



Congress Gives Wildlife a Boost

Conservation leaders say the final 2014 Farm Bill does much for Montana's pheasants, ducks, deer, songbirds, and other grassland wildlife. **By Todd Wilkinson**

Few pieces of federal legislation are more important and farther reaching for hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers than the Farm Bill. The 2014 version, passed by Congress and signed into law this past February, is no exception. Though conservation experts say the bill, which authorizes \$956 billion in spending over the next decade, came up short in some respects, it still contains many important wildlife-friendly provisions that prevent topsoil erosion and conserve clean water, wetlands, native grasslands, forests, and other wildlife habitat. "It is definitely a bill to cheer about," says Steve Kline, director of government relations with the Washington, D.C.-based Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, which has strong involvement in Montana.

Catherine Wightman, FWP's Habitat Program and Farm Bill coordinator, says many wildlife conservation leaders worked to ensure that the Farm Bill provided economic support for farmers and ranchers while also supporting stewardship of important wildlife habitat. "The final bill did a good job of striking that balance," she says. "We didn't get everything we wanted, but on the other hand there were a few bonuses in there we hadn't counted on."

CROP INSURANCE AND SOD SAVER

For years, conservation leaders have pushed to create provisions in the Farm Bill that

reward landowners for being good land stewards. To that end, a new regulation requires that landowners who wish to qualify for federal crop insurance meet conservation objectives. The notion of tethering conservation to crop insurance isn't new, but it hasn't been part of Farm Bill mandates since 1996.

"Depending on how you look at it, it's either a reward for sound stewardship or a financial disincentive to those who might be making hasty decisions that could nega-



CORN VS. CRITTERS Conservation leaders say the federal mandate for ethanol in gasoline has been a disaster for grassland wildlife. Corn prices rose so high that to many landowners it made economic sense to plow up CRP grasslands and plant them to crops.



tively impact wildlife habitat," says Dan Bailey, Montana regional director of Pheasants Forever. "If you are going to drain a wetland, or plow up virgin sod, or farm on highly erodible land, then the decision comes with greater risk. Now you'll no longer be eligible for federal crop insurance, which could be an important factor for many farmers."

A parallel component of the new Farm Bill, known as Sod Saver, provides similar economic disincentives to landowners considering busting native prairie and sagebrush into new cropland or pasture. Montana is one of six states—including the Dakotas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Iowa—in the Sod Saver program. "We're hopeful these programs can help slow or reverse wildlife habitat loss," Bailey says.

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

Since 1986, the biggest Farm Bill program affecting wildlife has been the U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The program pays farmers to take highly erodible cropland out of production and plant it to native grasses. Most

famously, CRP has been a boon to pheasants. According to USDA statistics, a 4 percent increase in CRP grassland acres is associated with a 22 percent increase in pheasant counts.

Yet the popular program's vast grassland acreage also benefits sharptails, Hungarian partridge, sage-grouse, waterfowl, shorebirds, and prairie songbirds. Big game, too. "How many times have you been on the prairie and had a big whitetail buck jump up out of the grass in front of you or spooked a band of pronghorn?" says Bailey.

Unfortunately, recent high grain prices—fueled largely by a federal mandate on ethanol production—have convinced many landowners to plow up their CRP grasslands and plant them to corn or wheat. Across Montana, CRP acreage has declined by 42 percent with a loss of 1.48 million acres. In the pheasant- and whitetail-rich region along the Hi-Line, CRP acres have dropped

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more than 55 percent since 2006, a loss of more than 800,000 acres.

The previous Farm Bill, passed in 2008, set a cap of 32 million acres enrolled in CRP, a target unmet because market forces made putting land into commodity crops too attractive. The 2014 Farm Bill lowers the CRP cap to 24 million acres, actually drawing down the amount from its current level of around 27 million acres, which itself represents a 25-year low. The only bright spot, says Kline, is that now the USDA is required to continually examine its CRP payments to make them more competitive with crop revenue. "CRP payments can never compete one on one with what a farmer will get renting his land for corn production, but at least it can be more competitive," he says. What's more, says Kline, conservation groups meet regularly with USDA officials, urging them to reject low-wildlife-value acreage and accept only higher-quality wildlife habitat as CRP acreage.

