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AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION

State Advisory Committees' Views on How USDA Programs Could Better Address Environmental Concerns

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Abbreviations

CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
CREP	Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
FPP	Farmland Protection Program
FSA	Farm Service Agency
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WHIP	Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program
WRP	Wetlands Reserve Program

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

February 22, 2002

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
The Honorable Richard Lugar
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

Farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners own and manage more than two-thirds of the continental United States' 1.9 billion acres and thus are the primary stewards of our soil, water, and wildlife habitat. Because of this important responsibility, how private land is used is increasingly being recognized as vital to the protection of the nation's environment and natural resources. For example, state water-quality agencies report that agricultural production is a leading contributor to impaired water quality; similarly, habitat loss associated with agriculture has been a factor in the declining populations of many wildlife species, including many threatened or endangered native species. Recognizing the critical role played by private landowners, Congress directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to implement numerous programs aimed at improving the stewardship practices on these lands. USDA currently has more than 70 million acres of privately owned land enrolled in programs that offer landowners financial incentives to implement conservation practices to protect or improve soil and water quality and wildlife habitat. USDA's conservation efforts are intended to address specific environmental concerns, target funding toward state and local environmental priority areas, and include partnerships with state or local entities to leverage limited funding. USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the federal government's largest single conservation program, has an enrollment of almost 34 million acres and makes annual payments of about $1.5 billion on these acres.

Administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency, CRP compensates landowners for taking certain highly erodible cropland or environmentally sensitive land out of agricultural production. Most of CRP's 34 million acres were enrolled through CRP General Enrollment, which USDA implemented in 1986. Alternative CRP enrollment options--CRP Continuous Enrollment, implemented in 1997, and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), implemented in 1998--are specifically targeted to high-priority conservation practices that yield significant environmental benefits. As of October 2001, enrollment in CRP

Continuous and CREP totaled 1.6 million acres. Other USDA programs, including the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and the Farmland Protection Program, are administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). These programs, which NRCS state conservationists manage, compensate landowners for activities such as restoring and protecting wetlands, implementing conservation and wildlife practices on land currently used for agricultural production, and preventing the conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses near urban areas.

State technical committees advise the NRCS state conservationists on implementing NRCS-administered conservation programs in each state. These committees include representatives from federal, state, local, and Indian tribal governments, as well as representatives from organizations knowledgeable about conservation issues, and are chaired by the NRCS state conservationists. The committees are responsible for such activities as recommending guidelines for evaluating conservation practices, determining eligible conservation practices for state priority areas, and making suggestions on program selection processes.

The future of USDA conservation programs has been the subject of extensive debate within the environmental and agricultural communities and in the Congress. This debate has centered on increasing the environmental and natural resource benefits resulting from the programs by allocating more funding to them, modifying them, or creating new programs. Pursuant to this debate, the omnibus farm bill is expected to become law in 2002.

In this context, you asked us to obtain the views of members of state technical committees on (1) the effectiveness of USDA's conservation efforts in addressing environmental concerns related to agriculture and (2) any program elements that hinder the achievement of environmental objectives related to agriculture, as well as program characteristics that current or new programs might include to better meet these objectives. Also, you asked us to provide information on program participation and the extent to which applications for program participation exceed program funding as well as the geographic distribution of payments for each program. This information is provided in appendixes I and II, respectively.

To provide information on the views of members of state technical committees for our first two objectives, we mailed a questionnaire to all

NRCS state conservationists and a sample of 1,470 committee members and received 996 responses. We drew the sample from the 2,124 state technical committee members in all 50 states and two territories. The sample was stratified by geographic region and the organizations the members represent, and the overall survey results are generalizable to the entire population. All percentage estimates from the survey have sampling errors of plus or minus 7 percentage points or less, unless otherwise noted. The survey solicited views on the effectiveness of CRP General Enrollment, CRP Continuous Enrollment, CREP, Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and Farmland Protection Program. For CREP and the Farmland Protection Program, which are relatively new programs, our results include only those states where the programs were implemented at the time of our survey. Our nationwide survey results are in appendix IV. In addition, survey results stratified by region and organization are included in a special publication entitled *Agricultural Conservation: Survey of USDA State Technical Committee Members* (GAO-02-371SP), which is available on the Internet at http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?gao-02-371SP.

We conducted our work from March 2001 through November 2001 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. More detailed information on our scope and methodology is contained in appendix III.

Results in Brief

State technical committee members indicated that while USDA's conservation programs are generally effective, some targeted programs are more effective than others in addressing specific environmental concerns. In addition, members believed that program effectiveness varies by region and type of agricultural operation. Of particular significance, members viewed CRP Continuous Enrollment and CREP, which target such specific environmental concerns as improving water quality and protecting native species, as more effective in addressing these concerns than CRP General Enrollment, which addresses environmental concerns more generally. These results are consistent with other analyses, such as a 1993 National Academy of Sciences study, which found that targeting programs to specific environmental concerns—as done by CRP Continuous Enrollment and CREP—is a promising way to increase program effectiveness. While USDA has taken steps to increase enrollment in the more targeted CRP programs, as of October 2001, enrolled acreage totaled only 1.6 million of the 34 million CRP acres. Committee members also viewed other programs as effective in

addressing environmental concerns. For example, members viewed the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program as effective in improving water quality and wildlife habitat, respectively. Members from the Northeast and Pacific regions regard CRP General Enrollment as significantly less effective in addressing their agro-environmental concerns than do respondents from the Corn Belt and Plains regions. These results may reflect the concentration of CRP funding in the Corn Belt and Plains regions. Members also indicated that programs are less effective in addressing the needs of specialty crop operations (such as fruit and vegetable farms) and livestock and poultry operations compared to their effectiveness for field crop operations (such as wheat, corn, and cotton farms).

Committee members cited several elements of the current programs that hinder achievement of environmental objectives and indicated a preference for more flexibility in new or existing programs. More than two-thirds of members cited program provisions that do not allow landowners to receive compensation for maintaining previously implemented landowner-financed conservation practices as a hindrance to the CRP programs. These provisions were also cited as a hindrance to the Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. In addition, members viewed as a hindrance the Environmental Quality Incentives Program provision stipulating that participants may not receive payment in the first year of the contract. Under this provision, producers are expected to bear the cost of conservation practice implementation in the first year of the contract. Finally, members would like to be able to tailor new or existing programs to the farming practices of producers in their states as well as increase emphasis on programs that keep lands in production.

In view of the survey results, we are making a recommendation to the secretary of agriculture to take into consideration committee members' views on ways to increase the environmental benefits of conservation programs as USDA modifies or develops regulations for programs reauthorized or created by the omnibus farm bill, which is expected to become law in 2002. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Natural Resources Conservation Service agreed with the information presented in the draft report. The Farm Service Agency generally agreed but provided additional comments about the impact of increasing emphasis on targeted CRP-based programs. The agencies also provided some technical comments, which we have incorporated as appropriate.

Background

USDA conservation programs are intended to compensate landowners for taking environmentally sensitive land out of agricultural production or employing conservation practices on land in production. Programs are designed to address a range of environmental concerns, such as soil erosion, surface and ground water quality, loss of wildlife habitat and native species, air quality, and urban sprawl. USDA's programs are intended to assist landowners in addressing environmental concerns identified at the state or local level as well as national environmental concerns. USDA establishes regulations governing these programs, including eligibility requirements, pursuant to authorizing statutes. Table 1 summarizes USDA's principal conservation programs and funding over the last 6 years.

