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Status and Trends of USDA Conservation Programs, 2002–2025

Kate Binzen Fuller, Daniel Hellerstein, Andrew Rosenberg, Dipak Subedi, Catherine Feather, Rich Iovanna, Bryan Pratt, and Roger Claassen

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Abstract

USDA's conservation programs provide incentives to agricultural producers to improve soil health, wildlife habitat, and water and air quality, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Over time, conservation funding authorized by Farm Bills has changed both in aggregate and in the relative shares of funded programs. In fiscal year 2024, estimated USDA conservation funding authorized by Farm Bills stood at $5.7 billion, with three programs (the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)) accounting for approximately 90 percent of funding. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided more than $19 billion in supplemental conservation program funding to be spent from 2023–31, on EQIP, CSP, as well as the Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This report provides a summary of USDA conservation programs and their funding, with a focus on conservation programs in the 2002−18 Farm Bills.

Keywords: U.S. conservation programs, environmental programs, agricultural conservation policy, Farm Bill, Inflation Reduction Act

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Glossary

Allocation: Appropriated funds that are made available for obligation at the relevant decision-making level (e.g., USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); NRCS State conservationist); or for a specific purpose.

Appropriation: Authorization granted by the U.S. Congress to make funds available to an agency for allocation (i.e., in the Farm Bill or other legislation).

Budgeted: In the fiscal year 2025 USDA Budget Summary published by the Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA), fiscal year 2025 numbers are "budgeted." These numbers show what was requested for 2025, published in FY2024. The process to develop the FY2025 budget began in 2023.

Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC): The CCC is a Government-owned corporation within the USDA. The CCC funds Farm Bill initiatives such as farm income and price support programs and conservation programs under various statutes of the 2018 Farm Bill, among other efforts.

Estimated (USDA Budget Summaries): In the FY 2025 USDA Budget Summary published by OBPA, FY 2024 amounts are 'estimated' because the 2024 fiscal year was underway when the 2025 budget was developed. The amounts show annualized Continuing Resolution levels for FY 2024. Previous-year USDA Budget amounts are always "estimated."

Funding: Generic term that can encompass allocations, appropriations, obligations, payments, budgets, and estimations.

Obligation: A legally binding commitment incurred by the Government for the payment of goods and services. In conservation programs, an obligation is made when a contract is signed with the producer. Payments made under an obligation may be made immediately or in the future.

Payment: Money (from previously obligated funds) paid to a producer/entity after a practice has been implemented, or in some cases, in advance of implementation.

Status and Trends of USDA Conservation Programs, 2002–2025

Introduction

Much of the legal framework for U.S. agricultural and food policy is set through a legislative process that occurs approximately every 5 years, generically referred to as the "Farm Bill." The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 ("2018 Farm Bill"), was signed on December 20, 2018. It has since been extended three times to include fiscal years (FY) 2024, 2025, and 2026. Programs within Farm Bills are funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

This report provides a broad overview of major U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs—programs that can assist agricultural producers to improve soil health, wildlife habitat, and water and air quality (including reducing greenhouse gas emissions). We focus on Farm Bill conservation programs over the past four Farm Bills (2002, 2008, 2014, and 2018).[1] Additionally, the report provides historical context regarding how these programs have been implemented under the 2018 Farm Bill, and the effects of supplemental funding provided by the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).[2]

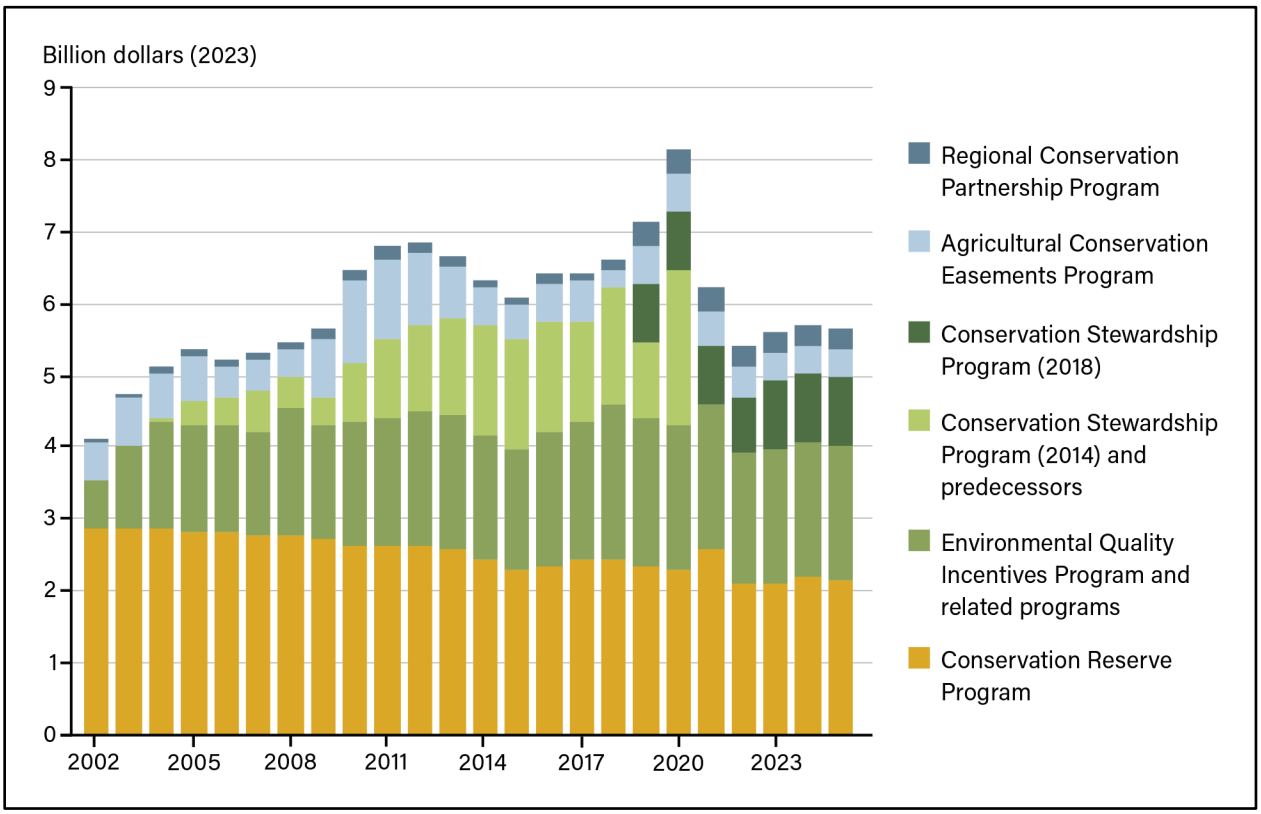
Farm Bill Conservation Programs

In addition to providing USDA authority to implement conservation programs, most funding or acreage caps are reviewed and modified during Farm Bill reauthorizations. Figure 1 shows that over the last four Farm Bill cycles, overall conservation funding increased from $4.1 billion (in 2023 inflation adjusted dollars) to an estimated $5.7 billion in FY 2024. While funding sharply declined during fiscal years 2021–22, funding since then has increased slightly. Funding in fiscal years 2023–25 remained more than $1.5 billion higher than in 2002 (USDA, Office of Budget and Policy Analysis (OBPA), 2024). Moreover, the IRA appropriated more than $19 billion in additional funding for distribution between 2023 and 2031.

