Farmers Face New Conservation Rules Under Farm Bill

STEVE KARNOWSKI, Associated Press

In this March 25, 2014 photo Red Angus cattle graze on native Big Bluestem grass at Daybreak Ranch near Highmore in central South Dakota. The main enterprise is a cow-calf operation on restored and native grasslands that make up a majority of the 8,000 acres at Daybreak. The habitat they provide supports clouds of pheasants, trophy bucks and other wildlife populations _ so abundant that they branched out into hosting hunters from across the country as a sideline. **(AP Photo/Eric Landwehr)**

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Wildlife and environmental groups are claiming victory for conservation practices in the new farm bill [1], where two of their top priorities made it into law.

Farmers will be required to use good conservation practices on highly erodible lands and protect wetlands to qualify for crop insurance subsidies. And the law requires "sodsaver" protections to discourage farmers from plowing up native grasslands in several Plains and Midwest states.

From his vantage point on a wide expanse of South Dakota prairie, rancher Jim Faulstich hopes the legislation spurs more farmers to protect the natural resources on their land.

Faulstich and his son-in-law manage about 8,000 acres near Highmore in central South Dakota, most of it restored and native grasslands on which they graze cows. They also grow a diverse rotation of crops. That habitat has proven so attractive to pheasants, trophy bucks and other wildlife populations that they launched a side business hosting hunters from across the country.

"It's a very good investment of U.S. taxpayer dollars to encourage people to do good things on the land," Faulstich said.

Other conservationists active in the long farm bill debate agree.

"I think we're going to get a quite a lot of bang for the buck on conservation compliance and sodsaver," said Bill Wenzel, agriculture program director for the Izaak Walton League of America.

It wasn't a total victory. The $57.6 billion in the farm bill for conservation programs over the next 10 years is a net reduction of $4 billion. Sodsaver will apply only to six states — North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana and Nebraska — instead of nationwide.

And the cap on acres in the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to take environmentally sensitive land out of production, was lowered from 32 million to 24 million. Conservationists say, though, they expect a limited impact from the lowered cap. It's only slightly below last year's total acres in CRP, as enrollment has fallen due to higher crop prices.

Several rule changes in the bill should help CRP stay attractive to landowners despite high land prices, rents and commodity prices, said Dave Nomsen, vice president of governmental affairs for Pheasants Forever.

Conservation compliance had been mandatory since 1985 for collecting crop subsidies under programs that were eliminated under the new farm bill, but it hadn't been a requirement for crop insurance since the 1996 farm bill. Now that crop insurance is becoming the main component of the farm safety net, restoring that linkage was the top priority for many groups.

Under sodsaver, producers who plow up native grasslands that have never been tilled will qualify for only half the normal crop insurance premium subsidies on those acres for four years.

"Even when prices are high people will really think twice," said Ferd Hoefner, policy director of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

The farm bill also streamlines 23 conservation programs into 13, though it does create a new Regional Conservation Partnership Program that's meant to work to protect soil, water, wildlife and other natural resources in areas such as the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River basin and Chesapeake Bay.

Faulstich tilled and grazed the conventional way when he got started in 1973. When the farm economy went sour in the 1980s, he said he realized he wasn't operating in tune with nature and decided his best chance for long-term survival was in taking better care of his land, through no-till farming, rotational grazing and planting a wider variety of crops. He said federal and state conservation programs and initiatives by wildlife habitat groups helped him make the transition.

He said the incentives in the new farm bill should help other farmers put a greater emphasis on sustainability, too, rather than focusing only on crops that are the most profitable thanks to crop insurance and commodity programs.

"It's been a win-win for our operation to place natural resources as our top priority," he said.

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