



Keeping Working Lands Working

Please support the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program in the 2018 Farm Bill

The 2014 Farm Bill provided billions of dollars for conservation, including \$1 billion over ten years for conservation easements, helping land trusts to protect high-priority farm and ranch lands, grasslands, wetlands and forests.

The bill established the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. It combines the former Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). ACEP contains two components: The Agricultural Land Easements Program (ALE) provides grants for state and local nonprofits to buy easements on working farms and ranches; and the Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) provides grants for landowners to restore and protect wetlands.

ALE provides up to 50% of the cost of buying these easements, which can be held by land trusts or by state and local farmland protection programs. ALE and its predecessor programs have helped fund the conservation of over a million acres of active agricultural land nationwide.

Funding Investments in Conservation

The average total spending for ACEP was set at \$405 million per year for 2014-2018; a 32% decrease from the average of \$732 million for FRP, GRP and WRP prior to 2014.

However, because of pressures to meet tight budget targets across the entire 2014 Farm Bill, the ACEP funding has been cut to \$250 million for 2018. We need to reverse that cut in the new Farm Bill. Already applicants represent more than twice available funding; without an increase in funding, those projects – and the irreplaceable lands they represent – will be lost.

Please help us restore baseline funding for ACEP to at least \$500 million per year in the 2018 Farm Bill.

Streamlining ACEP

While demand for easement funding continues to be high, the program is difficult to navigate. Too often, it takes two to three years to close a deal after an agreement is made between NRCS, a land trust and landowner. This makes it difficult for farmers and ranchers to make other important investments without knowing when – or whether – they will receive funding.

Investing in better, faster appraisal reviews; letting land trusts do their own title work; and giving land trusts more flexibility in writing their easements would be major steps toward achieving this.

We support streamlining ACEP to make it easier to use for land trusts and landowners so that all deals can be closed within six months.