Table 1: USDA's Conservation Programs

Program, responsible agency	Purpose, authorizing legislation	Program description	1996-2001 total appropriation (in millions)
Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) General Enrollment FSA	To improve soil, water, and wildlife resources by taking cropland out of production and converting it to a conserving use Food Security Act of 1985	Provides annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish permanent land cover in exchange for taking whole fields of environmentally sensitive cropland out of production for 10-15 years	**$9,837**
CRP Continuous Enrollment Option[a] FSA	To improve soil, water, and wildlife resources by taking cropland out of production, targeting the most highly sensitive land Food Security Act of 1985	Same as CRP General Enrollment except allows enrollment at any time for smaller parcels of land that provide especially high environmental benefits, such as narrow strips of land adjacent to water bodies, and offers additional incentives	[b]
Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)[c] FSA	To address specific state and nationally significant soil, water, and wildlife resource issues by taking cropland out of production Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996	Same as CRP General Enrollment and CRP Continuous Enrollment option except partners with states and targets specific state conservation objectives and offers additional incentives	[b]
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) NRCS	To restore and protect wetlands, to improve water quality, enhance wildlife habitat, reduce soil erosion and flooding, and improve water supply by restoring marginal agricultural land to its previous wetland condition Food Security Act of 1985[d]	Offers cost-share assistance for restoration or purchase of permanent or 30-year easements for the agricultural value of the land	**$845**
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) NRCS[e]	To improve soil quality, water quality and supply, and wildlife habitat on lands in agricultural production Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996	Offers incentive payments and cost-share assistance under 5-10 year contracts, allocating half of funds to natural resource concerns related to livestock production and targeting at least 65 percent of state funds to priority areas	**$1,038**
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) NRCS	To develop wildlife habitat Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996	Offers cost-share assistance through 5-10 year agreements to develop and improve wildlife habitat	**$63**
Farmland Protection Program (FPP) NRCS	To limit the conversion of land to non-agricultural uses Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996	Purchases easements for land development rights in partnership with state, tribal, and local government, as well as non-governmental organizations for a minimum duration of 30 years	**$52**

[a]FSA took administrative action in 1997 to allow an option under the CRP permitting enrollment at any time.

[b]Funded from CRP General Enrollment.

[c]CRP option that uses CRP authority in combination with state resources.

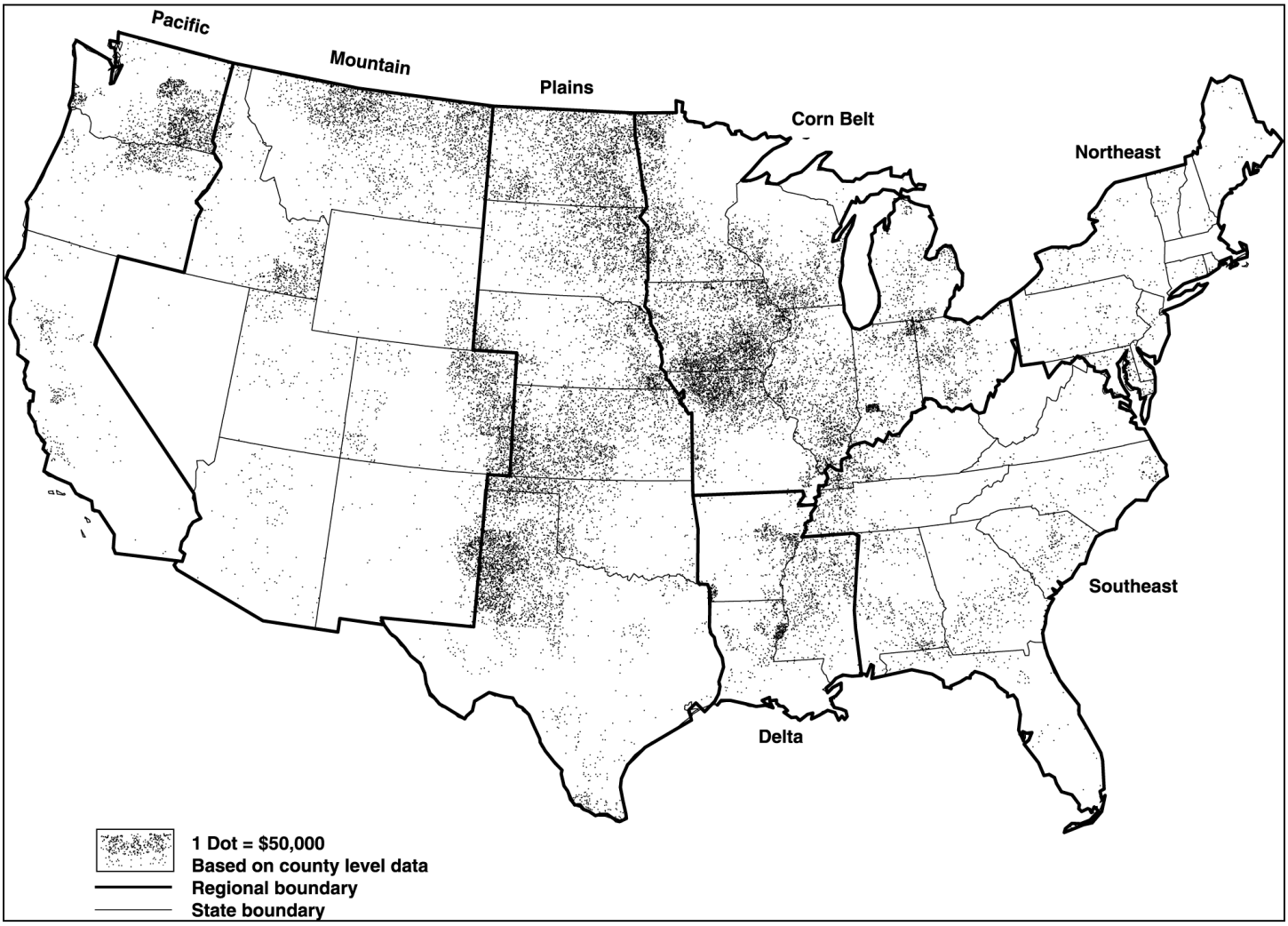
[d]Although WRP was authorized in 1985, it was not implemented until 1992.

[e]FSA has some administrative responsibilities.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Payments for these conservation programs totaled about $1.7 billion in fiscal year 2000, $1.5 billion of which went to CRP. As shown in figure 1, conservation payments are concentrated in the Corn Belt and Plains regions. This concentration reflects the fact that CRP payments are a large portion of total agricultural conservation payments. The distribution of payments for some of the other programs is less concentrated. Appendix II provides more detailed information on the geographic distribution of payments by program.

Figure 1: USDA Conservation Program Payments, Fiscal Year 2000



Notes: Figure includes payments in the continental United States for CRP, WRP, FPP, and EQIP, including programs that preceded EQIP (the Agricultural Conservation Program, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Program). Payments were also made to Alaska and Hawaii and the Caribbean territory. Fiscal year 2000 payment data at the county level were not available for WHIP.

During the time that we conducted our review, fiscal year 2000 data were the most recent data available for county level payments.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

USDA's NRCS is the primary federal agency that works with private landowners to help them protect their natural resources. The work of the agency is accomplished through conservation planning, technical and

financial assistance, resource assessment, and technology development and transfer. NRCS administers EQIP, WRP, WHIP, and FPP programs, in addition to providing technical assistance for CRP-based programs. USDA's FSA administers CRP-based programs, with technical assistance provided by NRCS.

The Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 established state technical committees to advise NRCS state conservationists on technical matters related to the implementation of USDA conservation programs in each state. The Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 provided additional guidance on committee membership. By regulation, USDA requires that state technical committees include representatives, if they are willing to serve, from NRCS, FSA, and other USDA agencies; various U.S. Department of Interior agencies including Fish & Wildlife Service; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Indian tribal governments; state and local natural resource departments and agencies; representatives from nonprofit organizations and agribusinesses; agricultural producers; and other individuals with conservation expertise. Chaired by NRCS state conservationists, committees are responsible for such activities as recommending guidelines for evaluating conservation practices, determining eligible conservation practices for state priority areas, and making suggestions on program selection processes.

