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Conservation Reserve Program

National Farmers Union (NFU) appreciates the opportunity to present the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) with comments on the interim rule implementing changes to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). NFU has nearly 200,000 family farmer, rancher and fisherman members nationwide and organized divisions in 33 states. We have advocated for the economic and social well-being and quality of life of our members and rural communities since 1902 because "the family farm is the keystone of a free, progressive, democratic national society, as well as a strong America, and is the basis of a safe, secure and stable food system."¹ NFU supports programs that encourage farmers to utilize sound conservation practices. NFU's policy, which directs our advocacy efforts and is set annually by the organization through a rigorous democratic grassroots process, states, "Family farmers and ranchers have historically been our best soil and water conservationists when given the economic incentive and flexibility necessary to do so," and specifically supports "the objectives of the conservation plan being used to reduce and control wind and water erosion, prevent non-point source pollution, and enhance the soil and water capacities of the land."²

¹ "Policy of the National Farmers Union," March 2015. http://www.nfu.org/nfu-2015-policy/2066#_Toc416184539

² *Id.*

Although many of the changes the interim rule makes to the CRP are required by the 2014 Farm Bill, NFU appreciates CCC and FSA's work implementing these changes. We are also grateful for some of the discretionary changes carried out by CCC and FSA, which will enhance the program's ability "to re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat."³ These comments discuss some discretionary changes undertaken by CCC and FSA that NFU finds especially helpful and notes a few adjustments that, while mandatory under the 2014 Farm Bill, are especially important to NFU.

Discretionary Changes

"Infeasible to farm"

NFU appreciates the addition of the "infeasible to farm" provision included in the interim rule. This change will produce greater conservation benefits by making CRP participation a viable option for more farmers. Without the provision, farmers would have to cultivate small parcels stranded amid conservation acreage, or leave them unplanted without receiving compensation. The interim rule allows compensation for such stranded acreage as long as 75 percent or more of the field is enrolled as bona fide qualifying acreage. Farmers with fields that mostly qualify will no longer have to forego the CRP and the attendant conservation benefits that land would produce, or jeopardize conservation benefits by farming difficult-to-reach-and-cultivate acreage.

Contract modifications

NFU policy calls for government policies that "use the least intrusive, economically practical and scientifically-based methods to accomplish sound environmental quality goals, with consideration given to all of these factors and not any one exclusively."⁴ The interim rule's discretionary provision allowing land to be transferred from CRP to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) pursues this goal. Allowing producers to enroll acreage under the conservation program that best suits their needs and maximizes the conservation benefits of their land will encourage quality applications and ensure positive outcomes.

³ <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index>

⁴ "Policy of the National Farmers Union."

Non-Discretionary Changes

Maximum county acreage

§1410.4 of the interim rule sets limits on the amount of cropland that may be placed in reserve through the CRP. Although these changes are not discretionary, NFU appreciates the attention given their implementation. Our policy calls for “A 25-percent-per-county acreage limit for CRP, unless it is determined that lifting the cap would address local endangered species concerns and not have a negative economic impact on rural communities,”⁵ and we are grateful that this cap is included in the interim rule.

The cap is important because the term of rental agreements and conservation easements established through the CRP are long enough to affect the viability of producer services in rural communities. If too much land in any one county is taken out of production, the viability of essential mechanic and agronomic service providers in that county could be undermined, potentially narrowing service availability or closure. This would reduce active producers’ access to these vital services. The percentage-based acreage cap in the interim rule will help avoid this potential unintended consequence and prevent the CRP from disrupting essential farm support services.

Addition of veterans to the CRP Transition Incentives Program

The addition of the word “veteran” under §1410.5, which makes veteran farmers eligible for the benefits of the CRP- Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) is not discretionary; it was mandated by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill. NFU expresses gratitude for CCC and FSA’s attention to this change and the unequivocal way it is expressed in the interim rule. NFU policy explicitly notes the important role veterans will play in ensuring the successful intergenerational transition U.S. agriculture is undergoing, and CCC and FSA’s implementation of this important 2014 Farm Bill adjustment makes clear that another resource is available to veterans interested in pursuing careers on the farm.

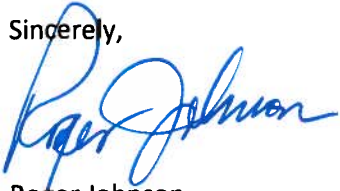
Conclusion

NFU appreciates CCC and FSA’s work implementing 2014 Farm Bill changes in a timely manner and are grateful for some of the discretionary changes made, as described above. NFU understands that the conservation gains achieved through the CRP are not only environmental enhancements; this program

⁵ *Id.*

adds substantially to U.S. and international food security by safeguarding a reserve of productive land that can be utilized in emergency circumstances. CCC and FSA's work to improve the efficacy of this program is important to the pursuit of these goals. NFU stands ready to provide any support or assistance CCC and FSA may find helpful regarding these matters. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Roger Johnson
President