Perspectives on the 2013 Farm Bill

Conservation Title:
Making Partnerships Work for Conservation

By Douglas J. Lawrence

"Farm Bills are evolutionary, not revolutionary." One area of evolutionary movement in the Conservation Title has been in the area of partnerships, particularly engaging the public-private partnership engine to generate resources—financial, technical and intellectual—aimed at seeking and solving pressing conservation issues at local, watershed, regional and even national scales.

One of the big obstacles to expanding partnerships is that the funding for partners' technical assistance comes from the already constrained funding for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff. To put this in perspective, let's look at what has happened to the NRCS workload. The Environmental Quality incentives Program (EQIP) has grown nearly eight-fold since 1996. This means an eight-fold increase in the number of producer contracts to be administered, and an eight-fold increase in the technical assistance needed to service those contracts. Unfortunately, because of how the Office of Management and Budget apportions Farm Bill funding between technical and financial assistance and cuts made to appropriated accounts, NRCS staffing levels have actually fallen over the past decade, leaving little capacity for the Agency to materially increase technical assistance partnerships.

The Conservation Title of the Farm Bill is founded in partnerships. Historically these have been partnerships between USDA, Conservation Districts and individual farmers and ranchers. Beginning in 1996, the Farm Bill expanded opportunities for engaging private-sector technical expertise to advance the delivery of conservation with the Technical Service Provider (TSP) provision. This provision, which was further defined and clarified in subsequent farm bills, has yet to deliver its full potential, in part because of the mechanisms used for implementation. On the surface it seems that this would be a simple decision—why not invest in temporary, private-sector technical assistance? However, when this comes at a cost of maintaining internal capacity, and there is a need for national technical standards and coverage in every county, finding funds for TSP becomes difficult to manage. The balance continues to be a challenge for the delivery of federal assistance, but could be addressed through more prescriptive language from Congress on how to support additional technical resources, while maintaining needed national consistency and standards.

The 2002 Farm Bill took progressive steps in offering another vehicle for engaging non-federal involvement in conservation activities. The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) envisioned federal interests coming together with local, state and private-sector interests to develop solutions focused on high priority natural resource needs. While failing to launch from that authorization, the concept was more clearly defined in 2008 and fully implemented by NRCS. Yet challenges remain, again with the provision of essential technical assistance. Current policy does not provide for supporting partner technical assistance directly through partnership programs, although complementary vehicles exist. It would be much more straightforward and more accountable to consolidate the entire partnership project, including technical and financial support for partners through a single agreement.

The Senate Version of the 2013 Farm Bill and the House Agriculture Committee-passed version both continue the evolution of partnerships in Title II by creating a Regional Conservation Partnership Program that combines CCPI, the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, and the Great Lake Basin Program for Soil Erosion and Sediment Control. However, Congress did not go far enough. Additional opportunities exist to use partnerships to help meet the demand by producers for technical assistance; accelerate the development and adoption of precision agriculture technologies; and gain access to skill sets not widely available in NRCS.

To move Title II partnerships forward will require the Farm Bill to:

1. Establish a stream of funding under the Farm Bill, additional and separate from federal technical assistance, to directly engage third parties in providing this assistance. Funding for partnerships should be proportional to available funding.
2. Increase access to alternative funding arrangements under conservation programs to allow cooperatives and other groups of eligible participants to act on behalf of their membership and customers to accept and distribute payments.
3. Provide incentives for agri-business to incorporate conservation attributes into to their products and services.
4. Increase the funding delivered through the existing CCPI program or the proposed Regional Conservation Program.
5. Clarify and strengthen section 1240A(5)(B) of EQIP that provides guidance on using EQIP financial assistance funding for the development of conservation plans.
6. Provide additional guidance on how Farm Bill funding is apportioned by the Administration.

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