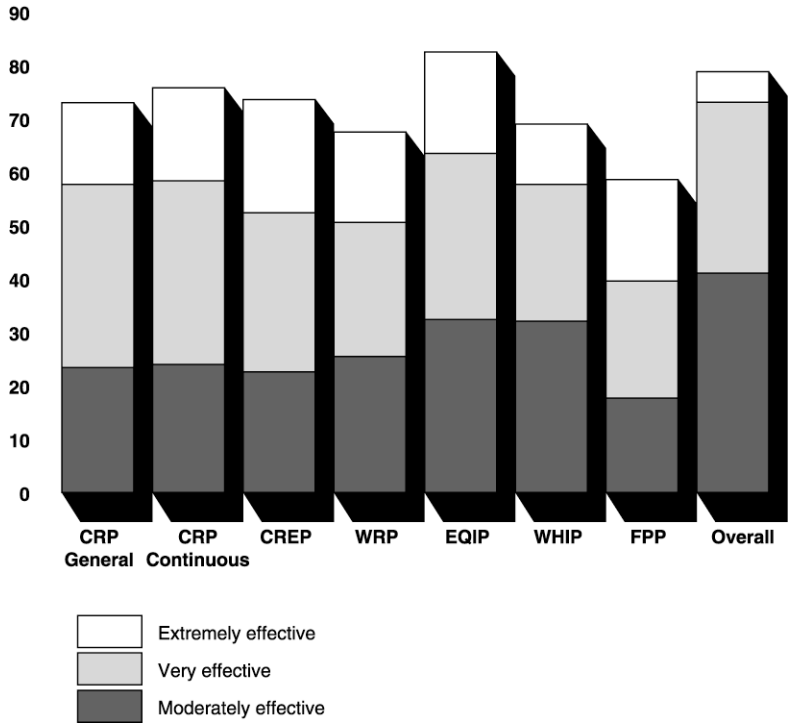
Committee Members Noted Some Programs Better Address Specific Concerns and Some Regions and Types of Operations Are Not as Effectively Assisted

Committee members cited USDA's conservation programs as being generally effective in addressing environmental concerns. However, members also indicated that CRP Continuous and CREP are more effective than CRP General in addressing specific environmental concerns. In addition, members viewed WRP, EQIP, WHIP, and FPP as effective in achieving environmental objectives important to these programs. Finally, some members indicated that the effectiveness of the programs is uneven across regions and types of agricultural operations.

Members Considered Targeted CRP-based Programs More Effective Than CRP General in Addressing Specific Environmental Concerns

Overall, state technical committee members viewed programs as effective in addressing agro-environmental concerns. As figure 2 shows, most committee members rated all programs as "moderately" to "extremely" effective in addressing environmental concerns. Some respondents noted in explaining their assessment of program effectiveness that current funding levels limit effectiveness. Other factors may also have affected committee members' assessments of program effectiveness. For example, respondents may have given higher scores to programs such as CRP General that have been in place a number of years because they would be more familiar with the programs. In contrast, the more recently implemented programs such as CREP and FPP may have been scored lower because respondents may be less familiar with them.

Figure 2: Estimated Percentage of Members Viewing Programs as Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



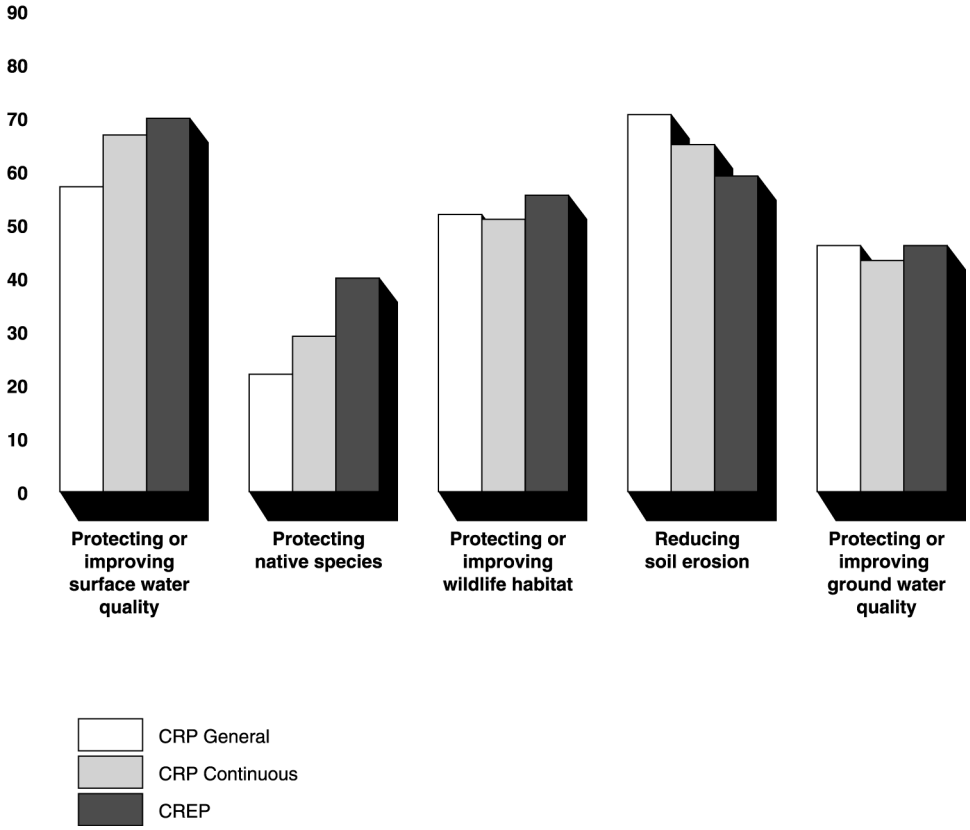
Notes: CREP and FPP results are for only the 15 states that had CREP and the 18 states that had FPP implemented at the time of our survey.

Figure reflects respondents reporting programs as "moderately," "very," or "extremely" effective. The remaining respondents rated the programs as "somewhat" or "slightly or not" effective.

Unlike the other conservation programs, the three CRP-based programs provide an opportunity for direct comparison with each other because they have similar environmental objectives and use the same mechanism to achieve these objectives--land retirement. Moreover, USDA has the ability to change the relative emphasis of the three programs by setting acreage goals and offering additional incentives for landowners to enroll land into CRP Continuous and CREP.

Committee members viewed the targeted CRP-based programs--CRP Continuous and CREP--as more effective in addressing surface water quality as figure 3 shows. Survey results showed statistically significant differences in the effectiveness of CRP Continuous and CREP compared to CRP General in protecting or improving surface water quality. In addition, some members noted that CRP Continuous and CREP, which are specifically targeted to high-priority conservation practices that yield significant environmental benefits such as retiring small parcels of land adjacent to water bodies, result in greater environmental benefits relative to federal dollars spent. Furthermore, members considered surface water quality to be an important environmental concern. In response to a survey question on whether various environmental concerns should receive more or less emphasis in the future, about 80 percent of members (more than for any other environmental concern) indicated that surface water quality should receive more emphasis.

Figure 3: Estimated Percentage of Members Viewing CRP-Based Programs as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



Concerning protecting native species, survey results showed statistically significant differences in the effectiveness of CREP and CRP Continuous compared with CRP General. As shown in figure 3, an estimated 40 percent of members indicated that CREP, which has a defined native species objective, is effective, compared with 22 percent for CRP General. A higher percentage of members also indicated that CRP Continuous is effective compared with CRP General.

