

FOREWARD

The Farm Bill -- A Keystone of Environmental Policy

by
P. Patrick Leahy

The Farm Bill is a major piece of legislation, passed approximately every five years, that reauthorizes farm programs. Farm programs began during the Great Depression as a response to the Dust Bowl crises. Today, farm programs affect farmers in all fifty states and address issues associated with almost every farm commodity. The Farm Bill has become a major influence in determining the environmental impact of farming practices.

This issue of "Water Resources Update" addresses the reauthorization of the Farm Bill specifically as it relates to the water-resources community. Water-quality issues related to the Farm Bill are currently of great interest to policy makers. Americans are increasingly concerned about a sustainable supply of diverse agricultural products at a reasonable price as well as progress in improving the Nation's environment. The agricultural community is interested in potential regulations relative to their impact on the economics of farming. At the same time because of their love of the land, the agricultural community has a deep concern for the health of their environment. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in their 1992 National Water Quality Inventory, has indicated that agricultural runoff is a significant source of water pollution in the United States. Agricultural sources of water-quality contamination include, for example, sediments from the erosion of soils and stream banks, nutrients related to the use of chemical and natural fertilizers, and pesticides used in the control of nuisance insects and weeds.

The Farm Bill supports a number of programs that are specifically included to counter any adverse environmental impacts of agriculture. Because Congress perceived a lack of progress in achieving water-quality goals, the 1990 Farm Bill authorized a new water-quality incentives program to implement innovative farm management techniques to protect water quality. The approach relies on voluntary actions of farmers and involves incentive payments for implementing approved management techniques. This program complements that Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that was first introduced in the 1985 Farm Bill. The goal of the CRP was to reduce the impacts on water quality due to soil loss from highly erodible land. Farmers received a government incentive payment for not planting these lands.

There are a number of issues that are being debated relative to the 1995 Farm Bill. Among these are:

- The role of government in subsidizing agriculture, especially in light of concern with the Federal deficit.
- The continuation of existing voluntary programs such as CRP, integrated crop management, and the 1995 water-quality incentives programs. There is concern that these programs have not worked effectively, thereby highlighting a serious lack of long-term, comprehensive and comparable environmental data.
- The role of "green payments" as a strategy to reduce agricultural sources of water-quality degradation. The idea here is to redirect the commodity-based incentives towards payments for farmers adopting environmentally-based approaches that demonstrably improve water quality.
- The targeting of programs and policies to areas where problems are most severe and the potential for improvements are greatest.

This issue of "Update" is designed to provide a forum for a number of different perspectives about the Farm Bill. Included are articles from representatives of the following organizations and groups:

- (1) U.S. Department of Agriculture--program implementation
- (2) U.S. Geological Survey--water-quality information
- (3) U.S. Congress-Office of Technology Assessment--policy analysis

- (4) American Farm Bureau--agricultural professional group perspective
- (5) Academia--farm policy and analysis.

The purpose of this issue of "Update" is to (1) provide information on what is known about agricultural impacts on ground-water and surface-water quality, (2) describe and discuss pertinent environmental aspects of the proposed 1995 Farm Bill, (3) identify the major policy issues that face debate as part of the 1995 reauthorization, and (4) describe environmental 'lessons learned' from previous Farms Bills. As the debate continues relative to this important piece of legislation, the information in this issue should be valuable to those interested in the water-quality aspects of agricultural production.

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