



Need for a USDA/FWS/NOAA Initiative to Expand Use of Farm Bill Programs to Further the Conservation of Endangered and Other Declining Species

Markedly expanding the use of Farm Bill programs to further the conservation of endangered and other declining species would be one of the most effective measures that the new Administration could take to reverse the decline of imperiled species and to demonstrate both the effectiveness of Farm Bill conservation programs and the value of inter-agency cooperation. How Farm Bill conservation programs are administered in the next few years will significantly influence whether some currently listed species recover, and whether other currently unlisted species can avoid the need to be listed.

To a limited degree, Farm Bill conservation programs are already being utilized to help conserve several imperiled species. In the East, early successional wetland habitats for the endangered bog turtle are being restored with Wetlands Reserve Program help. In Texas, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program is being utilized to enhance habitat for the endangered black-capped vireo. In California, Farm Bill programs are helping restore breeding ponds for two threatened amphibians. In the southern plains, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands have increased the amount of grassland habitat for the lesser prairie chicken, helping keep it off the endangered species list.

These examples, which have largely been opportunistic, represent a small fraction of what could be identified by a systematic inter-agency effort to find opportunities where the goals of Farm Bill conservation programs and the Endangered Species Program coincide. Such an effort could also focus on making sure that the foreseeable contraction of the CRP program does not cause currently unlisted species to need to be listed. For example, much of the CRP land within the lesser prairie chicken's range is subject to contracts that expire in the next two years. Unless key CRP parcels remain in grass cover, the expected contraction of the program in this region will increase the likelihood of an ESA listing for the bird. That would have major adverse ramifications, including for the considerable amount of wind energy development that is anticipated for that area.

To realize the full potential that Farm Bill programs offer, FWS, NOAA, and USDA should designate a team to scope out opportunities to further species recovery with Farm Bill programs, and make achieving those opportunities a clear expectation of each agency. USDA's incentive to cooperate in such an effort would be enhanced by finding ways to reduce ESA procedural obstacles to implementing Farm Bill programs generally (e.g. by programmatic consultations, or programmatic Safe Harbor Agreements). Landowners should support this effort if they understand its goal is preclude the need to list some species while helping to reduce conflicts with already listed species. The ESA's regulatory prohibitions have done little to encourage stewardship needed to recover rare species. By combining economic incentives with regulatory assurances, Farm Bill programs offer the best opportunity of doing so.

For further information, contact Michael Bean at Environmental Defense Fund.