[1] Each Farm Bill is named, often reflecting areas of emphasis. These four Farm Bills were titled The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, The Food, Conservation, Energy Act of 2008, the Agricultural Act of 2014, and the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018.

[2] The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), signed into law on July 4, 2025, repealed remaining IRA conservation funding, repurposing much of it into conservation baseline funding (U.S. Congress, 2025). We do not cover changes made as part of the OBBBA in this report.

Figure 1
Major USDA conservation program funding through Farm Bills, fiscal years 2002–2025, with estimated/budgeted 2024 and 2025 amounts



Note: Values are adjusted for inflation using the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Gross Domestic Product Price Index. Categories include predecessor programs. In the 2018 Farm Act, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) was converted to a discretionary program facing an annual budget constraint. For CSP contracts approved and signed prior to the 2018 Farm Act, fiscal year 2019 and 2020 spending represents ongoing obligations during the term of the contract rather than funding obligated the year the contract is signed. The chart does not include funding provided under the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. Fiscal year 2024 spending is estimated; fiscal year 2025 estimates represent budgeted spending.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service analysis of annual budget summaries from USDA, Office of Budget and Policy Analysis, as of August 2024.

The following programs account for the majority of USDA conservation program funding, with the top three programs (Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Conservation Stewardship Program) making up roughly 90 percent of total CCC conservation funding through Farm Bills.[3] USDA, Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers all other programs listed below.

- The **Conservation Reserve Program** (CRP) generally provides 10- or 15-year contracts to remove land from agricultural production and/or engage in specific practices, such as planting a mixture of native grasses or providing wildlife habitat. It also protects grassland from being converted to other uses. Producers with CRP contracts receive technical assistance, yearly rental payments, cost-share for installing native grass and other land covers, and often additional incentives. As of October 2024, more than 26 million acres were

[3] The listed USDA, NRCS conservation programs also received IRA funding, which we cover separately. The CRP did not receive IRA funding.

enrolled in CRP at an estimated annual cost of $2.2 billion (USDA, OBPA, 2024), including $1.8 billion dollars for yearly rental payments in 2024 (USDA, FSA, 2024b).[4]

- The **Environmental Quality Incentives Program** (EQIP) contributes cost sharing to producers who adopt or install conservation practices on land in agricultural production. From 2014–24, the top five EQIP conservation practices in terms of total funding were cover crops, fencing, brush management, livestock watering facilities, and livestock watering pipelines (USDA, NRCS, 2024a).[5] In FY 2024, CCC funding for EQIP was an estimated $1.9 billion (USDA OBPA, 2024).
- The **Conservation Stewardship Program** (CSP) offers financial incentives to producers currently implementing conservation practices. These incentives can support new practices, but unlike EQIP most acres receiving CSP funding are under enhancements to existing conservation activities (USDA, NRCS, 2024c). In FY 2024, the estimated CCC CSP funding was $922 million (USDA, OBPA, 2024).
- The **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program** (ACEP) provides long-term or permanent easements for preservation of wetlands and the protection of agricultural land from commercial or residential development. Between fiscal years 2014 and 2023, ACEP has protected approximately 700,000 acres under Agricultural Land Easements and 315,000 acres under Wetland Reserve Easement subprograms (USDA, NRCS, 2024b).[6] In FY 2024, estimated CCC ACEP funding was $416 million dollars (USDA, OBPA, 2024).
- The **Regional Conservation Partnership Program** (RCPP) aids producers and partners such as Tribes, land trusts, State and local governments, and other entities to solve agricultural conservation problems on a regional or watershed scale. RCPP funding can be used for activities authorized by other USDA, NRCS programs like EQIP, CSP, and ACEP (USDA, NRCS, 2024c) to support a range of activities including land retirement, easements, partial-field practices (e.g., filter strips), and conservation practices on working land (e.g., cover crops) (USDA, NRCS, 2023c). In FY 2024, estimated CCC RCPP funding was $283 million (USDA, OBPA, 2024).

Conservation Program Funding and the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act

The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided more than $19 billion in supplemental conservation program funding from 2023–26, to remain available until 2031 (U.S. Congress, 2022). The IRA funding emphasized activities that "improve soil carbon, reduce nitrogen losses, or reduce, capture, avoid, or sequester carbon dioxide, methane, or nitrous oxide emissions" (U.S. Congress, 2022). NRCS conservation programs EQIP, RCPP, CSP, and ACEP received IRA appropriations of $8.45, $4.95. $3.25, and $1.4 billion, respectively. The IRA also added funding for quantifying agricultural carbon sequestration

[4] In addition to annual rental payments, CRP provides participants with certain incentive payments, cost-share assistance, and technical assistance to plan, design, and implement conservation practices.

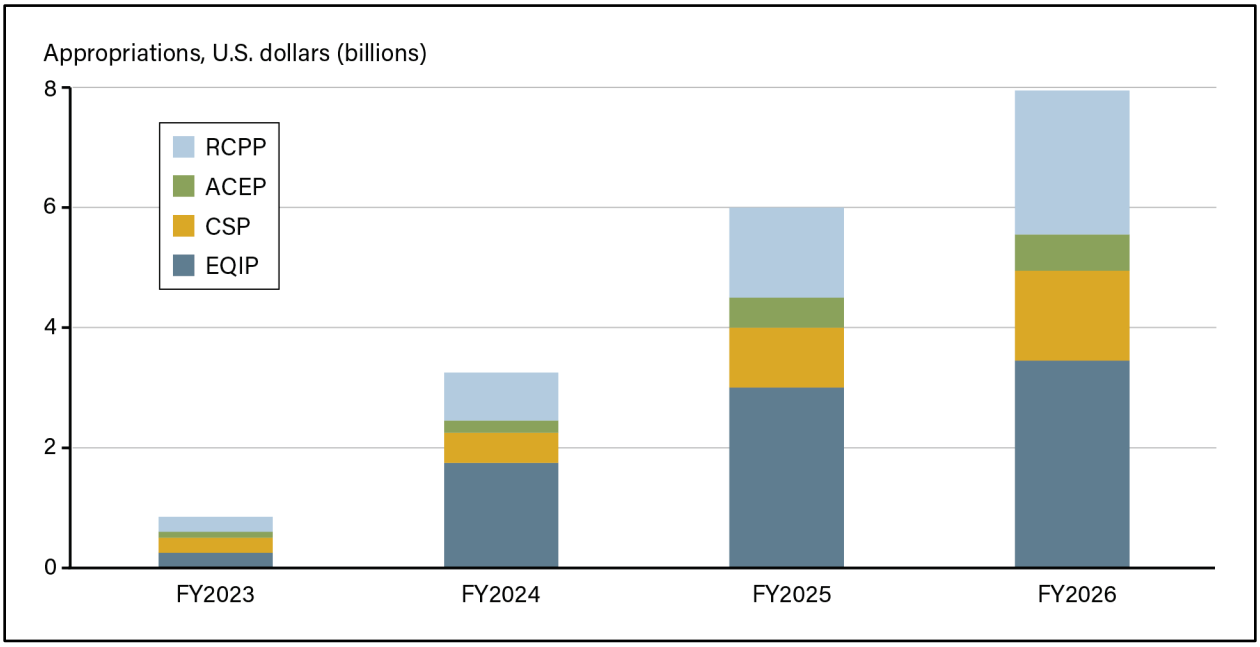
[5] The top five practices are calculated in terms of USDA, NRCS "dollars obligated" from fiscal years 2014–24 and were calculated as of July 1, 2024.

