

Dispelling the East Coast myth: Farm conservation programs work

Written by Deb Daniel, RRWCD and Steve Vandiver, RGWCD

The New York Times recently but not surprisingly published a misrepresentation of one of the most efficient Farm Bill provisions, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, better known as EQIP.

First and foremost, the Farm Bill funding that was erroneously referred to as a subsidy, is not a subsidy, but rather a conservation payment made to agriculture producers to voluntarily improve agriculture efficiencies and provide conservation measures on the ground.

It provides funding for numerous conservation measures in agriculture and has been very successful in providing tools to producers that wish to voluntarily address issues such as drought, water quality, water quantity and air quality. It has and will continue to be an extremely important tool for farmers and ranchers throughout the country.

In many areas of the West, the severe and prolonged drought has depleted snowpack in the mountains, left pastures almost totally barren of vegetation, and reduced crop production to a fraction of normal.

The ancient Ogallala Aquifer, which supplies irrigation and municipal water for several states, dropped almost three feet last year alone in some areas.

In the arid San Luis Valley of Colorado, the story is much the same. This area is dependent upon snowmelt runoff that fills the aquifers which then provides irrigation for the production of potatoes, barley and specialty crops.

Snowpack has been well below average over the past several years, leaving farmers short on water. Ranchers throughout the “Drought Belt” are being forced to drastically reduce their herds because of the lack of forage and the high cost of cattle feed.

Some agricultural drought analysts are relating the current conditions to the drought and heat wave that occurred in the 1930s, commonly known as the Dust Bowl Days.

The Dust Bowl spurred legislation in 1933 to address the economic depression and the impacts

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of the Dust Bowl. In the mid-1970s, the first Farm Bill was written and is historically revisited every five years by comprehensive reviews and reauthorization.

Today, we have a comprehensive set of conservation programs that assist producers in dealing with drought.

Some experts say that were it not for the USDA programs within the Conservation Title, we could be facing similar conditions that occurred in the 1930s.

Irrigated crop production has a long history of innovation and adapting to changing conditions. New technologies and more efficient use of water—the most valuable resource on the planet—are constantly being developed and voluntarily implemented throughout the irrigation belt of the West.

The recent drought has certainly accelerated new technology, and these advances in irrigated agriculture are most often first introduced to producers through the USDA Farm Bill.

EQIP and the other programs target proven conservation practices and provide technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers as they continue to voluntarily reduce irrigation and improve irrigation efficiencies.

For example, producers within the Republican River Water Conservation District in eastern Colorado have used EQIP for years as an effective tool to conserve irrigation water on more than 15,000 acres of irrigated cropland and convert the land to dryland cropping or grazing land.

This practice alone has resulted in an estimated reduction in water use of approximately 22,000 acre feet of water per year. This water then remains in the aquifer. Irrigated producers within the RRWCD are also voluntarily implementing a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to further reduce irrigation demands on the Ogallala Aquifer.

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This program has resulted in the conversion of almost 20,000 acres of irrigated cropland to native grasses and permanently removed irrigation from those acres.

A similar program was recently introduced in a portion of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District of the San Luis Valley to address the declining aquifer.

Irrigators in Colorado and throughout the West are constantly looking for ways “to do more with less.” Farmers need conservation programs such as EQIP and the CREP to assist, not subsidize, them as they face extremely difficult water conservation challenges caused by both drought and growth.

The Conservation Title of the Farm Bill, which includes funding for EQIP and CREP and other conservation programs, comprises less than nine percent of the total cost of the Farm Bill.

But those programs offer conservation benefits that are critical to agriculture producers, a tremendous value to all taxpayers, and funding for the voluntary conservation of land, water, wildlife and other natural resources.

The Farm Bill that recently passed the Senate directs \$760 billion of the bill’s total \$955 billion cost to nutrition and food assistance programs. So, contrary to what many like the New York Times believe, the bulk of the Farm Bill’s cost is not distribution of “subsidies” to farmers and ranchers to keep them in business.

We strongly support the programs within the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill and support the work the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service do to implement these programs.

We have demonstrated, through partnerships with these agencies, that the programs are a good investment for the taxpayer and have net positive results in terms of water conservation and effective farm management practices.

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We will work with our USDA partners and our Congressional delegation to help ensure farm bill legislation is passed and to educate those like the New York Times who clearly lack knowledge and understanding of the purpose, implementation and effectiveness of this investment.

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