Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

Recommendations for Increasing Community Capacity to Deliver Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Congress must do more than allocate financial assistance to each program in the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill; it must provide sufficient technical assistance or ‘boots on the ground’ to help farmers, ranchers and forest landowners implement conservation practices. Effective delivery of Farm Bill programs depends on partnerships among the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), other Federal agencies, and strong community-based, local and regional organizations to provide landowner outreach and education, collaboration assistance and landscape-scale strategic planning, landowner and community skill building, on the ground technical assistance, and connection to larger support networks. We refer to this as a community’s capacity to deliver Farm Bill and other conservation programs.

In a tight budget environment, it is essential that limited dollars are well spent to achieve multiple benefits. NRCS and community-based, local and regional organizations must work in coordination to provide access to and delivery of programs that help conserve and steward farms, ranches and forestlands, ensure long-term ecological health, build local economic stability, and enhance productivity and delivery of products to market.

Key Recommendations to Support and Maintain Capacity for Effective Conservation

1. Designate collaboration and capacity building outcomes as priority preference criteria for allocation of grants, loans and cost share for partnership programs.

2. Direct the agencies to increase their use of cooperative, contribution and technical service provider agreements to achieve Farm Bill program outcomes.

3. Formalize the role of community-based, local and regional organizations as strategic agency partners in Farm Bill program delivery.

4. Direct NRCS to develop and report on performance measures that would allow Congress and the public to fully understand the impact of technical assistance and partnership investments.

5. Expand NRCS’s ability to use Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding to support partnerships between NRCS staff and community-based and regional organizations and other non-federal conservation partners and specialists, and continue to increase CTA funding in annual appropriations.

6. Encourage a higher percentage of program funding be directed to Technical Assistance (TA) and expand its range of use for outreach, collaborative planning, skill building, and increased partnership with community-based, local and regional organizations.

7. Prioritize funding to programs that support landscape-scale conservation and dedicate funding to the community-based, local and regional organizations that spearhead planning efforts.

8. Direct a percentage of Regional Conservation Partnership Program funds to capacity building and technical assistance for program implementation partners and organizations.

9. Establish reimbursements for the transaction costs and services provided by community-based, local and regional organizations that enable landowners to participate in working lands easement programs.

10. Expand funding for Technical Service Providers (TSPs) and encourage NRCS to simplify the application process, increasing the ability of non-federal partners, especially community-based, local and regional organizations to become a TSP.
As participants in the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) and partnering landowners, organizations and businesses, we strongly support the work of the NRCS and other Federal agencies, and stand willing and able to work in partnership with the Department to achieve strong and lasting program outcomes.

**Strong Intermediaries Can Provide Essential Functions for Effective Conservation:**

Congress and the agencies can increase the effectiveness of the Farm Bill Conservation Title by partnering, engaging and supporting community-based, local and regional organizations to fulfill the following roles and activities:

- **Improve outreach, marketing and access to Farm Bill conservation programs.**
  
  Landowner education is the first step to providing access to Farm Bill conservation programs. Before a landowner is willing to participate in a voluntary program, he or she must be fully aware of all requirements and incentives, as well as the impact program participation will have on the management of their own property and possibly their neighbor’s property. Community-based, local and regional organizations and networks are well suited to provide outreach and marketing services to landowners. In fact, there are many organizations across the country already doing this. To improve outreach and marketing, Congress should formalize the roles of community-based, local and regional organizations and increase partnership with and funding to these entities to ensure their success. Congress should direct the agencies to develop performance measures and require reporting on accomplishments related to the use of community-based, local and regional organizations to improve program outreach, marketing and access.

- **Provide on the ground project-specific technical assistance, including planning, to ensure delivery of conservation programs at the landowner level.**
  
  We need more ‘boots on the ground’ and rural communities have boots to offer. Often, the landowner demand for project-specific technical assistance is far greater than the ability to provide such assistance. Congress and the agency must prioritize funding for technical assistance to implement effective conservation and restoration activities (e.g., wetland or riparian restoration project design, change in irrigation delivery, conservation planning, etc.) ensuring the enhancement and protection of our natural resources. To increase ‘boots on the ground’ Congress should encourage the Executive branch to allocate enough funding to support the staff needed to provide technical assistance. This includes technical assistance provided by on the ground agency personnel as well as non-federal conservation partners and specialists (including biologists, ecologists, foresters and rangeland specialists) who can work with agency staff to assist landowners and managers.

