



Know your environment.
Protect your health.

Testimony for the Record

To the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

Of the House Committee on Agriculture

By the Environmental Working Group

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Unregulated farm pollution is a leading source of water pollution and a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. In particular, unregulated farm pollution is a leading source of nitrates in drinking water, which have been linked to certain cancers.¹ Toxic algae blooms caused by farm runoff produce toxins that can sicken or kill people.²

Voluntary conservation programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) can play a significant role in efforts to reduce the impacts of unregulated farm pollution. For example, widespread adoption of conservation practices, in combination with state regulation and water infrastructure upgrades, has improved water quality in Chesapeake Bay.³ Congress should provide more resources for USDA voluntary conservation programs, many of which are oversubscribed.

However, as EWG's Conservation Database⁴ documents, voluntary conservation programs have largely failed to meet the pollution challenges posed by agriculture. Despite taxpayers spending nearly \$30 billion on USDA conservation programs since 1995, the vast majority of rivers, lakes and bays impacted by unregulated farm pollution have shown little or no improvement.⁵

For too long, USDA has treated the farmer, rather than the taxpayer and the environment, as the primary beneficiary of conservation practices. Allowing farmers to select cafeteria-style from hundreds of different practices frequently results in farmers failing to install the right practices in the right places. Many capital-intensive practices produce few if any environmental benefits. What's more, short-term contracts often result in short-term benefits that may be lost when contracts expire.

As Congress renews the Farm Bill, USDA conservation programs must be reformed to fund conservation practices that most effectively address major public health threats – including threats to drinking water – as well as those that require long-term stewardship in exchange for public financial support and encourage farmers to work cooperatively to address these threats.

¹ Mary H. Ward et al., *Nitrate Intake and the Risk of Thyroid Cancer and Thyroid Disease*, 21 EPIDEMIOLOGY 389–395, 389–395 (2010); Peter J. Weyer et al., *Municipal Drinking Water Nitrate Level and Cancer Risk in Older Women: The Iowa Women's Health Study*, 12 Epidemiology 327–338, 327–338 (2001).

² See <https://www.epa.gov/nutrientpollution/harmful-algal-blooms#effect>

³ USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, *Chesapeake Bay Progress Report*, September 9, 2016. Available online at: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSCConsumption/download?cid=nrcseprd1289419&ext=pdf

⁴ See <https://conservation.ewg.org/>.

⁵ See https://ofmpub.epa.gov/waters10/attains_nation_cy.control#causes



In particular, we urge the Committee to reform voluntary conservation to meet the following goals:

- 1) **Produce Environmental Benefits** – USDA should only fund practices that provide clear public health benefits. Many capital-intensive infrastructure improvements currently funded by conservation programs should instead be financed through an expanded conservation loan program.
- 2) **Produce Long-Term Benefits** – USDA should enter into long-term contracts for practices, and long-term and permanent easements for land restoration. Sign-ups designed to offer short-term contracts to temporarily restore farmland should be curtailed in favor of long-term restoration projects.⁶ Between 2007 and 2016, landowners plowed up nearly 13 million acres of land that has previously been enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.⁷
- 3) **Provide Targeted Benefits** – USDA should improve efforts to ensure that farmers install the right practices in the right places, and should expand efforts to promote cooperative efforts to address public health threats, such as protecting drinking water sources from farm pollution. USDA should finance a narrower set of practices and enhancements to address narrower range of resource concerns.
- 4) **Provide Greater Transparency** – To develop our Conservation Database, EWG had to file 28 separate Freedom of Information Act requests.⁸ To better assess program performance and promote collaboration among local partners, Congress should take steps to improve conservation program transparency.

These reforms will help ensure that the new Farm Bill better addresses the serious public challenges posed by farming. However, reforming voluntary conservation programs *alone* will not address the impacts of unregulated farm pollution. Only by reforming voluntary conservation programs *and* updating conservation compliance to address the public health threats caused by fertilizers and pesticides will Congress meet the expectations of ordinary Americans and the goals Congress has set through our public health and environmental laws.

Rural residents are especially vulnerable to the impacts of unregulated farm pollution. About 43 million Americans get their drinking water from private wells, many of which are contaminated with nitrates and other farm pollutants.⁹

EWG strongly supports efforts to reform USDA conservation programs to provide targeted public health benefits and strongly supports efforts to update conservation compliance to address the public health threats posed by unregulated farm pollution. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record.

⁶ For more information, visit <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=lown&topic=cep>

⁷ See FSA Map Change in CRP Enrollment 2007 – 2016.

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/Conservation/PDF/ChangeInCRPAcreagefrom2007_2016.pdf

⁸ See <https://conservation.ewg.org/what-do-conservation-data-tell-us.php>

⁹ See <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/gw-well-contamination.html>