest. This is an annual process; thus, resource concerns and/or priority areas must compete for funding each year, even if funding was received in previous years.

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS [TOOLS]

In the conservation program delivery process, the 1996 Bill encourages agencies to place an emphasis on resource concerns rather than programs. Programs should not drive natural resource management, resource concerns should drive natural resource management. Programs within this context should be considered as tools with which to address resource concerns. With this in mind, the following is a brief summary of the tools available through the 1996 Bill as well as some of the major changes to existing tools:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP]

EQIP is a new program which combines the functions of the Agricultural Conservation Program, Water Quality Incentives program, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program. At least 50 percent of the

annually funded \$200 million nationally is to be allocated on livestock-related practices. The Bill requires that conservation priority areas be established, places a focus on meeting water quality objectives, allows for up to 75 percent cost-sharing, and requires a contract to be carried out in accordance with a conservation plan.

Conservation Reserve Program [CRP]

The CRP protects highly erodible land and environmentally sensitive lands with grass, trees, and other long-term cover. The 1996 Bill allows new enrollments to replace expired or terminated contracts and gives the Secretary of Agriculture authority to offer future early outs of CRP acres.

Wetland Reserve Program [WRP]

The WRP is a voluntary program designed to restore and protect wetlands. This program will have an enrollment cap of 975,000 acres nationwide. Program changes provide more flexibility and help landowners work toward a goal of no net loss of wetlands. The Bill requires that one-third of total program acres be enrolled in permanent easements, one-third in 30 year easements, and one-third in restoration only agreements. Individuals may choose the category for their eligible land. The Bill also stipulates the following cost share rates: 75 to 100 percent cost-sharing for permanent easements, 50 to 75 percent for 30-year easements, and 50 to 75 percent for restoration cost-share agreements.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program [WHIP]

This new provision will help landowners improve wildlife habitats on private lands. The program will have \$50 million nationally for wildlife habitat improvement. The Bill provides cost sharing to landowners for developing habitats for upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, endangered species, fisheries, and other wildlife; and for consultation with the State Technical Committee on priorities, cost-share measures, and habitat development projects.

Farmland Protection Program [FPP]

The FPP is a new program under which the Secretary of Agriculture will join with state or local governments to purchase conservation easements. Based on voluntary participation, it only applies to land which farmers want to preserve in agriculture. This Bill calls for the protection of between 170,000 and 340,000 acres of farmland, authorizes up to \$35 million in federal funding, and requires land to be subject to a pending offer from a state or local farmland conservation program in or order to participate.

The Bill also reauthorized the Forestry Incentives Program [FIP] and the Resource Conservation and Development [RC&D] Program. Collectively, all of the programs in the 1996 Bill will bring millions of dollars to Georgia during the 1997 fiscal year. The programs along with the NRCS's PL-566 program, the Environmental Protection Agency's 319 program, and other federal, state, and local programs present significant opportunities for protecting and improving Georgia's water and related resources.

ANTICIPATED RESULTS

The conservation program delivery process initiated by the 1996 Bill will cause a number of positive events to occur at the local, state, regional, and national levels. The first and foremost is that resource focus will be given to resource concerns rather than to resource programs. By focusing on resource concerns, multiple agencies can take advantage of their common goals of trying to protect and improve the natural resource of this State. Applying common goals to address resources concerns in many of Georgia's geographic settings, which can have a variety of resources concerns, will encourage multiple agencies to find common solutions to resource impairments. Therefore, capital, funding, and technical expertise can be leveraged to more efficiently manage our natural resources.

Other benefits arising from this new process will be the locally led conservation program delivery process, which should lead to a higher rate of landowner participation. Under a voluntary approach, the tools (programs) applied can only be effective to the extent that they are utilized. The locally led conservation process will result in a sense of ownership at the local level arising from "local resource concerns, needs, and goals." Landowners will better understand the impact of their actions on their communities, and will be better equipped to comply with environmental laws, including nonpoint source pollution requirements [i.e. Total Maximum Daily Loads {TMDL's}].

By requiring priority areas to be identified and ranked, conservation assistance will also maximize the environmental benefit per dollar expended. This should greatly enhance ongoing state and local efforts through the aforementioned leveraging concept. In short, it is now easier to apply a coordinated effort, among all resource management entities, to improve and protect our natural resources.

SUMMARY

The programs mentioned above utilize dollars from the people of the United States, and Georgia, to help landowners pay for the implementation of conservation measures. Under this rationale, not only does the landowner pay to implement conservation measures, but the people of the United States, and Georgia, also pay for the implementation of conservation measures. This is appropriate since the benefits derived from conservation measures being implemented are enjoyed onsite by the landowner, and off-site by the general public and citizens of this State.

REFERENCES

- United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 1996. Athens, Georgia.
- United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 1996, Washington, D.C.