Concerning protecting wildlife habitat, members viewed CRP General, CRP Continuous, and CREP as about equally effective (52 percent, 51 percent, and 56 percent, respectively). Some committee members noted that the large number of grassland acres enrolled in CRP General provides habitat for species that need this type of habitat, such as pheasants and prairie chickens. Other members noted that CRP

Continuous and CREP, which often focus on small parcels of land near water, provide habitat for a wide variety of species, including many fish and bird species. In addition, a greater percentage of committee members viewed CRP General as effective in reducing soil erosion. Members' views on soil erosion may have been influenced by the substantial number of acres enrolled in that program compared to CRP Continuous and CREP. While soil erosion can be addressed through land retirement, it is also addressed through EQIP and USDA's conservation compliance program, which covers a large amount of erodible land.[1]

Underscoring the effectiveness of CREP and CRP Continuous in targeting environmental benefits per federal dollar spent, committee members from the Corn Belt region, where more members are familiar with CREP and CRP Continuous and the majority of enrolled CREP and CRP Continuous acres are located, said that these programs are more cost-effective than CRP General (67 percent and 73 percent respectively compared with 58 percent for CRP General).

These survey results are consistent with other analyses, such as a 1993 National Academy of Sciences study,[2] which found that targeting specific environmental concerns through the use of buffer zones (small parcels of land whose retirement results in high environmental benefits)—as done by CRP Continuous and CREP—is a promising way to increase program effectiveness. Similarly, in 1995, we reported that a targeted approach to land retirement, including the use of buffer zones, would achieve substantial environmental benefits.[3] More recently, a September 2001 USDA report on developing future agricultural policy stated that CRP Continuous and CREP are very well suited to increasing environmental benefits per land retirement program dollar.[4]

[1] The Food Security Act of 1985 introduced the conservation compliance program to combat soil erosion. This program requires farmers to implement approved soil conservation systems on highly erodible land in order to receive certain USDA benefits. Conservation compliance applies to over 140 million acres of highly erodible land.

[2] Board on Agriculture, National Academy of Sciences, *Soil and Water Quality: An Agenda for Agriculture* (1993).

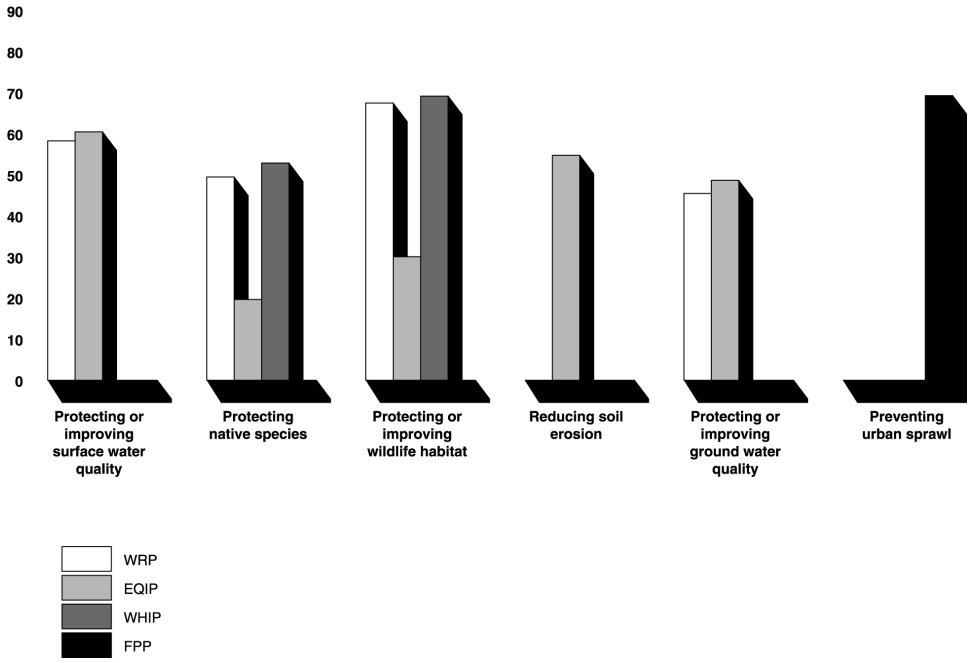
[3] *Conservation Reserve Program: Alternatives Are Available for Managing Environmentally Sensitive Cropland* (GAO/RCED-95-42, Feb. 21, 1995).

[4] U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Food and Agricultural Policy: Taking Stock for the New Century* (September 2001).

Recognizing the effectiveness of targeting, USDA has taken steps recently to increase enrollment in CRP Continuous and CREP. Of the 36.4 million acres authorized for CRP enrollment, USDA has reserved 4.2 million acres for CRP Continuous and CREP. In 2000 USDA began offering additional financial incentives for landowners to enroll highly sensitive land in CRP Continuous. Furthermore, USDA has promoted CRP Continuous and CREP through an initiative in which it partners with other federal, state, and private agencies to encourage landowners to create a buffer between fields in crop production and the surrounding environment. However, the results of these programs still fall short of their potential. As of October 2001, CRP Continuous and CREP enrollment totaled 1.6 million acres, less than 5 percent of the authorized CRP enrollment, and over 71 percent of these acres were concentrated in the Corn Belt and three other states. Enrollment in many other states is very low. Furthermore, USDA's September 2001 agricultural policy report also notes that, among the CRP-based programs, CRP Continuous and CREP have the greatest untapped potential to generate environmental benefits.

As shown in figure 4, members viewed WRP, EQIP, WHIP, and FPP as effective in achieving environmental objectives important to these programs. For example, members rated WRP and WHIP as effective in protecting or improving wildlife habitat (68 percent and 69 percent, respectively). In addition, members viewed WRP and EQIP as effective in protecting or improving surface water quality (58 percent and 61 percent, respectively). Some members noted the flexibility of EQIP, in that it is able to implement a wide variety of conservation practices to address local environmental needs. Finally, 69 percent of members rated FPP as effective in addressing urban sprawl.

Figure 4: Estimated Percentage of Members Viewing WRP, EQIP, WHIP, and FPP as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns

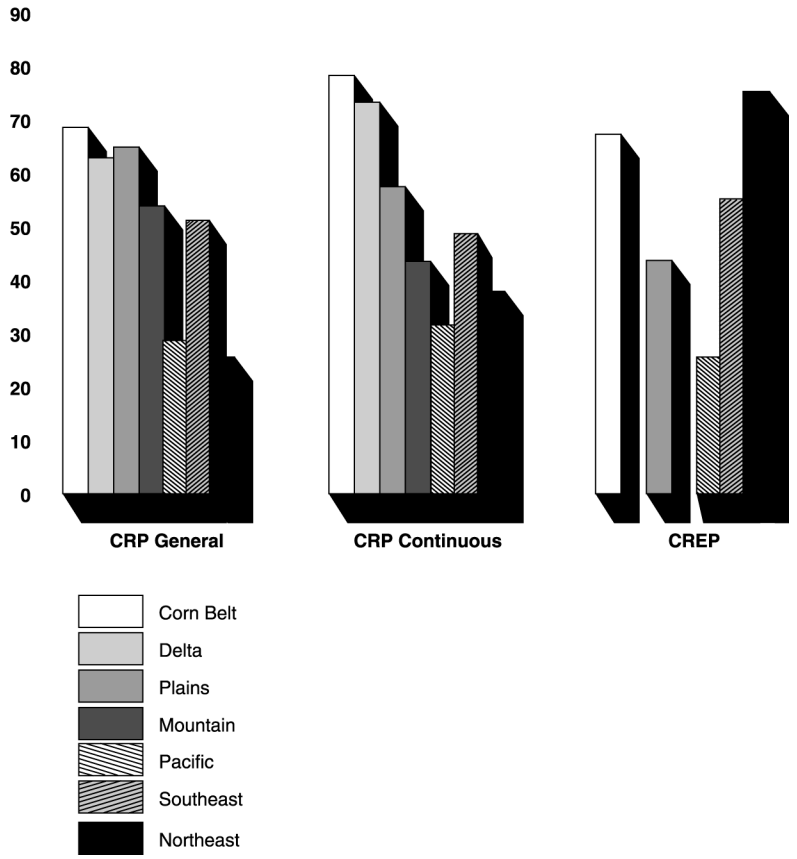


Note: Shown are environmental concerns that are important for each program.

