

# American Farmland Trust: 2018 Farm Bill a victory for farmland protection, environmentally sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land

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WASHINGTON, DC - **American Farmland Trust**, the organization behind the national movement **No Farms No Food®**, praises the 2018 Farm Bill conference report released today and expresses great appreciation for the bipartisan nature of the final bill and the tireless work of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. The 2018 Farm Bill delivers on the funding and programmatic priorities supporting AFT's mission to save the land that sustains us by **protecting farmland, promoting environmentally sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land.**

“Farmers, ranchers and the many partner organizations who use USDA programs to fund innovative work around the country can breathe a sigh of relief. The 2018 Farm Bill is just steps away from becoming law,” says John Piotti, AFT president and CEO. “AFT urges members of the House and Senate to vote to pass this bill, to allow programs to move forward expeditiously.

He continues, “We are losing farmland at a rate of three acres a minute—31 million acres between 1992 and 2012 alone. Farmland is lost when farmers and ranchers don’t have adequate risk-management tools. When they can’t find new markets or develop new products. When there’s no next generation farmer able to afford the land that an exiting farmer is selling. When there’s not enough funding to meet demand for the sale of agricultural conservation easements. This bill, while not perfect, is an important step in addressing these needs.”

The bill includes many of AFT’s priorities, including funding increases and programmatic improvements to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, and the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program. With support from these programs, AFT and its partners around the country will be able to move forward in fulfilling its mission.

## **Protecting Farmland**

ACEP is a critically important voluntary federal conservation program implemented by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service that permanently protects agricultural land and conserves wetlands. ACEP cost-shares with state and local partners to purchase agricultural conservation easements from farmers, ranchers and agricultural landowners. The program permanently protects land from sprawling development while keeping it in agricultural production. Importantly, it enables farmers and ranchers to reinvest the proceeds of the easement sale in their businesses to transition land to the next generation or to improve their stewardship.

The ACEP funding increase—AFT’s top priority for the Farm Bill—to \$450 million per year, is an important gain. This funding level, a \$2 billion increase over the current baseline, will allow USDA to nearly double from last year the number of applications it can fund under the new Farm Bill.

In addition, the bill makes several programmatic changes championed by AFT and its partners at state and local Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement programs and agricultural land trusts. These include:

- Ensuring that experienced partners can use their own easement deed terms and conditions as long as they are consistent with the program’s statutory objectives.
- A change to the cost-share requirement that will enable partners to do more projects with limited funding.
- A waiver of adjusted gross income limits for projects of special environmental significance, enabling partners to act on opportunities to permanently protect productive, at-risk agricultural land regardless of the financial situation of the owner.
- Allowing “buy-protect-sell” transactions, in which land trusts help young and beginning farmers and ranchers especially gain access to land, by purchasing land in fee, protecting it with an agricultural conservation easement and then selling the protected land to a farmer or rancher.

## **Promoting Sound Farming Practices**

Voluntary conservation programs are vitally important to farmers and ranchers who want to be good stewards of their land and the shared natural resources we all enjoy. A full toolbox of

well-funded conservation programs, which often leverage matching funds from farmers and ranchers themselves, is important to improve environmental outcomes and to avoid the need for more stringent regulations in the future. For this reason, AFT applauds the Farm Bill Conferees for maintaining the overall funding level for the bill's Conservation Title.

An important Conservation Title program that makes this possible is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program-- an innovative, landscape-scale program that brings many partners together to address targeted environmental issues including farmland loss. AFT is appreciative of the \$300 million of annual mandatory funding for RCPP in this bill and changes to the program that pave the way for better quantification of the environmental outcomes being achieved by farmers, ranchers and their partners. AFT specifically uses RCPP to address water quality in the Macoupin Creek Watershed in Illinois, including measuring the changes in phosphorus and sediment loss from implementing conservation cropping systems.

### **Keeping Farmers on the Land**

Since AFT's founding in 1980, the average age of farmers has risen from 50 to 58. More than 371 million acres of agricultural land are likely to change hands within the next two decades. Yet, the most recent Census of Agriculture in 2012 showed the number of beginning farmers decreased 20 percent compared to the five years before. This bill includes several important avenues for helping beginning farmers and ranchers access the land they need to start their operations and to promote new markets and products to help all producers remain viable into the future.

Land protected under ACEP enables senior farmers to retire with a cash infusion and then sell their land at a price that new and beginning farmers can afford.

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program is included under the umbrella of the new Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Program. FOTOP is given baseline funding, amounting to \$435 million over 10 years. Through BFRDP, AFT has provided technical support to state and local partners along with other agricultural service providers to become Land Access Trainers.

The Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program was also included in another umbrella program, the Local Agriculture Market Program, and given baseline funding at a level of \$50 million per year. This program will provide grants to organizations working to improve local food infrastructure such as farmers markets, regional food hubs and value-added production enterprises that can improve farm viability for small- and mid-sized new and established farms alike.

Additionally, the bill contains several important provisions that will provide better information and better service to farmers and ranchers transitioning their land and operations to the next generation, including:

- New reports on absent landowners and on farmland access, analyzing the effects of absent landowners and identifying barriers beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers face in accessing land;

- New authority of State Agricultural Mediation Programs to address issues around land leases and family farm transitions;
- A new Commission on Farm Transitions–Needs for 2050, to address the looming transfer of millions of acres of agricultural land and billions of dollars in agricultural assets over the next 20 years;
- Expanded data collection around farmland ownership, tenure, transition and other issues, including a regular follow-on survey to the Census of Agriculture;
- New authority enabling operators on heirs property land to obtain a farm number.

“The 2018 Farm Bill’s support for saving the land that sustains us through programs promoting farmland protection, environmentally sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land expands AFT’s ability to help ensure a future with enough farmland farmed well to sustain our society and help all of us to maintain a livable planet for this and future generations,” says Piotti.

He continues, “AFT is best known for its **No Farms No Food®** call to action, but just this year, I have added **No Future** to that mantra. We must see farmland as critical infrastructure akin to roads and bridges if we hope to feed, fuel and clothe our society for years to come.”

“AFT appreciates the bipartisan nature of this bill and the invaluable input provided from a wide variety of agricultural, conservation and nutrition stakeholders. AFT looks forward to working with Congress, with the Administration and with our partners across the country to help translate the promise of this

legislation into positive direct outcomes on farms across the nation.”

*American Farmland Trust is the only national conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting environmentally sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. Since 1980, AFT's innovative work has helped to permanently protect more than 6.5 million acres of farmland and rangeland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. **No Farms, No Food.** Learn more at [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org).*

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