



The organizations noted at the left participated in the Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group.

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## COALITION RELEASES BLUEPRINT FOR GROWING CONSERVATION

*Report highlights consensus priorities of leading hunting, fishing and conservation organizations for 2007 Farm Bill; groups call for robust fish and wildlife funding*

WASHINGTON – The Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group (AWWG) of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) today released recommendations for the conservation programs of the federal legislation commonly known as the Farm Bill. Encapsulated in a report entitled “Growing Conservation in the Farm Bill,” these recommendations show how the U.S. can make conservation a new priority commodity.

“Few people realize just how much the Farm Bill matters for fish and wildlife,” said Barton James of Ducks Unlimited, a co-chair of the AWWG. “Its importance is huge – it’s the single largest federal investment in conservation on private land, which covers more than half of the landscape in the lower 48.”

“Through two years of close study, we’ve found a crystal-clear rationale for expanding Farm Bill conservation programs,” said Dave Nomsen of Pheasants Forever, a co-chair of the AWWG. “We’ve also identified a series of balanced, realistic, achievable and necessary program improvements.”

“The approach of the AWWG has been hallmarked by care for the details, which is not always easy when the political sands are shifting under your feet,” said George Cooper, Acting President of the TRCP. “The working group’s efforts have been a model for persistence and constant collaboration. We owe a debt of gratitude to the efforts of Lynn Tjeerdsma, whom the USDA shared with us for almost three years to make this collaboration possible, and our deepest thanks go to the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation for its ongoing commitment to supporting our work.”

“Seeding well-thought-out conservation practices enables farmers, ranchers and forest owners to grow conservation in harmony with food, fiber and fuel,” said Adrienne Wojciechowski of The Nature Conservancy. “Carefully crafted, the 2007 Farm Bill has the potential to positively alter the lives of every American.”

“Never before has such a broad and diverse coalition with such a compelling and proactive vision for growing conservation in the Farm Bill come together,” said Julie Sibbing of the National Wildlife Federation. “We are eager to work with Congress to make this vision a reality.”

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The priorities of the Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group include:

- **BIOFUELS AND RENEWABLE ENERGY** – The 2007 Farm Bill, under the Energy Title, provides a unique opportunity to promote the next generation of biofuels and renewable energy. Research and development funding should promote the next generation of biofuels and renewable energy technology based on sustainable polycultures that are consistent with fish, wildlife, soil, nutrient management and water conservation goals. Taxpayer investment in conservation and wildlife gains accomplished during the past 20 years under Farm Bill conservation programs should not be sacrificed or diminished.
- **“SODSAVER” OR NON-CROPLAND CONVERSION** – Any land that does not meet the definition of cropland, as determined by the USDA/Farm Service Agency, that is converted from non-cropland status to cropland should be made ineligible for any federal benefit, including but not limited to price and income support payments, crop insurance, disaster payments, conservation program enrollment, and FSA farm loan benefits. To preserve its identity, non-cropland converted to cropland shall be reconstituted as a separate farm by FSA.
- **CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE** – Sodbuster/swampbuster compliance should be linked to all federal farm program benefits, including crop insurance and disaster program eligibility. A farm shall be ineligible to receive federal benefits for the year noncompliance is discovered. Following-year eligibility may be approved if noncompliance is rectified and restoration is certified within six months of discovery.
- **CONSERVATION PERFORMANCE MEASURES** – It is imperative that we identify and authorize specific mechanisms for tracking the success of conservation measures.
- **CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP)** – Reauthorize the most successful USDA conservation program and ensure its competitive viability. Cropland eligibility criteria for enrollment in CRP and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) shall retain the requirement mandated in the 2002 Farm Bill that in order to be eligible for enrollment in CRP, cropland must have been planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity during four of the six years from 1996 through 2001. CREP and Continuous CRP authority should be reauthorized. Overall CRP acreage should expand to 45 million acres.
- **WETLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM (WRP)** – Increase America’s number-one wetlands restoration program to 300,000 acres per year to improve wetlands conservation, mitigate wetlands loss, provide migratory bird and fisheries habitat, and improve water quality.
- **GRASSLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM (GRP)** - Increase GRP to 2 million acres per year. Require that a minimum of 60 percent of the agreements are long term easements of 30 years or more. Provide incentives for large tract non cropland native grasslands.
- **WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVES PROGRAM (WHIP)** – Gradually increase the WHIP funding from \$100 million to \$300 million over the course of the 2007 Farm Bill. A significant portion of new funds should be targeted for aquatic restoration activities, including instream habitat improvement projects. Conservation partnerships and program benefits should be enhanced by incorporating the assistance of states, municipalities, and non-government organizations to deliver and manage WHIP.

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- *ACCESS* – Include a provision based upon “Open Fields” legislation, S. 548/H.R. 1351 in 109th Congress, to provide \$20 million per year in grants to fund state-managed, voluntary access programs. Program funds shall be used to enhance wildlife management and improve recreational opportunities on land enrolled in Farm Bill conservation programs. Landowner assurances that reduce liability and risk can be provided through the state-managed public access programs. A higher enrollment priority shall be granted to a conservation program application that includes a public access component.
- *FORESTRY* – Reauthorize the Forest Stewardship Program, at a minimum, at its current authorization level. Conservation programs should promote long-term healthy forest ecosystems and enhance management for fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, recreation, and timber production. The Healthy Forests Reserve Program should be expanded nationwide.
- *CONSERVATION SECURITY PROGRAM (CSP)* – Reauthorize CSP and ensure that it provides increased, measurable, and consistent benefits for fish and wildlife conservation. CSP should require fish and wildlife habitat improvement components for all program tiers and require that NRCS engage federal and state fish and wildlife agencies and non-government conservation organizations when developing fish and wildlife and habitat criteria and assessments. CSP should enhance other USDA conservation programs and not replace or reduce their funding. A CSP model should also be adopted for private forestland owners.
- *FARM AND RANGLAND PROTECTION PROGRAM (FRPP)* – Reauthorize at \$300 million per year. Allow transfer of water rights on enrolled land consistent with state law. Allow landowners the right to prohibit non-cropland conversion on land subject to the easement.
- *ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP)* – Reauthorize EQIP, increase allocation percentages for fish and wildlife practices, and increase opportunities for private forestland owners. EQIP funding shall be approved only for practices and structures that do not adversely impact wetlands, riparian zones, streams, native grasslands and other environmentally sensitive areas. Existing wetlands must be maintained or improved for their functions and values in water improvement and flood control.

“America’s hunters, anglers and conservationists need to fully engage in the public debate on the Farm Bill if the resources so crucial to our outdoor heritage are to continue to be there for our enjoyment,” said Jen Mock Schaeffer of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. “Our coalition’s aim was to build a sound, science-based foundation on which we can build for the future. We hope federal policymakers have the same goals and will embrace our consensus recommendations.”

*The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is a coalition of leading hunting, fishing and conservation organizations and individual partners working together to guarantee access to places to hunt and fish, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, and increase funding for conservation.*