[6] Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) are used to purchase development rights to keep parcels in agriculture. Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) are used to protect wetlands from development or restore them.

and greenhouse gas emissions ($300 million) and for conservation technical assistance (CTA)($1 billion), which provides personalized information and advice to producers making conservation plans (U.S. Congress, 2022). As of July 2024, $5.26 billion had been allocated to USDA, NRCS conservation programs in fiscal years 2022–24.[7]

Figure 2 shows EQIP, CSP, ACEP, and RCPP appropriations set by statute in the IRA. While appropriations exceed $1 billion each year after FY 2023, payments to producers were lower for several reasons, totaling $4.6 million in FY 2023 and $261 million for FY 2024 (as of September 30, 2024).[8] First, appropriations are subject to sequestration, so both obligations and payments are less than what are appropriated. Second, payments to producers do not include funding for technical assistance. Additionally, in most of the programs receiving supplemental appropriations through the IRA, payments to producers may not be made at the time of obligation (when the contract is signed), but instead across years in the contract or after the contract is complete. Lastly, the planned amount of a practice to be implemented may not equate to the actual amount of a practice implemented.[9]

Figure 2
IRA appropriations for USDA, NRCS programs (fiscal years 2023–26)



IRA = U.S. Inflation Reduction Act; EQIP = USDA, NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program; CSP = USDA, NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program; ACEP = USDA, NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, RCPP = USDA, NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Congressional appropriations amounts that were reported in the Public Law 117–169, August 16, 2022.

[7] Throughout this document, for USDA budget amounts, fiscal year 2022 and fiscal year 2023 spending is actual, fiscal year 2024 is estimated, and fiscal year 2025 is budgeted (USDA, OBPA, 2024). Stubbs (2023) provides a comparison and a discussion of IRA, Farm Bill/CCC, and other conservation program funding.

[8] Information on payments to producers from USDA, Economic Research Service is based on data from USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service.

[9] Note that for these reasons, neither USDA, NRCS IRA payments made to producers nor funding numbers from USDA, OBPA budgets necessarily equate to obligations, which can be found in the USDA, NRCS Inflation Reduction Act Data Visualization Tool (USDA, NRCS, 2024d).

Major Trends in USDA Conservation Programs

USDA's conservation programs range from those designed to incentivize specific practices implemented during the growing season to longer-term practices such as installing perennial conservation covers. Long-term goals of the programs include ecological restoration, preventing soil erosion and improving soil health, making structural changes on the land, and preventing agricultural land conversion. USDA's conservation programs can be categorized into the following: working-lands programs (including EQIP, CSP, and Grassland CRP) that provide financial and/or technical assistance to producers who adopt, install, or maintain conservation practices on land in production; long-term easements (ACEP-ALE), used to prevent the development of agricultural lands and are another type of working-lands program; finally, land retirement (General and Continuous CRP) and other easement programs (ACEP-WRE) that provide easements or contracts to restore, preserve, or convert highly erodible and environmentally sensitive or degraded agricultural land from agricultural production to vegetative cover or wetlands.

Starting with the 2002 Farm Bill, funding for working lands programs has grown, while funding for land retirement and easements has remained relatively steady. Including IRA funding, much of which was destined for working lands programs, magnifies this difference.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Established in 1985 and administered by FSA, USDA's CRP has changed substantially over time.[10] CRP is subject to a national acreage cap set in Farm Bills, rather than a funding constraint. The acreage cap was 40–45 million acres when the program began, then dropped to a low of 24 million acres in 2018 before rising to 27 million acres in 2024 (Barbarika, 2021). CRP uses 10- or 15-year contracts to convert environmentally sensitive land to vegetative cover (such as native grasses, trees, and riparian buffers), and preserve grasslands under grazing (USDA, FSA, n.d.a.). As of October 2024, the 26 million CRP enrolled acres were 1 million acres under the 27-million-acre cap set in the 2018 Farm Bill. Over the next 5 years, an average of less than 1 million acres per year will expire from the program (USDA, FSA, 2024b). As per the 2018 Farm Bill, there are three CRP subprograms:

- **General signups** are the oldest component of CRP. Every year during a specific signup period, landowners can submit offers to enroll parcels of agricultural land into CRP. The 2018 Farm Bill required General CRP signups to be annual (U.S. Congress, 2018). New parcel enrollments must have a recent history of agricultural use and meet erodibility or other requirements. Land with expiring CRP contracts can also be re-enrolled in the program. Landowners request a rental rate (which cannot exceed a parcel-specific maximum determined by USDA, FSA) and choose a cover practice (such as establishing native grasses).[11]

[10] For more on the history of CRP, see Barbarika (2021), Coppess and Laingen (2022), and Hellerstein (2017). For more on the 2024 General CRP signup period, see USDA, FSA (2024a).

[11] The parcel-specific maximum is based on average county rental rates for dryland cropland, adjusted by the soil productivity ratings (USDA, FSA, n.d.a.). For details on how the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) is structured and used, see (USDA, FSA, 2024a).

At the end of the signup period, USDA scores each offer using an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) that combines environmental attributes of the parcel (such as potential edge-of-field sediment losses), the attributes of the land cover to be installed (such as the mix of seeds), and the requested rental payment. All eligible offers that exceed that year's national threshold EBI score, established by USDA, FSA, are accepted (Hellerstein, 2017).[12] This quality-adjusted mechanism incorporates cost and estimated environmental benefits, while limiting overpaying for relatively low productivity land (Cramton et al., 2021).

During 1993–95, General CRP acreage peaked at 35 million acres, when other subprograms did not yet exist. As of October 2024, about 7.8 million acres are enrolled under General signup (30 percent of CRP acres), at an average rental rate of $57.25 per acre (USDA, FSA, 2024b).