- **Implement strategic and collaborative conservation planning at a landscape-scale.**
  
  Landscape-scale conservation planning and implementation is an efficient and comprehensive means to protect the productivity of multiple natural resources, recognize relationships between ecological processes within a landscape, and incorporate multiple stakeholders into decision-making processes. Community-based, local and regional groups are critical to building agreement among stakeholders around land management and economic development goals. They reach agreement through community and landowner engagement, collaborative planning processes, and the use of pilot projects and facilitated dialogue to build trust before scaling up efforts. Congress should prioritize and fund programs that support landscape-scale conservation and dedicate funding to the community-based, local and regional organizations that spearhead these planning efforts.

- **Build and strengthen networks of landowners and community-based, local and regional organizations to advance effective program outreach, planning and implementation.**
  
  Networks promote the use and effectiveness of conservation programs by catalyzing landowner outreach and education and providing access to ‘boots on the ground’ technical assistance. They help advance the learning and problem solving needed for effective program design and implementation. It is through these networks that many landowners learn about the mechanics of Farm Bill programs, get connected with technical assistance providers and resources, and share their experiences. Congress should support existing networks of landowners...
and community-based, local and regional organizations (including general operations and staffing) that undertake many of the activities listed above.

- Provide the organizational infrastructure needed to staff and organize collaboration, community and landowner engagement, and conservation project planning and implementation.

Strong and stable community-based, local and regional organizations are essential to Farm Bill program delivery. Supporting organizational infrastructure means building strong foundations for community-based organizations, intermediary groups and networks by providing small amounts of tailored financial and technical assistance to promote ‘back of office’ systems and processes that lead to effective, efficient, and lasting organizations. These are essential functions such as financial management systems, strategic planning, human resources, communications tools and other elements that underpin effective organizations. Congress should support the organizational infrastructure needs of these community-based organizations, as they relate to Farm Bill conservation programs.

- Provide educational and skill building opportunities for technical assistance providers and recipients.

Community-based, local and regional organizations provide trainings and workshops to improve the skills and knowledge of local landowners and groups. Farm Bill conservation programs will reach more landowners and produce better long-term results if Congress allocates funding for education and skill building opportunities in areas such as sustainable grazing systems, ecological function and monitoring, effective conflict resolution, financial management and grant-writing. Congress can also provide funding for peer-to-peer learning among community leaders, organizations and practitioners to facilitate the transfer of successful models between communities in different regions of the country.

Expanded Recommendations to Support and Maintain Capacity for Effective Conservation

Congress and/or the agencies should:

1. Designate collaboration and capacity building outcomes as priority preference criteria for allocation of grants, loans, and cost share for partnership programs in the Conservation Title.

Collaboration and partnerships create a strong new model for doing business in rural America. To support this model Congress should draft and approve a Farm Bill that will prioritize funding for projects and activities that strengthen community capacity by supporting strong community-based, local and regional organizations and networks and the array of entities that support Farm Bill program delivery. This can be accomplished by improving criteria to reward and support projects that can show evidence of collaboration and partnerships and that focus on capacity building.

2. Direct the agencies to increase their use of cooperative, contribution and technical service provider agreements to achieve Farm Bill conservation program outcomes.

Congress and the Secretaries of USDA and USDI should provide direction and training to increase the use of cooperative and contribution agreements for conservation and capacity building. These tools are an effective means by which NRCS can partner with intermediaries to provide technical assistance to landowners. The NRCS Chief should
direct staff to use agreements to support community-based, local and regional organizations in providing technical assistance, outreach and community engagement for conservation programs.

3. **Formalize the role of community-based, local and regional organizations as strategic agency partners in Farm Bill program delivery.**

All partnership programs within the Farm Bill must provide formal funding for non-federal partners that contribute staff, organizational infrastructure, knowledge and training to support the delivery of conservation programs. This may include the explicit provision of reimbursements for administrative costs of partners or a stand-alone provision establishing an education and outreach program within the Farm Bill. Congress must work with NRCS and partners to determine the most appropriate method for formalizing the role of community-based, local and regional organizations.