RCPP

A brand new component of the 2014 Farm Bill that will attract large amounts of new

FRIENDLY TO WILDLIFE One major conservation measure of the 2014 Farm Bill is a requirement that landowners who wish to qualify for federal crop insurance meet certain conservation objectives—for example, not tilling virgin prairie or draining marshes or wet meadows, such as those on this western Montana ranch.

private and federal funding to conservation is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The program will competitively award federal funds to conservation projects designed by local partners specifically for their region. Eligible partners include private companies, universities, nonprofit organizations, local, state, and tribal governments, and others. They will join with agricultural and conservation organizations and producers to invest money, manpower, and materials in conservation projects, says Erik Suffridge, assistant state conservationist for programs at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Bozeman.

The USDA will spend \$400 million in the first year of the program and require part-



ners to provide an equal match in funding, labor, or other contributions. The total five-year USDA contribution nationwide will be \$1.2 billion, awarded through grants.

Priority for the new conservation dollars, says Suffridge, will go to projects that have multiple partners, including those at a state or regional level. “The RCPP empowers local decision making,” he says. “It brings together conservation groups, landowners, cities and townships, universities, agricultural associations, and others to design conservation projects tailored to our needs here in Montana.”

According to Kline, the TRCP government relations director, creation of the RCPP in Washington’s contentious political climate shows strong support for private lands conservation across the political spectrum. “People know that conservation is important, even if they live in a city and don’t hunt or fish,” he says. “A lot of people in downstream states understand that the water running through their rivers or reaching them at the drinking fountain started its course passing through rural farmland and ranchland.”

OTHER WILDLIFE PROGRAMS

► *Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program:* Congress authorized \$40 million nationally to pay eligible landowners to provide public hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching access—similar to Montana’s Block

TOO THICK The Farm Bill allocated millions of dollars to thin Montana forests to reduce disease and pest insect outbreaks. Thinning will also open areas to sunlight to produce more grasses and shrubs that elk, moose, and deer eat.

Management Program. Priority is given to property near public wildlife lands and those that benefit from conservation practices such as fencing cattle away from streams.

► *Agricultural Conservation Easement Program:* The new Farm Bill also allocates another \$1 billion to landowners nationwide who implement conservation easements that protect wetlands, grasslands, and productive farmland from conversion to other uses, such as subdivisions.

► *Forest Thinning:* U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced earlier this year that millions of dollars in the Farm Bill could be made available in Montana for forest treatment and thinning projects identified by Governor Steve Bullock. According to U.S. Forest Service biologists, more than 7.6 million acres of national forest in Montana are vulnerable to outbreaks of disease and pest insects. Thinning will fortify remaining trees to help them ward off threats while also producing habitat better suited to big game animals. “Logging projects that open areas to sunlight produce more forage that elk need to put on weight in summer,” says Eric Tomasik, regional wildlife manager for the

U.S. Forest Service Northern Region.

► *Environmental Quality Incentives Program:* EQIP provides money and manpower—especially for farmers and ranchers who might not be able to afford it—to carry out conservation practices.

► *Sage-Grouse Initiative:* This NRCS program, begun in 2010, was created in large part to help ranchers graze cattle in ways that benefit sagebrush grasslands. In Montana, 64 percent of sage-grouse habitat sits on private lands, so the timing and intensity of grazing affects the birds’ survival.

“The big issue for sage-grouse in eastern Montana is landowners giving up on cattle because it’s no longer profitable,” says David Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana and science adviser for the SGI. “That means they sell or convert their land to crops with no value to sage-grouse. The SGI helps set up grazing regimes that are good both for sage-grouse habitat and ranchers’ bottom lines.”

The issue is especially timely, given that western states are drafting individual conservation plans for sage-grouse. In 2015, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is expected to announce whether it will list the bird under the federal Endangered Species Act. Part of the determination will rest on arguments made by Montana and other western states that sufficient habitat safeguards are in place, such as those provided by the SGI. 🐾