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Congress' approval of the 2012 Agriculture Appropriations Bill cuts much-needed funding of Farm Bill Mandatory Conservation Programs ([/full-blog/2011/10/congress-approval-of-2012-agriculture.html](#))



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By: Alison Marcotte, Staff Member

Roughly every five years, the legislature reviews and renews what is known as the farm bill. Each farm bill normally encompasses titles such as “commodity price and income supports, farm credit, trade, agricultural conservation, research, rural development, energy, and foreign and domestic food programs such as food stamps and other nutrition programs, among other programs.”[1] It also usually provides for the mandatory funding for several of these programs. Mandatory funding means that the amount of funding authorized by Congress is available unless

limited to smaller amounts in the appropriations process.[2] After the approval of the House of Representatives' and Senates' version of the Agricultural Appropriations Bill of 2012, many conservationists worry that much of the funding that has been provided to mandatory conservation programs will be cut to levels below the authorized amounts in order to increase spending on food and nutrition programs.

On September 7, 2011, the United States Senate passed its fiscal year 2012 Agriculture Appropriations Bill. The result was a total provision of \$19.78 billion to the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee for spending for fiscal year 2012, which is about a \$141 million reduction from the amount enacted in fiscal year 2011.[3] While this allocation of funds was more generous than the mere \$17.08 billion approved by the House of Representatives in June of this year, it still cuts important and much-needed funding to a number of Conservation Programs nationwide.[4]

Specifically, some of the conservation cuts to be made by the Senate-approved version of the bill include \$350 million from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, \$35 million from the Conservation Stewardship Program, \$50 million from the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, and \$35 million from the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Additionally, the Wetlands Reserve Program and the Grasslands Reserve Program would be cut by \$180 million and \$46 million respectively.[5] In all, the spending bill cuts mandatory conservation programs by 12%, or \$726 million, from levels authorized by the farm bill. These cuts are being made on top of the reductions made from the 2011 appropriation levels.[6]

The problem with the potential enactment of the Agricultural Appropriations Bill as approved by the Senate is that the mandatory conservation programs will be taking a large monetary hit in order to compensate for the money needed to fund other farm bill programs. On top of this, Congress made the decision to cut the level of agricultural spending knowing that the Agricultural Appropriations Committee must increase spending on food and nutrition safety programs and, as a result, would be forced to spend less on conservation. [7] This could result in negative environmental effects due to the fact that the conservation programs offer incentives to farmers to consider ecological factors in making farming decisions to avoid land abuse and overuse. [8] Congress' approval of slashing the funds of these programs is more than questionable. Ferd Hoffner, Policy Director at the National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition stated it best: "Shortchanging the Agriculture appropriations allocation such that the funding of important items like feeding programs and food safety requires raiding farm bill direct spending to make up for shortfalls is the type of gaming and double dealing that gives Congress a bad name." [9]

[1] Renee Johnson and Jim Monke, *What is the "Farm Bill"?*, Congressional Research Service, 1 (Dec. 10, 2010), <http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/crs/RS22131.pdf>. (<http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/crs/RS22131.pdf>)

[2] Jeffery A.Zinn, *Mandatory Funding for Agriculture Conservation Programs*, CRS Report for Congress, 1 (Jan. 9, 2007), http://lugar.senate.gov/services/pdf_crs/ag/11.pdf. (http://lugar.senate.gov/services/pdf_crs/ag/11.pdf)

[3] *Senate Appropriations Committee Approves FY 2012 Spending Caps, Rural Housing Funding Bill*, National Council of State Housing Agencies Blog, (Sept. 19, 2011 11:10 PM), <http://www.ncsha.org/blog/senate-appropriations-committee-approves-fy-2012-spending-caps-rural-housing-funding-bill> (<http://www.ncsha.org/blog/senate-appropriations-committee-approves-fy-2012-spending-caps-rural-housing-funding-bill>)

[4] Jerry Hagstrom, *Ag Appropriation bill Approved*, Agweek.com (Sept. 13, 2011 5:41 AM) <http://www.agweek.com/event/article/id/19069/>. (<http://www.agweek.com/event/article/id/19069/>)

[5] *Senate Agricultural Spending Bill Unveiled*, National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition, (Sept. 9, 2011), <http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/senate-ag-spending-bill-2/>. (<http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/senate-ag-spending-bill-2/>)

[6] *Id.*

[7] Daniel Looker, *CHIMPING away at conservation*, agriculture.com (Sept. 9, 2011 4:37 PM), http://www.agriculture.com/news/policy/chimping-away-at-conservation_4-ar19070?print. (http://www.agriculture.com/news/policy/chimping-away-at-conservation_4-ar19070?print)

[8] Tom Philpott, *Budget fight threatens to turn Farm Bill into Industrial Ag Bill*, Grist.com (Apr. 4, 2011 8:50 PM), <http://www.grist.org/farm-bill/2011-04-04-budget-fight-threatens-turn-farm-bill-into-industrial-ag>. (<http://www.grist.org/farm-bill/2011-04-04-budget-fight-threatens-turn-farm-bill-into-industrial-ag>)

[9] Looker, *CHIMPING away at conservation*, Agriculture.com, http://www.agriculture.com/news/policy/chimping-away-at-conservation_4-ar19070. (http://www.agriculture.com/news/policy/chimping-away-at-conservation_4-ar19070)

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