JOHNS HOPKINS
CENTER *for* A LIVABLE FUTURE

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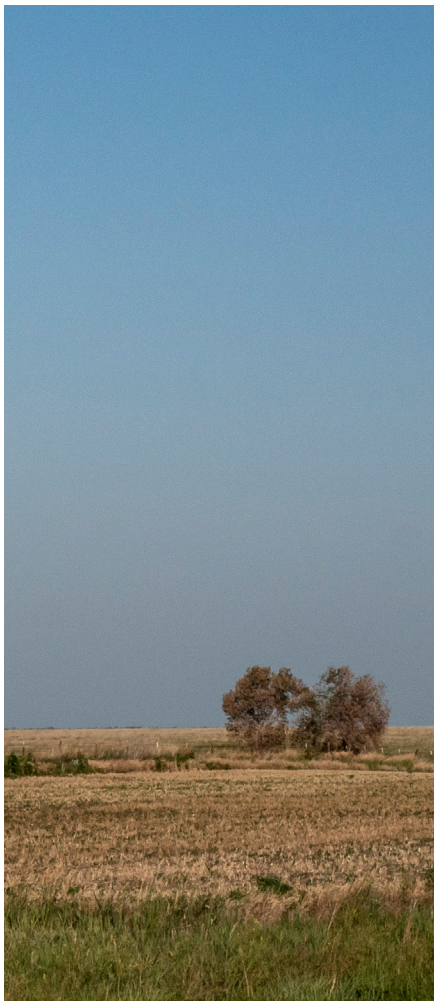
PROTECTING CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE PROGRAMS: A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY

WHAT IS CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE?

Several United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) farm support programs offer benefits to farmers on the condition that they meet the minimal standards of environmental protection on highly-erodible land and wetlands. These requirements, commonly known as "conservation compliance," ensure that taxpayer dollars are utilized to sustain the current food supply and protect the natural resources needed to provide for future generations.

Farmers who fail to follow through with conservation compliance provisions can lose program benefits. Conservation compliance helps safeguard the health of the environment and protect public health. Linking conservation compliance measures to programs such as crop insurance subsidies is a major incentive for U.S. farmers to promote soil and water quality, reduce soil erosion, protect fragile lands and conserve wetlands. The 2014 Farm Bill recognized the value of this incentive and reestablished a link between crop insurance subsidies and conservation compliance.



CONSERVATION PROGRAMS PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Water quality

Healthy soil and resilient wetlands serve as filters that can help keep harmful chemicals out of waterways and groundwater. Soil does this in many ways, including with organic matter, the heart of topsoil; it slows down erosion and minimizes runoff that can contain chemicals. In addition, healthy topsoil absorbs potential contaminants and binds pesticides, helping to keep them out of waterways and groundwater.

Nitrates are common pollutants found in fertilizers. Nitrate-contaminated drinking water has been associated with various cancers, adverse reproductive outcomes, diabetes, thyroid conditions and the potentially fatal "blue baby syndrome."

As our water filters disappear, more pollutants and contaminants make their way into our groundwater and waterways. Loss of soil through erosion and the loss of wetlands can have serious impacts on water quality.

Conservation compliance measures that protect soil and wetland ecosystems—such as "Sodsaver," which protects highly-erodible lands, and "Swampbuster," which protects wetlands—help mitigate agricultural impacts on water quality by reducing erosion and restoring natural filtration systems.

Healthy Soils

Healthy soil is the foundation of the food supply. As soil is depleted, its ability to support food production diminishes. Lower crop yields can contribute to higher food prices and decreased food security. Conservation compliance measures help protect and improve soil quality. Organic matter in healthy soil serves as a sponge-like reservoir of water and nutrients, providing plants with a steady supply of resources for growth. The capacity of healthy soil to retain water is particularly valuable during droughts. Organic matter also improves soil structure by helping to aerate roots, by improving drainage and absorbing rainfall and irrigation, and by reducing runoff and erosion, which is especially important during flooding.

Climate change

Climate change poses serious threats to food and water security, and contributes both directly and indirectly to infectious disease, heat stress, respiratory conditions and other health problems. While the science is still developing, it seems soil organic matter stores carbon, an element that when released from soil into the air in the form of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas (GHG), would otherwise contribute to climate change. But high prices for crops give farmers an incentive to convert native sod and wetlands—both rich in organic matter—into cropland. The conversion of sod and wetlands to cropland releases stored carbon, further contributing to climate change. In fact, while wetlands do emit some methane (another GHG), they may sequester more GHGs than they emit, acting as potential carbon sinks. Conservation compliance programs incentivize famers to keep native land intact, which may limit the emission of GHGs and reduces vulnerability to severe weather events associated with climate change.

WE NEED A SAFETY NET FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Action: Sustain and Improve Conservation Compliance

The reestablished link between conservation compliance and crop insurance was a hard-fought, important step supported by many conservation groups and farm organizations. The connection, however, must be strengthened to more effectively and efficiently serve farmers and taxpayers, and protect the environment and public health. In addition to improving enforcement and transparency, described below, crop insurance premium subsidies should be linked to specific stewardship practices that protect our natural resources and health, and barriers to sustainable practices should be eliminated (for more information, see the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's Agenda for the 2018 Farm Bill, "Aligning with Conservation", p. 81).

Action: Improve Enforcement

Enforcement of conservation compliance programs is lacking. USDA reports indicate that compliance audits and reviews are not uniformly conducted across states, and that there is no enforcement of compliance in a majority of states, even in those with a large number of land tracts subject to compliance. Increasing and dedicating funding for compliance enforcement, including uniform reviews in each state, would enable the USDA to ensure effective implementation of conservation compliance.

Action: Increase Transparency

A July 2017 USDA Economic Research Service report on conservation compliance indicated deficits in the collection and transparency of conservation compliance data. This data is critical for understanding how conservation compliance is working and what improvements may be needed. Dedicated, mandatory funding for the collection, evaluation, and reporting of this data is essential to improve transparency and ensure that taxpayer dollars are being used efficiently and effectively.

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