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**Importance and Role of Community-Based Organizations in the West**

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are community-focused and/or locally-led groups uniquely positioned to play a significant role in the delivery of Farm Bill programs in the West.

These groups are strategically situated and capable of aligning the goals and resources of ‘outside’ entities – including the federal government – with the activities of conservation-oriented landowners and businesses.

Over the past 15 years, we have witnessed the success of these groups that occupy the space between agencies and landowners and leverage public and private dollars for conservation, both at the local and regional scales.

Although there is no set formula for effective CBOs, there are a number of general commonalities:

- A locally-focused mission that includes an integrated approach to ecological conservation and restoration, natural resource-based economic development, and retention and promotion of local cultures;

- A commitment to the use of collaborative processes to define, implement and monitor conservation and sustainability goals and activities on the landscape;

- Governance and advisory structures that include significant local leadership, complemented by diverse expertise and representation that often includes conservation organizations, federal and state agencies, recreationists, and out-of-area interests;

- A business and markets orientation – driven by local and regional expertise – that finds a role for federal conservation investments inside broader business models or economic development plans that leverage public and private capital and “sweat equity,” for lowest cost, highest value conservation outcomes that retain jobs and wealth in the local economy; and

- The ability to leverage small amounts of funding to accomplish significant conservation goals by utilizing multiple funding streams and capitalizing on local knowledge and labor.

Developing and funding CBOs is an investment that pays dividends in the medium and long-term. In the short-term, building the capacity of organizations, training staff, engaging in collaborative planning and fostering relationships between landowners and federal agencies utilizes resources that may not immediately lead to restoration activities.

However, once these initial investments have been made, conservation implementation accelerates greatly and the ratio of funding for capacity building vs. funding for on the ground programs becomes very small. On the other hand, failing to support adequate CBO capacity can condemn an area to “creeping” restoration and conservation implementation, with large amounts of funding going underutilized or unused.
4. Direct NRCS to develop and report on performance measures that would allow Congress and the public to more fully understand the impact of technical assistance and partnership investments.

There must be more accountability for Farm Bill conservation program outcomes resulting from the outlay of technical assistance funding. The responsibility for reporting on technical assistance funding spent and outcomes achieved can and should be shared by both the NRCS and community-based, local and regional organizations. NRCS should develop performance measures that would allow Congress and the public to more fully understand the impact of technical assistance and partnership investments.

5. Expand NRCS’s ability to use Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding to support partnerships between NRCS staff and community-based and regional organizations and other non-federal conservation partners and specialists, and continue to increase CTA funding in the annual appropriations process for this purpose.

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding is necessary for effective outreach, delivery, and implementation of conservation programs. CTA funding supports NRCS representatives in the field, but it also supports the ability of the agency to partner with community-based and regional organizations through cooperative, contribution, and technical service provider agreements and contracts. The use of partnerships through these agreements can build delivery capacity, create local benefit, and leverage private resources for greater impact. There is a need for additional CTA funding to support existing conservation programs. If additional funds are unavailable, we recommend increasing the percentage of total conservation program allocations that go to TA, to grow the effectiveness of Financial Assistance cost-share dollars.

6. Encourage a higher percentage of program funding be directed to Technical Assistance (TA) and expand its range of use for outreach, collaborative planning, and skill building activities, and increased partnership with community-based, local and regional organizations.

Technical Assistance (TA) is the essential vehicle for delivery of Farm Bill conservation programs. However, TA is consistently underfunded. Even in the years when Congress allocates additional funding for on the ground conservation, the Executive branch neglects to provide the TA funding necessary to get the project dollars on the ground. Further, TA funding is only permitted for a limited category of activities performed in furthering the delivery of Farm Bill conservation programs. We strongly support the expanded use of TA funding for essential capacity-building activities such as: (a) community engagement and collaborative watershed planning; (b) program marketing and outreach; (c) support of community-based, local and regional organizations serving as intermediaries between federal staff and landowners; and (d) skill building and educational activities for landowners and community members. This will ensure that there are TA funds available for functions that are currently being ignored due to lack of money.

7. Prioritize funding to programs that support landscape-scale conservation and dedicate funding to the community-based, local and regional organizations that spearhead these planning efforts.

