



# EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

While not offering much for Montana's dispirited CRP fans, the 2018 Farm Bill's other land and water conservation programs will provide tens of millions of dollars to help farmers, ranchers, wildlife, and public recreational access in the state's prairie region.

By Catherine Wightman

Commonly known as the Farm Bill, the Agriculture Improvement Act is one of the most powerful pieces of legislation affecting Montana's farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. Wildlife, too.

In fact, no other legislation has more potential to help or hurt wildlife populations in the state's central and eastern regions than the Farm Bill, which Congress reauthorizes every five years or so.

The nation's first Farm Bill, passed in 1933 as part of the New Deal, was Congress's response to the economic and environmental

crises of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Then as now, the goals of the Farm Bill are to maintain fair food prices and adequate food supplies while conserving natural resources. Over the years, a growing number of Farm Bill programs have improved water quality, protected wetlands, and enhanced wildlife habitat.

Each Farm Bill must balance economic, political, and other priorities. As a result, some Farm Bill components end up harming wildlife habitat and populations, while other programs, including several in the 2018 bill, are beneficial. "Overall, this is a great Farm Bill,"

Bob Sanders, Montana Conservation Program manager for Duck's Unlimited (DU), says of the \$876 billion bill, authorized by Congress in December 2018.

Earlier drafts of the bill threatened to slash conservation by \$1 billion, Sanders says. But DU and other conservation groups fought back in the final negotiations and pressured Congress to restore and even boost conservation programs.

Here's how several of the 2018 Farm Bill's dizzying alphabet soup of programs, authorized by Congress last December, shake out for Montana's wildlife populations and habitat:

## ► Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

"We were told not to get our hopes up," says Glenn Marx, executive director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts, about ACEP funding in the 2018 Farm Bill. "But we made our case to Congress, based on 2014 Farm Bill successes, and the funding ended up far exceeding our expectations."

Though the program's name highlights "agriculture," ACEP focuses just as much on improving wildlife and water quality.

The 2018 Farm Bill appropriates \$450 million per year for the program, which pro-

vides technical and financial assistance to help landowners protect and restore agricultural lands and wetlands.

ALE is a provision of ACEP in which the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) cost-shares on conservation easements held by land trusts. (As any reader can tell, the Farm Bill is packed with acronyms.) Under the 2014 Farm Bill, Montana led the nation in acres conserved using Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) funding. In fact, one of every three acres conserved nationally was in Montana, according to the NRCS. Montana landowners, land trusts,

and the NRCS together enrolled 191,575 acres on 56 parcels in ACEP-ALE between 2014 and 2018.

"Montana's enrollments are a remarkable accomplishment," says Marx. "Farms and ranches will be maintained as farms and ranches in perpetuity, highly erodible soils will be conserved, grasslands and sagebrush and sage-grouse habitat will be maintained, and many multigenerational farms and ranches will stay multigenerational. ALE is a great example of a federal program producing tangible results."

ALE-funded conservation easements



**GIT ALONG** Ranch hands and dogs drive cattle on the J Bar L Ranch through a healthy sagebrush-studded landscape in the Centennial Valley. The 2018 Farm Bill includes programs that help ranchers and farmers conserve sagebrush habitat and protect prairie streams.

held by FWP also increase acreage for public recreational access. "The combination of conservation and access is a fantastic package," Marx says.

While applauding the increased funding, Marx notes that changes in the 2018 Farm Bill will increase national competition for those dollars. "The ALE program will be open to more landowners, more land trusts, and more states," he says. "We'll have our work cut out for us obtaining full funding for our 2019 applications."

Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE), another provision of ACEP, provides funding for wetland restoration and conservation easements held by the NRCS. While similar to its predecessor, the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), WRE has additional flexibility, such as a grazing rights option, making it more attractive to Montana's farmers and ranchers. "The old WRP basically took land

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and put it in a glass jar on a shelf," DU's Sanders says. "WRE puts wetland conservation in a working lands context. That means more landowners will apply, which should mean more wetland acres protected in Montana and other states."

#### ► Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Prairie wildlife love large tracts of grass. And grass and forbs (flowering plants) is what the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has produced since it was established in 1985. Aimed at stabilizing soil, improving water quality, and maintaining wildlife habitat, the program pays farmers to take highly erodible cropland out of production and plant it with grasses and forbs. Pheasants in particular thrive with increased CRP acreage, as do waterfowl, songbirds, white-tailed and mule deer, and other prairie wildlife.

The 2018 Farm Bill offered good news for CRP, increasing the enrollment cap nationwide from its current 22 million acres to

27 million acres by 2023.