- **Continuous signups** started in 1996 as an administrative decision that was later incorporated into subsequent Farm Bills. Many Continuous contracts involve partial field practices, such as grass filter strips or riparian buffers (Barbarika, 2021). Continuous acreage has expanded over time, with total acres in General CRP declining although remaining largely level since 2018. Offers can be submitted to Continuous signup at any time of the year and eligibility is determined by environmental needs and the feasibility of a practice at the desired location. All eligible offers are accepted. The concept of continuous signup includes several subprograms, each with its own eligibility criteria, geographic scope, and cover practice requirements. The 2018 Farm Bill set a goal for Continuous contracts of 8.6 million acres, 40 percent of which are practices that target surface water quality (USDA, ERS, 2024).[13] Continuous signup also includes Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs (CREP), in which producers partner with State agencies, nonprofits, and others to address State or regional conservation priorities. CREPs offer additional payments from both USDA and the partners for eligible parcels (USDA, FSA, 2021). As of October 2024, about 8.4 million acres (32 percent of total CRP acreage) were are enrolled under Continuous signup, at an average rental rate of $150.26 per acre (USDA, FSA, 2024b).[14]
- The **Grassland CRP** subprogram was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, with a minimum acreage enrollment set in the 2018 Farm Bill (Stubbs, 2019). Under Grassland CRP, landowners and operators can enroll grassland—including rangeland, pastureland, and certain other lands (Bigelow et al., 2020). Grassland CRP offers are enrolled competitively, using a ranking index similar to the EBI that reflects cover type, risk of conversion to crop production or developed uses, and other factors (USDA, FSA, n.d.b.). Grassland CRP contracts, unlike other types of CRP, do not require land to be cropped before entering the program. Grassland CRP is a working lands program; it provides rental payments in exchange for maintaining grass cover and may continue to be used for livestock production. Grassland CRP acreage has expanded quickly since 2018 to become the largest CRP subprogram. As of October 2024, about 9.8 million acres (38 percent of CRP acres) were enrolled under Grassland CRP, at an average rental rate of $15.74 per acre (USDA, FSA, 2024b).

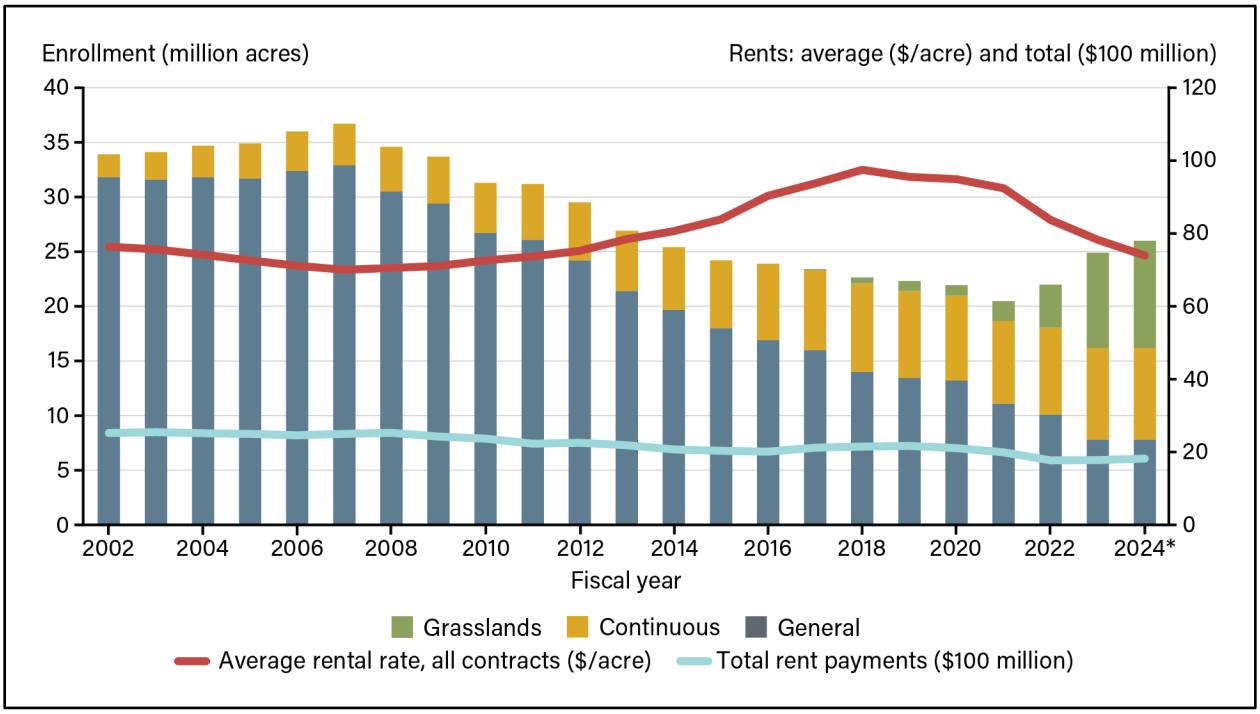
[12] All CRP subprograms are subject to the CRP acreage cap.

[13] The 2018 Farm Bill created this focus under the label of the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) program, which includes a small pilot program for 30-year contracts (less than 1.5 percent of CLEAR contracts).

[14] The average rental rate of $150.26 for Continuous CRP contracts includes payments from USDA only. The rate does not include any additional payments made by partner organizations through CREP.

Figure 3

Conservation Reserve Program enrolled acres and rental payments, 2002–2024



Note: 2023 dollar values (right axis) are adjusted for inflation using the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis Gross Domestic Product Price Index. The average rental rate is computed across acres in all subprograms.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Farm Service Agency data (2024b). Years 2023 and 2024 are from the October summaries for those years.

CRP underwent several additional changes in the 2018 Farm Bill, including gradually increasing the CRP cap from 24 million acres to 27 million acres. Soil rental rates for General and Continuous enrollment were limited to 85 or 90 percent of the county average, "with secretarial requirements to account for potential impact on [the] local farmland rental market" (U.S. House, 2018).[15] At the same time, the 2018 Farm Bill mandated a one-time incentive payment equal to 32.5 percent of the first annual payment for new Continuous contracts, which offset some of the reductions in rental payments for some contracts (Bigelow et al., 2020).[16] However, the restrictions on rental rates and a higher proportion of Grasslands contracts, which have relatively low rental rates, correspond with an overall decrease in average rental rates from 2019 to 2024. Lastly, the 2018 Farm Bill stated that enrollment should be targeted toward its historic geographical distribution (U.S. Congress, 2018).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The principal objectives of EQIP, established in 1996, are to: (1) promote production and environmental quality as compatible goals, (2) optimize environmental benefits, and (3) help farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, and local regulatory requirements. A key to this approach is the designation of

