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Conservation Issues: The 1985 Farm Bill Debate

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Conservation issues: The 1985 farm bill debate

As part of the 1985 farm bill debate, the House and Senate are considering three conservation measures — the so-called sodbusting, swampbusting and conservation reserve provisions.

On Oct. 8, the House agreed on a final version of the 1985 farm bill, but at this writing, the Senate is still debating the bill that emerged from the Senate Agriculture Committee. It is not anticipated, however, that any changes in the conservation provisions of the Senate bill will be made on the floor of the Senate.

The sodbuster program is designed to discourage farmers from converting highly erodible land to cropland in the future by denying price supports and other farm benefits for their crops. Similarly, the swampbuster program would deny farm benefits to producers who, in the future, convert wetlands to croplands.

The conservation reserve program, in contrast, would attempt to encourage the removal of fragile land from *current* use as farmland by reimbursing farmers who shift fragile cropland to less intensive uses.

*Character is much easier
kept than recovered.*

— Thomas Paine

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CONSERVATION ISSUES
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The Sodbusting Program

The House and Senate bills provide that any person who produces an agricultural commodity on highly erodible land during any crop year shall be ineligible, as to any commodity produced by such person during that crop year, for price support payments, Commodity Credit Corp. (CCC) farm storage facility loans, federal crop insurance, federal disaster payments, and certain Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) loans — if the Secretary of Agriculture determines that the proceeds will be used for a purpose that will contribute to excessive erosion of highly erodible lands, and leasing of storage space to CCC.

The Senate bill would ban federal farm program assistance to any farmer who continues to cultivate highly erodible land after 1988 without a government-approved conservation plan. Generally, the House provision requires that, by 1990, all highly erodible land must be farmed according to an approved conservation plan in order to qualify for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) benefits.

The other significant difference between the Senate and House bills is that the House's sodbuster program would not include land capability class IIIe. As a result, the Senate bill would cover approximately 750 million acres of land, of which about 70 million acres have a high or medium potential of being converted to cropland. The House bill would reach about 650 million acres of land, of which approximately 30 million acres have a high or medium potential of being converted to cropland.

The Conservation Reserve Program

Over 50% of all soil erosion occurs on just 12% of the nation's cropland. The Conservation Reserve Program would pay an annual fee for a number of years to farmers who shift highly erodible cropland

to less erosive — but still profitable — uses. In contrast to the sodbuster provisions, The Conservation Reserve Program is aimed at taking fragile land out of crop production.

There are striking differences between the House and Senate conservation reserve programs. In terms of acreage limits, the Senate bill establishes a conservation reserve program of 25 to 30 million acres.

It requires that not less than 10 million acres be set aside in each of the 1986 and 1987 crop years, while stating that not less than five million acres, nor more than 10 million acres, be set aside during the 1988 and 1989 crop years. The House bill establishes a reserve of only 25 million acres, with no per-year minimum or maximum number of acres specified.

The bills also differ as to the length of contracts, with the Senate version stating seven to 15 years as the contract term, and the House bill generally stating a period of not less than 10 years.

Under the House and Senate provisions, the conservation reserve contract must require the Secretary of Agriculture to provide technical assistance, share the cost of carrying out certain conservation measures and practices when such cost sharing is in the public interest, pay an annual fee, and to retire any cropland base and allotment history that the owner or operator agrees to permanently retire.

The fee would be paid for a period of years, but not in excess of the duration of the contract. Under both bills, no producer is to annually receive more than \$50,000 in contract payments, and all such payments must be in cash, in kind, or in some combination thereof.

"Erosion-prone cropland" is defined in both the House and Senate bills. "Eligible erosion-prone land," for the conservation reserve, is defined only under the Senate version. It is land that has been (or has been

considered to have been) devoted to the production of an agricultural commodity during at least two of the three crop years prior to Jan. 1, 1986, thus ensuring that land actually in use as cropland is put into The Conservation Reserve Program.

The Swampbusting Program

Wetlands provide wildlife habitat, nesting areas, groundwater recharge and flood control, yet nationwide, fewer than half of our original wetlands still exist. Four out of every five acres of wetlands lost are converted to agricultural uses.

The House and Senate bills provide that any person who produces an agricultural commodity on converted wetlands during any crop year shall be ineligible — as to *any* commodity produced by such person during that crop year — for price support payments, CCC farm storage facility loans, federal crop insurance, federal disaster payments, as well as certain FmHA loans if the Secretary of Agriculture determines that the proceeds will be used for a purpose that will contribute to the conversion of wetlands.

The proposed legislation would not apply to any person who, during a crop year, produces an agricultural commodity on wetlands that become available as a result of natural conditions (such as a drought), so long as the producer does not destroy natural wetland characteristics.

The same is true if the land becomes available as a result of the conversion of artificial wetlands that were created for such purposes as stock water, fish production, irrigation, subsurface irrigation, settling basins, cooling, rice growing, flood control, or irrigation systems. Finally, the Secretary of Agriculture may exempt actions by producers, which either cumulatively or individually, have a diminutive impact on hydrological and biological values.

— Linda A. Malone