Members Indicated that Programs Are Not as Effective in Assisting Some Regions of the Country and Types of Agricultural Operations

Because of the wide diversity in agricultural production settings, environmental needs differ across regions.[5] While members were generally positive about the assistance provided by USDA's conservation programs, as figure 5 shows, members in the Northeast and Pacific regions, which receive a relatively small portion of total conservation funds, regarded CRP General and CRP Continuous as less effective in serving their needs than did members from other regions.

Figure 5: Estimated Percentage of Members in Each Region Viewing CRP-Based Programs as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



Note: CREP was not implemented in the Delta and Mountain regions at the time of our survey.

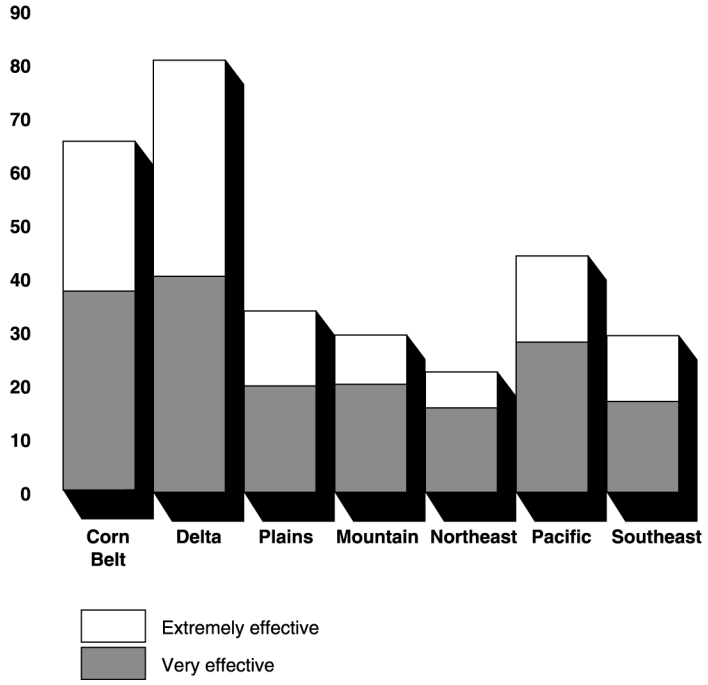
[5] For example, while depletion of surface water sources is a major environmental concern in the Pacific region, it is less of a concern in regions such as the Corn Belt.

While many factors may have influenced members' responses, some respondents from the Corn Belt and Plains regions commented that the significant enrollment in their areas contributes to the effectiveness of CRP General. These regions receive the most concentrated funding because CRP is primarily directed to environmental concerns related to field crop production. (See appendix II for additional information on geographic distribution of program payments.)

As figure 5 shows, members from the Northeast and Corn Belt regions viewed CREP as significantly more effective than members from other regions. These results may reflect the concentration of CREP funding in these regions and the program's flexibility in allowing conservation practices and offering financial incentives. Similarly, members from the Corn Belt and Delta regions viewed CRP Continuous as significantly more effective than members from other regions. More than half of the 1.5 million acres enrolled in CRP Continuous are located in the Corn Belt and Delta regions.

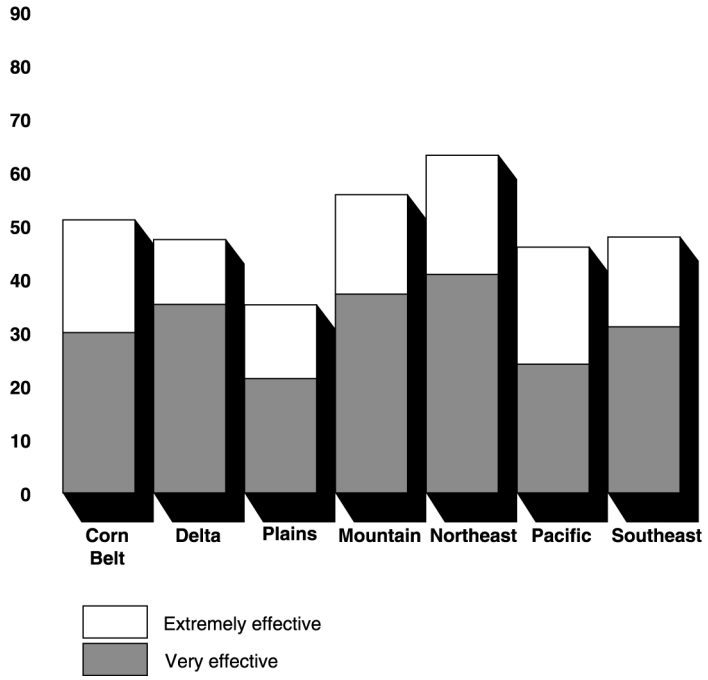
Concerning WRP, as shown in figure 6, a greater percentage of members from the Delta and Corn Belt regions viewed this program as "very" or "extremely" effective compared to members in other regions. Moreover, members from the Delta region rated WRP as more effective than any other program. In addition, almost half of all members from the Pacific also viewed WRP as effective. While there may be many reasons for members' responses, the results from the Delta region may reflect the significant amount of WRP funding in this region. Furthermore, according to USDA officials, these survey results may reflect the considerable landowner interest in these regions for converting acreage poorly suited for agricultural production to other uses; specifically, for developing habitat for migratory birds in the Delta region and salmon in the Pacific region.

Figure 6: Estimated Percentage of Members in Each Region Viewing WRP as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



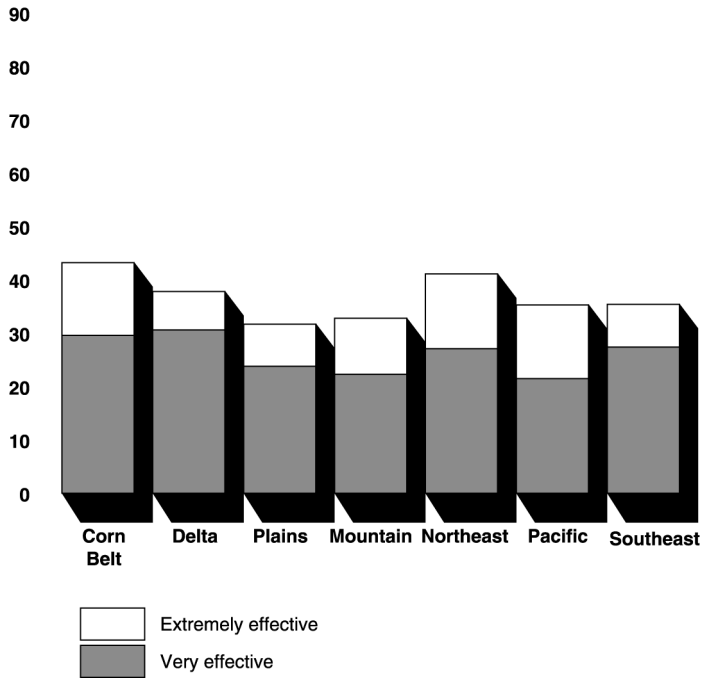
With the exception of the Northeast and the Plains, about half of the members rated EQIP as "very" or "extremely" effective in addressing environmental concerns. As shown in figure 7, a greater percentage of members in the Northeast believed that EQIP is effective, possibly reflecting limited funding from other programs in the region. The uniformity in responses across most regions may reflect the uniform distribution of EQIP funding to all states.