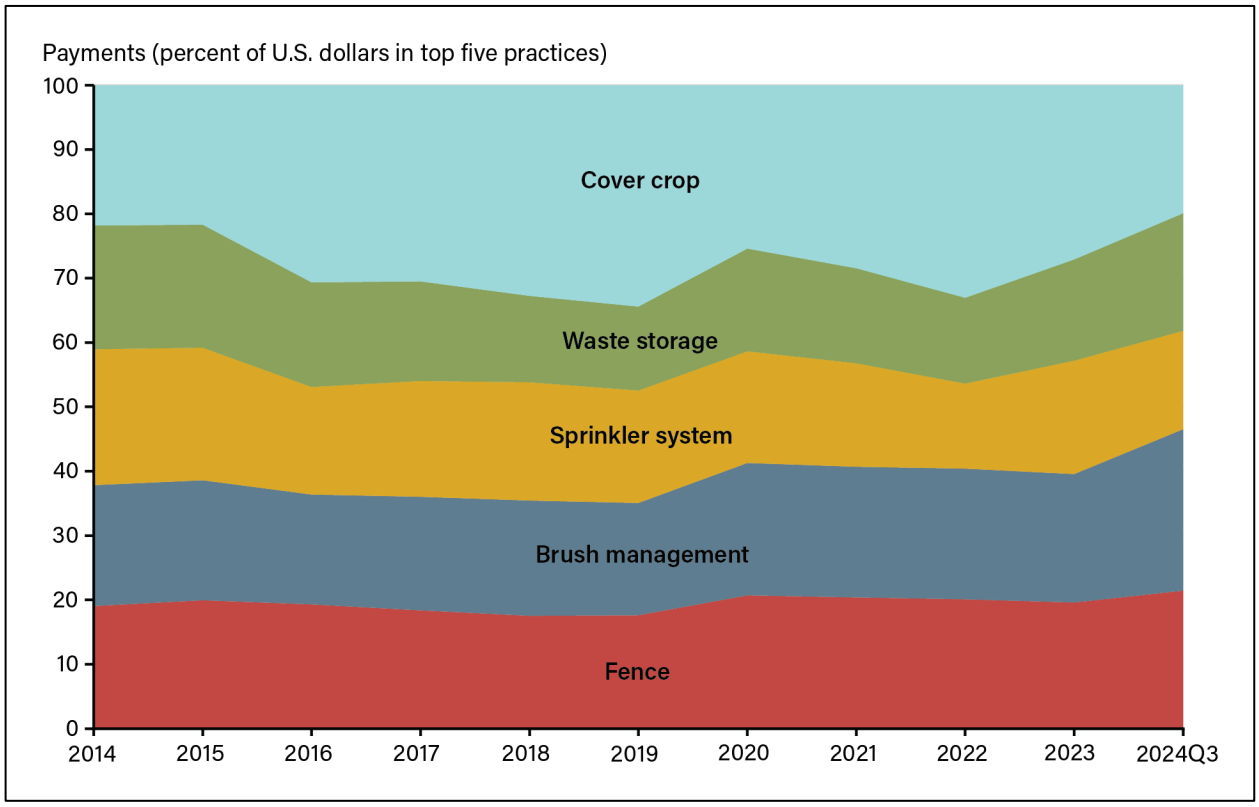
[15] Individual CRP contract rental rates are adjusted by a soil productivity index (SPI), which can bring the rates to greater than the county average. The calculation of and constraints on SPI have changed over time.

[16] While the one-time incentive payment for Continuous contracts existed before 2018, the 2018 Farm Bill specified the amount.

"conservation practice standards," specific management actions or structures implemented according to USDA, NRCS standards. EQIP applications include a conservation plan identifying resource concerns and practices that address them (USDA, NRCS 2024c). NRCS State Technical Advisory Committees advise the U.S. State Conservationist to determine State priorities and split funding into pools targeting those priorities. Producers then apply for funding and USDA, NRCS staff rank the applications into appropriate funding pools, using ranking formulas that balance priorities at the Federal, State, and local levels. If applications exceed the funding available, low-scoring applications are deferred (USDA, NRCS, 2024c), incentivizing competitive applications.

Inflation-adjusted EQIP funding was approximately $400 million in 2002 but increased to roughly $2 billion in 2024 (excluding IRA funding). The 2018 Farm Bill also made changes to several of the goals of EQIP funding, including decreasing the proportion of funds targeted to livestock conservation practices from 60 to 50 percent and increasing the proportion of funds targeted to wildlife habitat from 5 to 10 percent (U.S. Congress, 2018). Cover crops are the top funded practice in most years, with waste storage facilities (used for animal manure, contaminated runoff, or other agricultural wastes) and fences (that can be used to keep livestock out of waterways and facilitate other conservation activities), close behind. Sprinkler systems and brush management round out the top five funded practices.

Figure 4
Top five conservation practices in the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program, by percent of dollars obligated, fiscal years 2014–24



Note: Data are current through July 2024. All available years of data are reported.

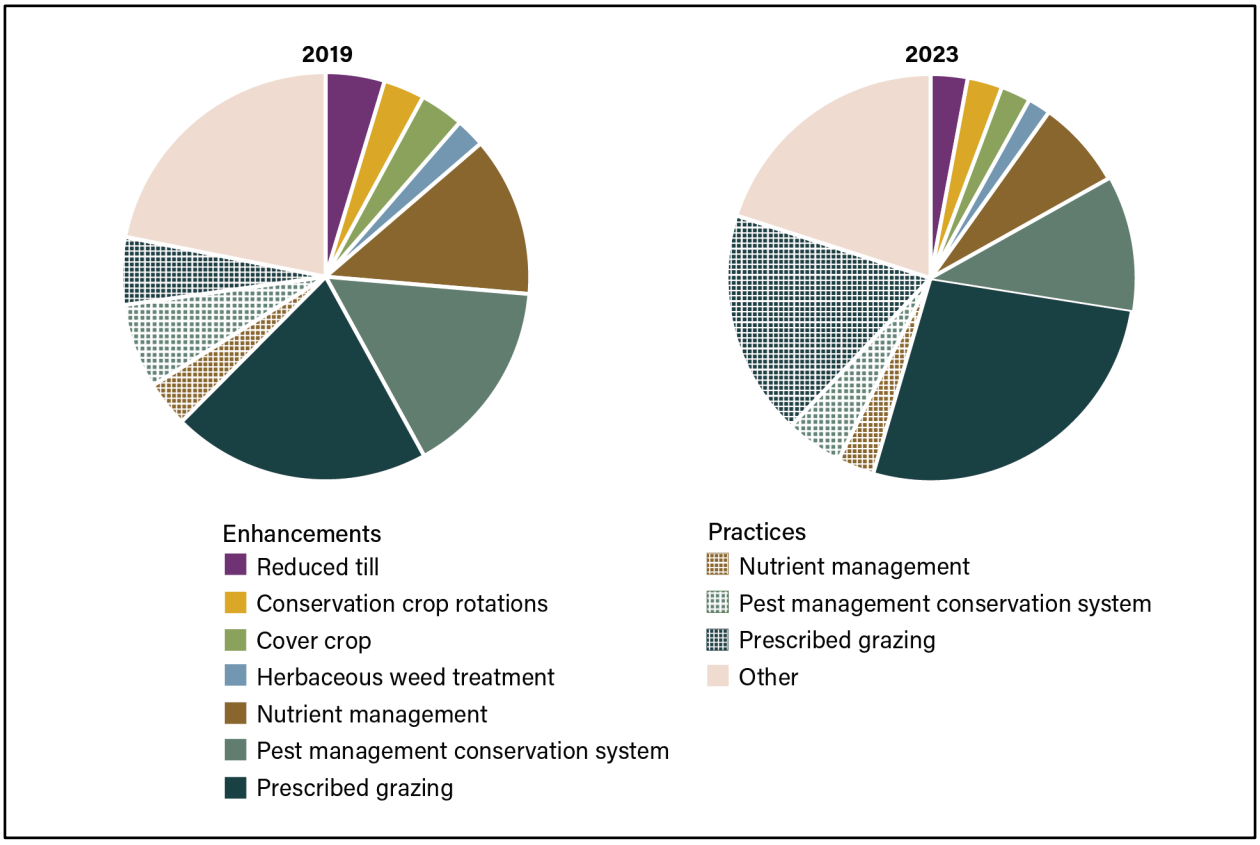
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using information from USDA, National Resources Conservation Service (2024a).