That modest increase could at least help stem the decline of Montana's CRP acreage. Over the past decade, Montana has seen its CRP acres drop by nearly 70 percent as Congress shifted funding away from the northern Great Plains to the lower Midwest, South, and Eastern Seaboard states. Montana's CRP acreage declined from a high of nearly 3.5 million acres in 2007 to just 1.1 million acres today.

Meanwhile, Montana's upland bird numbers have tumbled. Hampered by several years of poor weather for nesting and brood rearing, the 2018 pheasant population was the lowest in decades. Hunters in recent years also report fewer sharp-tailed grouse. Upland bird experts say the loss of CRP lands is making it more challenging for populations to recover.

"Considering the importance of CRP for upland game birds, we wish the increase had been greater than it was," says Al Eiden, western regional director for Pheasants Forever.



**FLUSH WITH HABITAT** Though the new Farm Bill won't help Montana fully recover the 2.4 million acres of CRP grasses lost over the past decade, it does boost the program's acreage nationwide by nearly 25 percent. Several other programs also offer incentives for landowners to protect upland bird habitat.

"That being said, we did make progress, and the gains in CRP will do a lot for upland birds in Montana and elsewhere."

#### ► Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides money and technical help for farmers and ranchers to carry out land and water conservation practices. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized roughly \$2 billion for EQIP per year. The bill also directs NRCS to use at least 20 percent of that on projects that benefit wildlife, up from 10 percent in the previous Farm Bill. This means a good portion of EQIP federal dollars will be directed toward maintaining and enhancing quality habitat in Montana with activities such as managed grazing, riparian (streamside) restoration, and grassland reseeding.

Tom Watson, Montana's NRCS state conservationist, says he's committed to working with local farmers and ranchers to ensure that EQIP funding is used to target the highest priority resource needs, including wildlife habitat enhancement.

#### ► Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP)

VPA-HIP is a competitive federal grant program that helps state and tribal governments expand voluntary public access to private lands for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities. FWP successfully competed for VPA-HIP funding in the 2014 Farm Bill, which allowed additional enrollments under the department's Open Fields Program. "Open Fields provides walk-in access with no further permission required to hunt upland game birds on privately owned CRP lands," says Debbie Hohler, FWP Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program coordinator. "Landowners like not having to take access calls, and hunters like knowing they have permission ahead of time."

FWP has expanded bird hunting and other recreational access on over 48,000 acres of privately owned wildlife habitat by combining VPA-HIP and state Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program funding.

The 2018 Farm Bill increases VPA-HIP mandatory funding from \$40 million to \$50 million nationwide, providing more opportunities for FWP and Montana's Native American tribes to compete with other states



**KEEPING THE "WET" IN WETLANDS** Several Farm Bill programs provide landowners with financial incentives to protect wetlands, which benefit wildlife and improve water quality.

and tribes for the federal funds. Farmers and ranchers with active CRP contracts may enroll their lands in Open Fields for a one-time payment. Coupled with potential increases in CRP enrollment, "the new Farm Bill provides an opportunity for another successful round of Open Fields," says Hohler.

#### ► Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

RCPP is another conservation program carried over from the 2014 Farm Bill. It provides financial assistance to local partnerships (composed of nonprofit organizations; local, state, and tribal governments; private companies; universities; and others) built around shared conservation priorities.

Since 2014, five RCPP awards totaling over \$8 million have been made to Montana's partners. Project priorities include saline seep restoration, drought resilience, agricultural sustainability, and working lands maintenance.

"RCPP has also been deployed with great success in Montana," says Marx, with the land trust group. "For example, the Gallatin Valley Land Trust is bundling NRCS programs under

RCPP and fostering broad partnerships to conserve land in a highly developing landscape in the greater Bozeman region."

Ducks Unlimited also received an RCPP grant that allowed it to leverage other funds to total more than \$1 million for targeted conservation work on Montana's Hi-Line. The grant allows partners to direct NRCS program funding specifically to areas most important for waterfowl, declining grassland bird species, and other top priority wildlife. "The work is not just about ducks," says Sanders. "We're also supporting grass-based agriculture, farmers, ranchers, and local communities."

It's called the Farm Bill for a reason. The federal legislation's main focus is on farmlands, ranchlands, and agricultural communities. But increasingly the Farm Bill is showing that conservation measures that help farmers and ranchers can also help grassland wildlife. "When you conserve grass and water, everyone wins," says Sanders. 

To learn more about 2018 Farm Bill programs, contact Catherine Wightman at cwightman@mt.gov or (406) 444-3377.