Figure 7: Estimated Percentage of Members in Each Region Viewing EQIP as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



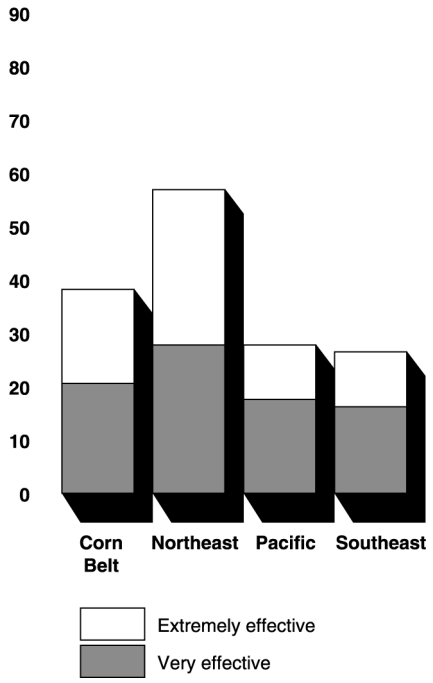
As shown in figure 8, members from different regions generally viewed the effectiveness of WHIP similarly, which may also reflect the uniform distribution of WHIP funding across states.

Figure 8: Estimated Percentage of Members in Each Region Viewing WHIP as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns



At the time of our survey, FPP was not implemented in all states; consequently, we were able to summarize data related to FPP for four regions only. As shown in figure 9, members from the four regions viewed the effectiveness of the program differently. A greater percentage of members from the Northeast, 57 percent, viewed FPP as "very" or "extremely" effective, possibly reflecting the concentration of FPP funding in this region.

Figure 9: Estimated Percentage of Members in Each Region Viewing FPP as "Very" or "Extremely" Effective in Addressing Environmental Concerns

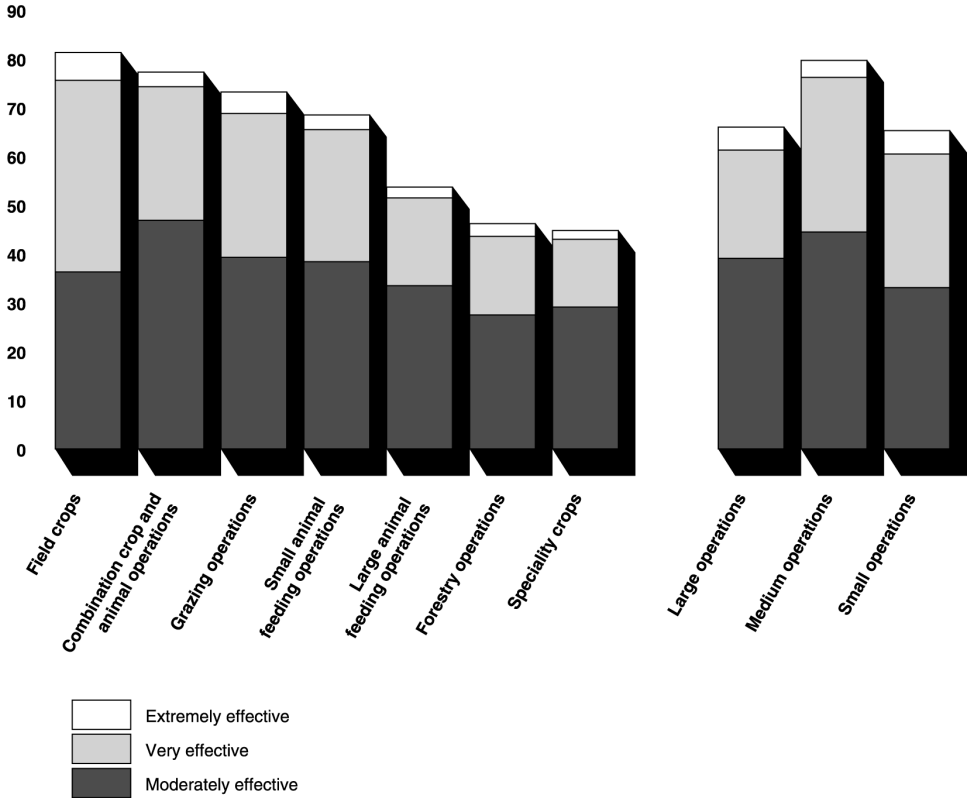


Note: FPP was not implemented in the Delta or Plains regions at the time of our survey. The Mountain region was not included in the figure because only one response from this region was received.

Regarding the effectiveness of the USDA conservation programs in assisting different types of agricultural operations, a greater percentage of members viewed programs as effective in assisting field crop operations compared to other operations. Figure 10 shows that more than 80 percent of members viewed the programs as effective in assisting field crop operations (such as wheat, corn and cotton), while only about half viewed the programs as effective in assisting specialty crops (such as fruits and vegetables), large-animal feeding operations, and forestry operations. These results may reflect the programs' traditional focus on field crop operations.

Finally, members viewed programs as more effective in assisting medium-size operations than small or large operations, as shown in figure 10. These results may be explained by conservation programs' historical focus on medium-size operations.

Figure 10: Estimated Percentage of Members Viewing Programs as Effective in Assisting Different Sizes and Types of Agricultural Operations



Note: We considered members viewing programs as effective as those that responded that the programs were “moderately,” “very,” or “extremely” effective.

Recognizing that the existing programs are concentrated on certain regions and types of operations, USDA’s September 2001 report stated that the success of USDA’s conservation programs will depend on programs extending coverage to a broader base of agricultural operations across geographic regions.

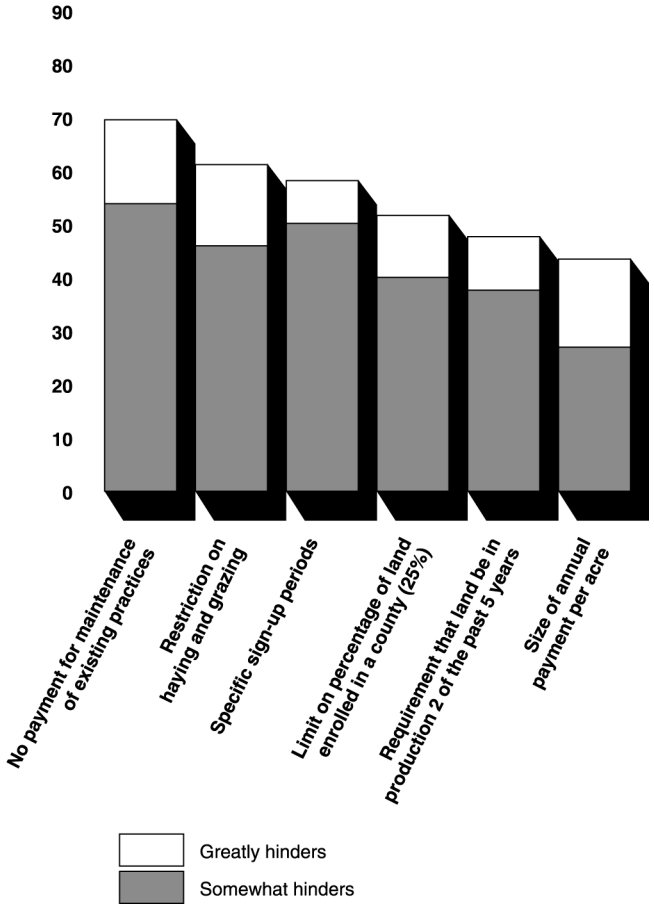
Members Noted Some Program Elements Hinder Achievement of Environmental Objectives and Would Like More Flexibility

State technical committee members believe that some program elements hinder achievement of environmental objectives but identified other program elements they would like to see emphasized in current or new programs. For example, members indicated several provisions that limit eligibility or deter participation. Members cited provisions that do not allow landowners that maintain previously implemented landowner-financed conservation practices to receive compensation as a hindrance to all programs. Members indicated a preference for program elements that provide increased flexibility that would enable the programs to better adapt to the diverse situations faced by landowners across the nation as well as increased emphasis on local conservation priorities.