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

The goals of CSP are to encourage producers to extend existing methods of addressing resource concerns by: (1) undertaking additional conservation activities; and (2) improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities. Key to addressing these goals is the use of conservation "enhancements," which are either improved or expanded versions of existing conservation practices or bundles of improved or expanded practices. To participate in CSP, farmers and ranchers must have already addressed at least two resource concerns on their property via existing ("base") practices and agree to address at least one additional priority resource concern during a 5-year contract term (USDA, NRCS, 2023d).

Like EQIP, CSP evaluates applications according to the degree to which proposed practices address resource concerns. CSP payments relate to factors including the number of resource concerns addressed by existing ("base") practices and the number of additional practices to be undertaken (USDA, NRCS, 2024c). In the 2018 Farm Bill, CSP funding was reduced and the program was converted from an acreage-based program with an aggregate enrolment cap to a dollar-based program with annual funding caps (USDA, ERS, 2024). However, the reduction in CCC CSP funding was offset by $3.2 billion from IRA appropriations to the CSP between FY 2023 and FY 2026. Figure 5 shows the top 10 CSP practices in terms of acreage in Fiscal Years 2019 and 2023.

Figure 5
Acres under top 10 Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) practices, fiscal year 2019 and fiscal year 2023



Note: Base practices are shown as patterned pie slices; enhancements are solid colors. All available years of data are reported. The "Other" category contains both base practices and enhancements.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using information from USDA, National Resources Conservation Service (2023a).

Although the methods and practice adoption of EQIP and CSP are similar, recipients are somewhat different. EQIP can be viewed as an entry-level program that helps producers start incorporating conservation practices on their land or helps them address specific problems. CSP helps producers maintain and expand conservation activities, with the longer-term goal of addressing all resource concerns throughout the operation. For example, CSP provides payments for base practices, but at a lower rate than payments for enhancements (10 percent of the cost of establishment for base practices versus 125 percent for enhancements) (USDA, NRCS, 2024c).

Technical Assistance

Not all USDA conservation programs involve financial incentives. USDA technical assistance involves personalized guidance to producers seeking to improve the environmental performance of their operations. USDA technical assistance is primarily provided by USDA, NRCS. The USDA, NRCS sources of assistance fall into two categories.

The USDA, NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA) receives discretionary (non-CCC) funding. Through CTA, producers develop conservation plans to help design and implement strategies for addressing resource concerns through practice adoption. The plans also detail which Farm Bill programs might be part of that plan (e.g. EQIP), although many practices are applied by producers without receiving financial assistance. Between FY 2005 and FY 2023, CTA has been used to apply conservation practices on 11 to 28 million acres annually (USDA, NRCS, 2023b).

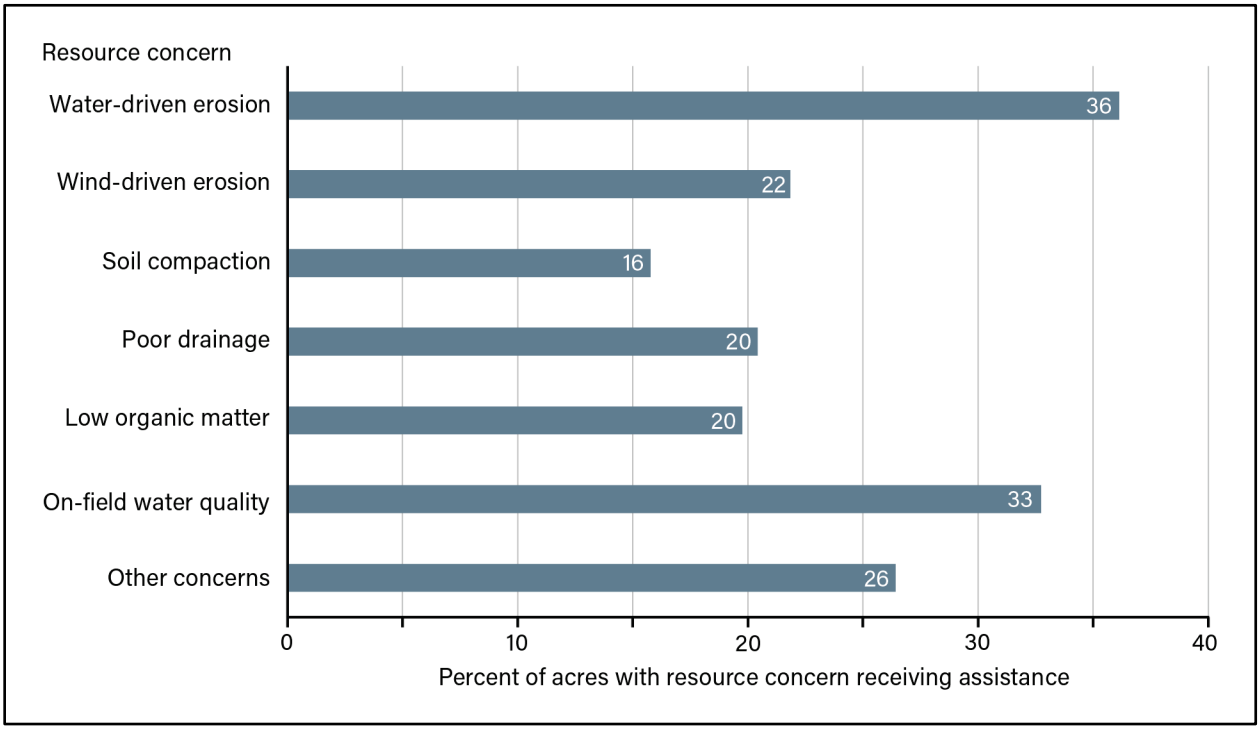
The other type of technical assistance (TA) receives mandatory CCC funding through Farm Bills. TA is included in the budgets of specific programs such as CRP, EQIP, CSP, and ACEP to assist the planning and implementation of contracts.[17] TA funding covers aspects of Farm Bill program implementation, such as staff support and ground-truthing of claimed conservation practice implementation. From 2019–24, an average of about $825 million per year was provided for CTA. An average of an additional (inflation adjusted) $1.7 billion per year was provided for "mandatory" technical assistance through conservation programs (e.g., EQIP) during that time period. On top of these Farm Bill-authorized funds, the IRA appropriated an additional $1 billion in 2022 to provide CTA through USDA, NRCS (USDA, OBPA, 2024).

