BioOne COMPLETE

New Farm Bill Could Have Devastating Effects on Water Quality

Author: Sponberg, Adrienne Froelich

Source: BioScience, 62(9) : 797

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2012.62.9.4

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/BioScience on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

New Farm Bill Could Have Devastating Effects on Water Quality

ADRIENNE FROELICH SPONBERG

Agricultural nonpoint-source pollution has repeatedly been cited as a leading cause of degraded water quality in water bodies ranging from tributaries to coastal estuaries. Approximately 40 percent of US agricultural land—roughly 15 percent of all the land in the United States—is enrolled in farm bill conservation programs aimed at improving soil retention and reducing nutrient pollution. But as Congress looks for ways to reduce discretionary funding, these conservation programs are on the chopping block in the 2012 reauthorization of the bill. The impact on water quality could be devastating.

The conservation title of the farm bill cost $844 million in fiscal year (FY) 2012. Although there are many conservation programs within the bill, one of the most widely known is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The goal of the CRP, which has existed in various forms since the Agriculture Act of 1954, is to counteract erosion by providing rental payments and cost-share assistance to landowners who take sensitive land out of production. Senator Debbie Stabenow (D–MI), chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, credits CRP for preventing in 2012 a repeat of the 1930s Dust Bowl that devastated the American Southwest: "The soil, while it was dry, stayed on the ground because [of] the Conservation Reserve Program."

The impact of the CRP in reducing nonpoint-source pollution has been substantial. The Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute estimates that in FY 2010, the CRP reduced the nitrogen leaving fields by 95 percent (607 million pounds), and phosphorus by 86 percent (122 million pounds). The US Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency estimates that CRP lands retained 220 million tons of sediment in that same period. Despite its successes, the CRP will continue downsizing as legislators continue to lower the cap on acres that can be enrolled. The CRP lost 7 million acres in the 2008 farm bill, and another 7 million acres went on the chopping block in the 2012 farm bill, bringing the cap to 25 million acres by 2017.

Senator Pat Roberts (R–KS), ranking member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, made it clear that trimming the budget was a key priority of the committee: "The Senate Agriculture Committee voluntarily wrote and reported a bill that provides $23.6 billion in deficit reduction.… We are the first authorizing committee to produce that kind of mandatory budget savings, and it was voluntary."

Conservation groups are concerned that the conservation programs, which account for only 7 percent of the farm bill's estimated $1 trillion price tag over the next 10 years, took a disproportionate share of the reductions. As the Senate began deliberation on the bill, 523 individuals and organizations requested in a letter that senators hold the line on conservation title funding. The groups argued that the funding levels the committee approved in April demonstrate that conservation "is already contributing more than its fair share to budget deficit reduction."

Even as the Senate debates the future of conservation programs, the programs are already taking a hit through the FY 2013 appropriations process. At a March subcommittee hearing, Representative Jack Kingston (R–GA), chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, took aim at the CRP: "CRP is something like 10 percent of the crop acreage, but it is 50 percent of the expenditure.… People are getting a monthly check and they decided they like the program. I think we need to look at it." Ranking member Sam Farr (D–CA) offered his own twist on the usual disparagement of paying people not to farm: "We ought not be paying people for not farming on land they shouldn't be farming" in the first place.

The debate over acreage caps could be moot, however, as prices for corn rise, prompting farmers to opt out of their CRP contracts. In the past year alone, the program has lost 1.5 million acres. The current total of 28 million acres is the lowest amount of enrolled acreage since 1988. Given the importance of CRP lands to wildlife such as migratory birds, conservation groups are keeping close tabs on these land-use changes. "The rate at which native grassland, particularly in our nation's prairies, is being converted rivals any in recent history," said Ducks Unlimited's chief conservation officer Paul Schmidt. "The results could be disastrous for this continent's waterfowl and wildlife."

Adrienne Froelich Sponberg (sponberg@aslo.org) is director of public affairs for the Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography.

doi:10.1525/bio.2012.62.9.4

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/BioScience on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use