Members Noted Some Program Provisions Limit Eligibility and Deter Participation

State technical committee members viewed a number of provisions in CRP General, CRP Continuous, WRP, and EQIP as limiting eligibility and deterring participation. As figure 11 shows, about 70 percent of members cited as a hindrance CRP General's provisions that do not allow landowners that maintain previously implemented landowner-financed conservation practices to be compensated. A majority of members in all regions shared this view, ranging from 58 percent in the Delta region to 77 percent in the Northeast. Members cited the CRP General provision generally restricting use of land from activities such as haying and grazing as a hindrance that may serve as a deterrent to program participation. While not viewed as a hindrance by a majority at the national level, the provision limiting the amount of annual payments per acre was viewed as a significant hindrance by almost two-thirds of members in the Northeast and Pacific. In these regions, the income derived from annual payments is often significantly lower than potential income from other land uses, thus deterring participation. More than half of all members indicated that specific enrollment periods, rather than continuous enrollment offered under the CRP Continuous option, is a hindrance.

Figure 11: Estimated Percentage of Members Indicating Provisions of CRP General "Somewhat" or "Greatly" Hinder Achievement of Environmental Objectives

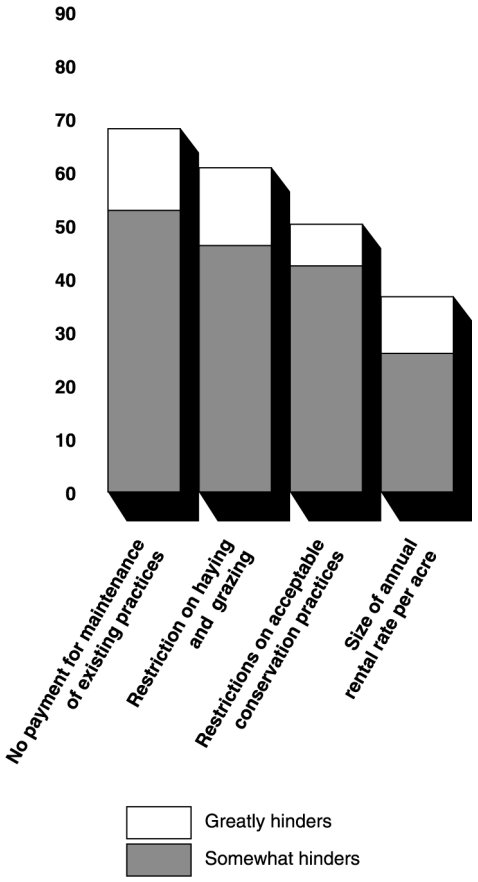


Almost half of the members also indicated that the program eligibility requirement that land be in crop production 2 of the past 5 years hinders CRP General. Furthermore, in response to a question regarding the incentives the programs provide to landowners, almost a quarter of members believed that landowners discontinue or avoid desirable conservation practices to meet this program eligibility requirement. For example, several respondents noted that some landowners convert grassland that is susceptible to soil erosion to cropland in order to be eligible to enroll this land in CRP. Higher percentages of members from the Plains and Corn Belt regions (44 percent and 39 percent, respectively), where CRP participation is concentrated,

believed that landowners discontinue or avoid desirable practices to qualify for CRP General.

Figure 12 shows the principal hindrances that members cited for CRP Continuous. As with CRP General, CRP Continuous' provisions that do not allow landowners to be compensated for maintaining previously implemented practices were viewed as a hindrance. This view was consistent across all regions. While viewed as a hindrance by 37 percent of members overall, the provision limiting the amount of annual payments per acre was viewed as a significant hindrance by 63 percent of members in the Northeast and 48 percent in the Pacific. In addition, 84 percent of committee members believed that the ability to enroll at any time rather than during specific signup periods "somewhat" or "greatly" helps CRP Continuous. For example, some members noted that the continuous sign-up process simplifies enrollment in CRP Continuous. Finally, about 62 percent of members cited the premium on annual payments per acre offered as an incentive for enrollment in CRP Continuous as helping the program achieve its environmental objectives.

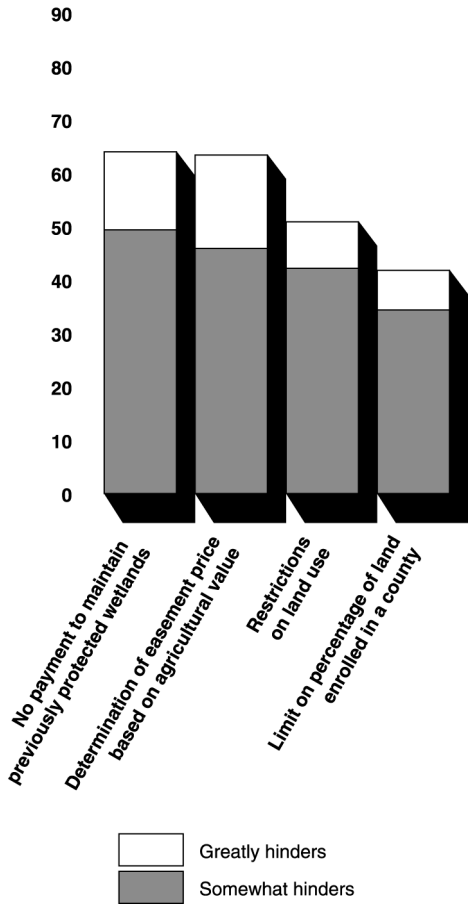
Figure 12: Estimated Percentage of Members Indicating Provisions of CRP Continuous "Somewhat" or "Greatly" Hinder Achievement of Environmental Objectives



For WRP, as shown in figure 13, an estimated 64 percent of members indicated that provisions that do not allow landowners to be compensated for maintaining previously protected wetlands are a hindrance. This view was consistent across all regions. Over half of the state technical committee members viewed restrictions on the use of land enrolled in WRP as a hindrance. They viewed the determination of WRP easement purchase price based on the agricultural value of the land rather than the market value, which may reflect its value as developed property, as somewhat or greatly hindering achievement of WRP's environmental objectives. A higher percentage of members from the Northeast, Pacific, and Southeast regions (84 percent, 71 percent, and 66 percent, respectively) viewed this provision as a hindrance, possibly reflecting higher market prices relative to the agricultural value of the land in these

regions. Members' views were strongly divided on WRP's use of 30-year or permanent easements; 45 percent viewed easements as helping achieve the program's objectives while 38 percent viewed easements as a hindrance.