In addition to helping achieve program goals and providing public benefits, technical assistance can help producers address field-level resource concerns that have broader implications when applied across all operations participating in a program. Rosenberg and Wallander (2022) found that for selected commodity crop producers with specific resource concerns, the concerns most likely to receive targeted technical assistance (not necessarily through USDA) were on-field water quality and wind- and water-driven erosion. The report found that USDA, NRCS was the most common provider of technical assistance for on-field resource concerns, but technical assistance that producers reported also came from university cooperative extension staff, State agencies, and other sources. Using more recent USDA Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) information for each of the four major commodity crops—corn in 2021, soybeans in 2018, cotton in 2019, and wheat in 2022—figure 6 shows that that the

[17] See Rosenberg and Wallander (2022) and Stubbs (2007) for discussions on sources of technical assistance.

top resource concerns remain unchanged from Rosenberg and Wallander (2022) for corn, soybean, wheat, and cotton producers receiving technical assistance.[18]

Figure 6
Percent of U.S. acres in corn, soybeans, wheat, and cotton receiving technical assistance for each specific resource concern



Note: Bars depict the percent of combined acres in corn (2021), soybeans (2018), cotton (2019), and wheat (2022) receiving technical assistance to address specific concerns, given that the field had that concern. Technical assistance may be received from USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, university cooperative extension staff, State agencies, or other sources. Individual fields are included in multiple bars if the fields report having multiple resource concerns. The "other concerns" category represented within-field soil and water concerns that are not already specified on the list.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Agricultural Resource Management Survey, Phase 2, for corn (2021), soybeans (2018), cotton (2019), and wheat (2022).

Conservation Compliance

In contrast to direct payments through voluntary incentive programs, USDA's Conservation Compliance provisions are conditions of eligibility for USDA program benefits. Compliance explicitly links environmental and income objectives and can leverage USDA program payments for environmental gain.

Under highly erodible land conservation provisions (HELC, often referred to as "sodbuster"), producers who cultivate land that was determined to be highly erodible in 1990 must apply an approved soil

[18] Although USDA, NRCS provides technical assistance for CRP, we would not expect this assistance to be included, as these surveys ask about actively cropped fields. Producers participating in USDA, NRCS programs can hire designated technical service providers to provide some kinds of technical assistance and can be reimbursed by USDA, NRCS. Services from technical service providers may be included in figure 6, although ARMS does not ask specifically about them.

conservation system or risk becoming ineligible for nearly all agriculture-related program benefits.[19] Under wetland conservation provisions (often referred to as "swampbuster"), producers must refrain from draining wetlands on which crops had not been grown prior to 1986 or face the loss of program benefits (Claassen et al., 2017). Claassen et al. (2017) found that between 1982 and 1997, water-driven soil erosion fell significantly more for fields subject to HELC than those that were not subject to HELC. Between 1997 and 2017, USDA, NRCS National Resources Inventory data suggest that soil erosion on agricultural land remained largely stable (or trending to slightly declining) on both highly erodible land (HEL) and non-HEL lands (USDA, NRCS, 2022b).[20] The USDA, NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) Cropland estimated results suggest soil erosion has fallen further during that time period, dropping between 13 and 16 percent from the time between CEAP I (2003–06) and CEAP II (2013–16).

For producers who choose to grow crops on land that has not been previously tilled, the “sodsaver” provision reduces crop insurance premium subsidies and limits the yield or revenue guarantee available during the first 4 years of crop production. The sodsaver provisions apply only to native sod in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Nebraska.

Measures of Benefits

Due to the nature of the impacts of agricultural conservation policies, which can entail many small changes across a broad landscape, assessing the full impact of the programs is challenging. However, numerous studies provide measures of a variety of impacts. For example, Allen and Vandever’s (2012) annotated bibliography reviewing the impacts of the CRP on wildlife lists several hundred publications. The USDA, NRCS CEAP Cropland Assessment also reports on trends in conservation practices on cultivated cropland and associated outcomes over time. They find that between CEAP I (2003–06) and CEAP II (2013–16), model-estimated average annual water and wind erosion dropped by 70 million and 94 million tons, respectively. The authors attribute the erosion declines to conservation practice adoption, including conservation tillage, cover cropping, and other practices supported by USDA conservation programs (USDA, NRCS, 2022a).

When CRP takes land out of crop production and a conserving cover is established instead, CRP dramatically reduces erosion from both enrolled and adjacent cropland. The 2023 Annual Report on CRP Water Quality Practices found that overall edge-of-field losses for nitrogen and phosphorus were lowered by 361 million and 79 million pounds, respectively, due to CRP in 2023 (USDA, FPAC-BC and FSA, 2024).

[19] Affected farm program benefits can include farm commodity programs, crop insurance premium subsidies, conservation programs, disaster assistance, farm loan programs, and others.

[20] The soil erosion data viewer (USDA, NRCS, 2022b) displays erosion data from 1982–2017. The viewer does not separate fields by lands subject to HEL compliance but does separate by HEL status.

Additionality, Persistence, and Participation

When accounting for the benefits of practice adoption through program participation, it is useful to consider whether the practice would be adopted without program participation (additionality), as well as whether the practice will be maintained post participation (persistence). Measuring this can be challenging, requiring prediction of what would have happened had the program not existed. While definitive results are not common, several analyses illuminate the scope and extent of additionality and persistence.

Claassen et al. (2014, 2018) found that the degree of additionality provided by a program depends, in large part, on the practices the programs support. Specifically, they found that practices that can be profitable were more likely to be adopted without payments ("low additionality" practices). Practices that are expensive to install or that provide limited on-farm benefits are unlikely to be adopted without payments ("high additionality" practices). Wallander et al. (2019) found that producers were also more likely to drop these types of high additionality practices from their existing EQIP contracts.