Conservation practices are most effective and provide the most significant results when implemented on a landscape-scale. Further, meaningful partnerships among government agencies and community-based, local and regional organizations can produce long-lasting conservation projects that transform local thinking and practice around land management. These two elements – landscape-scale and local leadership – are necessary to achieve the ultimate goals of the Farm Bill Conservation Title. Congress should direct NRCS to prioritize funding for programs and projects that incorporate these essential characteristics.

8. Direct a percentage of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (CCPI and AWEP merged program) funds to capacity building and technical assistance for program implementation partners and organizations.

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) depends on ‘boots on the ground’ delivery by third party partners and organizations. While this program supports partnerships and collaborative efforts in the design stages, there is a lack of funding to support other crucial activities such as outreach. The impact of RCPP to local communities would be amplified if the Farm Bill directed a portion of program funding to be used to increase the organizational capacity of community-based organizations.
that contribute to program delivery. Often, the small local entities best suited to engage in the outreach and education of landowners cannot cover their own administrative costs or other costs of providing these services. These entities should be eligible to use a portion of RCPP TA to cover these costs, especially in the first year of the program, when they are building their accomplishments and track record to apply for additional private sources of funding.

9. Establish reimbursements for the transaction costs and services provided by community-based, local and regional groups that enable landowners to participate in working lands easement programs.

For easement programs like the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program (FRPP) and the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), Congress should allow reimbursement of transaction costs incurred by cooperating entities. This would include costs for appraisals, surveys, environmental assessments, title searches, geologist reports, and legal fees, and should be covered for up to 5% of the appraised value of the conservation easement. There is also an ongoing need for funds to ensure long-term monitoring and compliance with terms of conservation easements. By providing funding for these transaction costs and services, Congress will encourage participation and increase the capacity of community-based organizations that provide the coordination of these services, thereby ensuring their continued participation.

10. Expand funding for Technical Service Providers (TSP) and encourage NRCS to simplify the application process, thereby increasing the ability of a larger subset of non-federal partners, especially community-based, local and regional organizations to become a TSP.

Technical service providers – third parties that are hired to provide technical assistance – are an important component of the conservation program delivery system. Currently, the TSP program is used to develop conservation plans and perform limited compliance duties, and to plan, design and outline conservation practices. The TSP program should be expanded beyond these roles to help meet the significant workload needed to deliver and implement Farm Bill conservation programs. This is particularly important in states lacking sufficient NRCS personnel to fully apply the conservation program resources available to them. Another method to expand the TSP program is to enhance accessibility for applicants. Many potential applicants find the application process burdensome; streamlining the process would increase the number of applicants able to successfully enter the TSP program, thereby increasing the pool of intermediaries providing Farm Bill conservation program delivery.

Additional Resources:


Please see the back cover for a list of coalition partners.
Alaska
Sitka Conservation Society

Arizona
Flavors Without Borders
Foodways Alliance

California
Alliance of Forest Workers
and Harvesters
Canyon Creek Ranch – Robert H. Mackey & Sons, Inc.
Watershed Research and Training Center

Idaho
Framing Our Community
Lemhi Regional Land Trust
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Salmon Valley Stewardship

Iowa
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Kentucky
Center for Rural Strategies
Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Letcher County Chapter

Massachusetts
YouthBuild USA

Minnesota
League of Rural Voters

Missouri
Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-Op

Montana
Bad Goat Forest Products
Big Hole Watershed Committee
Blackfoot Challenge
Center for Large Landscape Conservation
Flathead Economic Policy Center
Northwest Connections
Rolling Stone Ranch
Sonoran Institute
Swan Ecosystem Center
Watershed Consulting, LLC

Nevada
Robin Boies, Boies Ranches, Inc.

New Hampshire
The Carsey Institute
Northern Forest Center

New Mexico
Cottonwood Gulch Foundation
Forest Guild

New York
Seneca Trail RC&D Council, Inc.

Oregon
Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council
Ecosystem Workforce Program
Harney County Watershed Council
Institute for Culture and Ecology
Josephine County Stewardship Group
Klamath Basin Rangeland Trust
Lake County Resources Initiative
Mid Klamath Watershed Council
Oregon Rural Action
Savory Institute, LLC
Siouxsland Institute
Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative
Sustainable Northwest
Wallowa Resources

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Conservation Northwest
Mt. Adams Resource Stewards
Pinchot Institute

Washington, DC
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