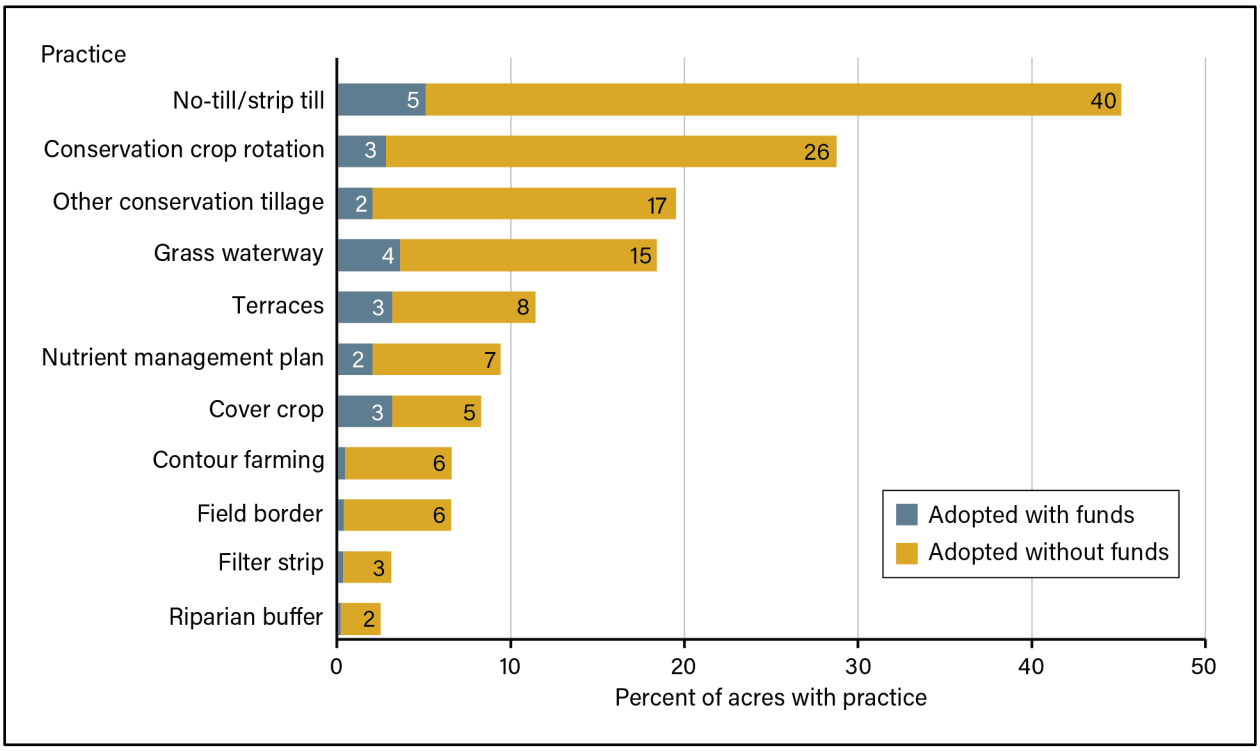
Practices that are more commonly adopted without assistance are likely seen as more privately beneficial and are less likely to be "additional." Figure 7 shows the percent of cropland acres adopting practices with (in blue) and without funding (in red). The figure (an update from Claassen et al. (2014)) suggests that many practices are adopted without payments. No-till, strip till, and reduced tillage are very common, as they are often profitable without assistance. Overall, unfunded no-till, strip till, and other conservation tillage practices have increased substantially since 2009–11, as reported in Claassen et al. (2014).[21]

Other high additionality practices, such as terraces or cover crops, are less likely to be adopted without assistance relative to other practices. These practices have a higher proportion of acres receiving assistance.[22] Those practices that were assessed in 2009–11 (nutrient management, terraces, filter strips, field borders, riparian buffers, and grass waterways) have maintained relatively stable acreage or increased marginally.

[21] Note that Claassen et al. (2014) used corn (2010), wheat (2009), and barley and sorghum (2011) to calculate practice adoption with and without payments.

[22] Canales et al. (2024), Mezzatesta et al. (2013) have qualitatively similar findings on the relative additionality of tillage and cover crop practices.

Figure 7
Conservation practice adoption as a percentage of acres with and without financial assistance in corn, soybeans, wheat, and cotton (2019–23)



Note: Bars depict the percent of acres in corn (2021), soybeans (2023), cotton (2019), and wheat (2022) performing a practice with or without reporting ever having received financial assistance for that practice. Financial assistance can be from Federal programs or other sources, such as State or private incentive programs. Individual fields are included in multiple rows if the fields report using multiple practices.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Agricultural Resource Management Survey, Phase 2, for corn (2021), soybeans (2023), cotton (2019), and wheat (2022).

Additionality in the context of General or Continuous CRP has several aspects. For example: Would cropland enrolled into CRP have continued to be cropped, or would it have been converted to some other use? Rosenberg et al. (2024) examine additionality specific to the CRP, arguing that the land-use decisions of offers rejected from the 2016 CRP General Signup, a year with a much higher than average EBI threshold for acceptance, are representative of enrolled offers from other General Signups. They find that 38 percent of rejected U.S. farm acreage went on to produce crops in the 3 following years, but that 21 percent was in grass, 15 percent was in mixed forage, and 10 percent were fallowed. Rosenberg et al. (2024) find that those applying to CRP for the first time had a much higher percentage of land in commodity crops after rejection, compared to returning applicants with previous or expiring CRP enrollment. Cover on land that has left CRP is both directly indicative of persistence and indirectly indicative of additionality.

Other literature has suggested that about 50 percent of CRP-enrolled land eventually reverts to crop production after contracts expire (Hansen, 2007). Bigelow et al. (2020) found that approximately 60 percent of land in contracts expiring between 2013 and 2016 returned to crop or forage production. Notably, in contrast to Rosenberg et al. (2024), much of this land voluntarily exited CRP and is therefore more likely to return to cropland than rejected CRP offers.

Conclusion

Over the past four Farm Bills (2002, 2008, 2014, and 2018), USDA has provided an annual average of more than $6.2 billion (inflation adjusted) to agricultural conservation programs through CCC funding laid out in Farm Bills. The 2022 supplemental appropriations from the IRA increased conservation funding.

USDA conservation programs range from permanently removing sensitive lands from production through programs such as ACEP-WRE to shorter-term removals through programs such as CRP. These programs also include targeted modifications to agricultural practices on working lands, such as EQIP and CSP. While difficult to measure precisely, these programs have generated environmental benefits across the landscape (e.g. Allen & Vandever, 2012; FAPRI, 2007; Feather et al., 1999).

USDA policy continues to evolve. Over 2019–24, a greater proportion of funds was allocated to working-lands programs corresponding with the expansion of Grasslands CRP and supplemental IRA funding for several working-lands programs. Improving program cost effectiveness, including achieving additional changes in on-farm conservation, remains a topic of research interest.

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