Figure 13: Estimated Percentage of Members Indicating WRP Provisions "Somewhat" or "Greatly" Hinder Achievement of Environmental Objectives

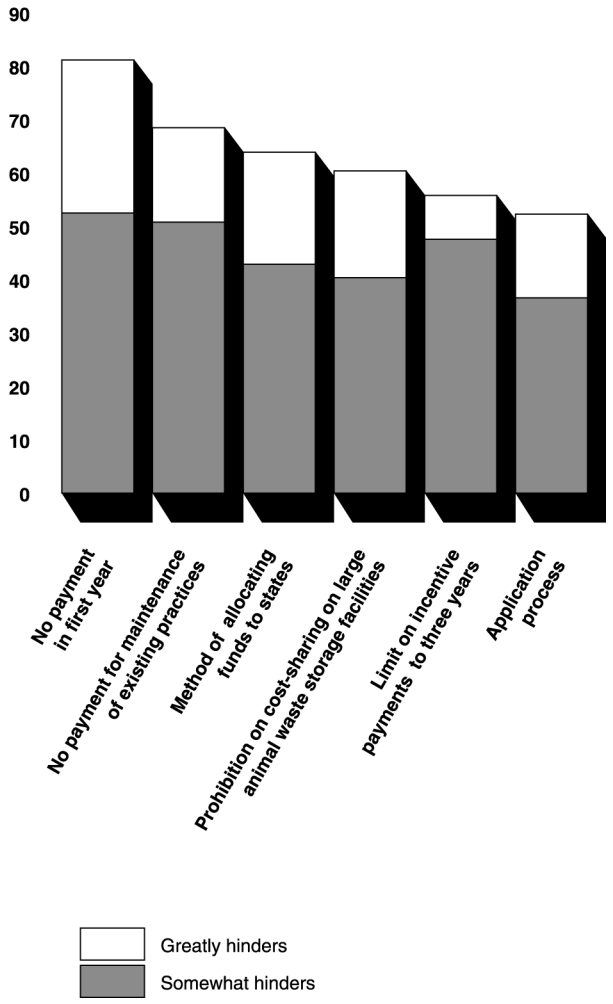


As shown in figure 14, committee members cited several program provisions as hindrances to achieving EQIP's environmental objectives. For example, 69 percent of members cited the provisions that do not allow landowners to be compensated for maintaining previously implemented conservation practices as a hindrance. Furthermore, more than 80 percent of members viewed as a hindrance the program provision stipulating that participants may not receive payment in the first year of the 5- or 10-year contract. Under this provision, producers are expected to bear the cost of

conservation practice implementation in the first year of the contract. About 60 percent of members indicated that the prohibition on USDA's sharing the cost of the construction of waste structures for large livestock and poultry operations[6] "somewhat" or "greatly" hinders achievement of environmental objectives by limiting eligibility. In addition, more than half of the members believed that the application process for EQIP enrollment is a hindrance. For example, some members told us in their written comments that the EQIP application process is unnecessarily cumbersome and entails too much paperwork and staff time. NRCS program officials told us they believe the application process is relatively easy, but that it is the ranking of the applications to determine which are funded that members may consider as the hindrance.

[6] The Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 and implementing regulations prohibit large livestock and poultry operations greater than 1,000 animal units from receiving EQIP funding for construction of animal waste management facilities.

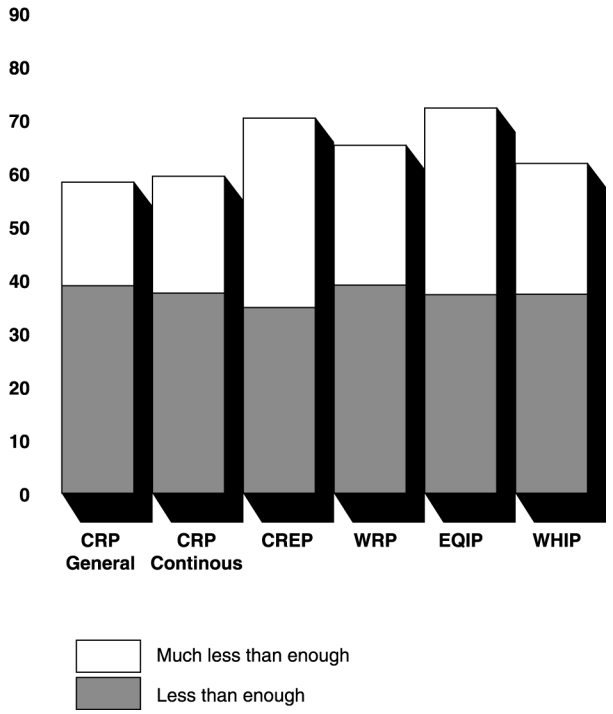
Figure 14: Estimated Percentage of Members Indicating EQIP Provisions "Somewhat" or "Greatly" Hinder Achievement of Environmental Objectives



Similar to the other programs, 69 percent of committee members viewed as a hindrance WHIP's provisions that do not allow landowners to be compensated for maintaining previously implemented practices. Members also viewed as a hindrance the program's lack of annual rental payments (69 percent). About 75 percent of members viewed program promotion at the state or local level as a factor that helps WHIP achieve its environmental objectives. Members viewed this factor as helpful for all of the other programs as well.

Finally, committee members noted that all the programs lack adequate technical assistance to support landowners in planning and implementing conservation practices. As figure 15 depicts, a majority of members indicated that all programs lack adequate technical assistance. Among regions, members from the Northeast and Pacific responded that EQIP has the greatest shortage of technical assistance (75 percent).

Figure 15: Estimated Percentage of Members Viewing Programs Having "Less Than Enough" or "Much Less Than Enough" Technical Assistance

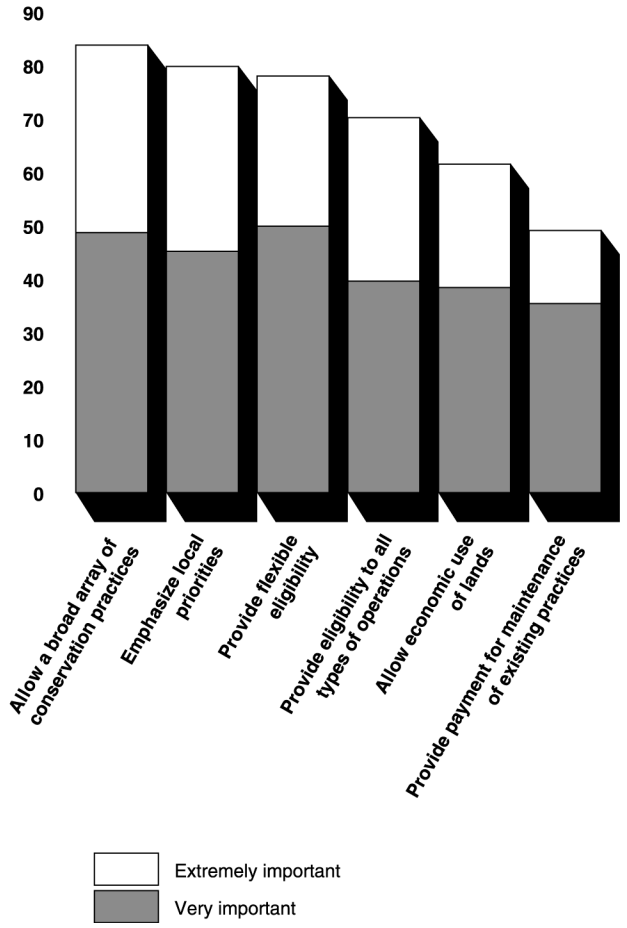


Members Would Like to See Programs Provide Increased Flexibility and Emphasis on Local Priorities

Eighty percent of committee members believed that programs should emphasize local conservation needs while only 24 percent would emphasize national needs. As shown in figure 16, members also indicated that emphasizing local priorities is an important design element in current or new programs. Most of the current programs allow landowners to implement only a limited selection of conservation practices. More than an estimated 80 percent of members viewed allowing a broad array of conservation practices as "very" or "extremely" important in modifying current programs or designing new programs. More than an estimated three-quarters of members identified the need for less stringent eligibility

requirements. For example, some respondents said in written responses that little land in their states meets CRP eligibility requirements. About 70 percent of members also said that providing eligibility to all types of operations is an important design element.

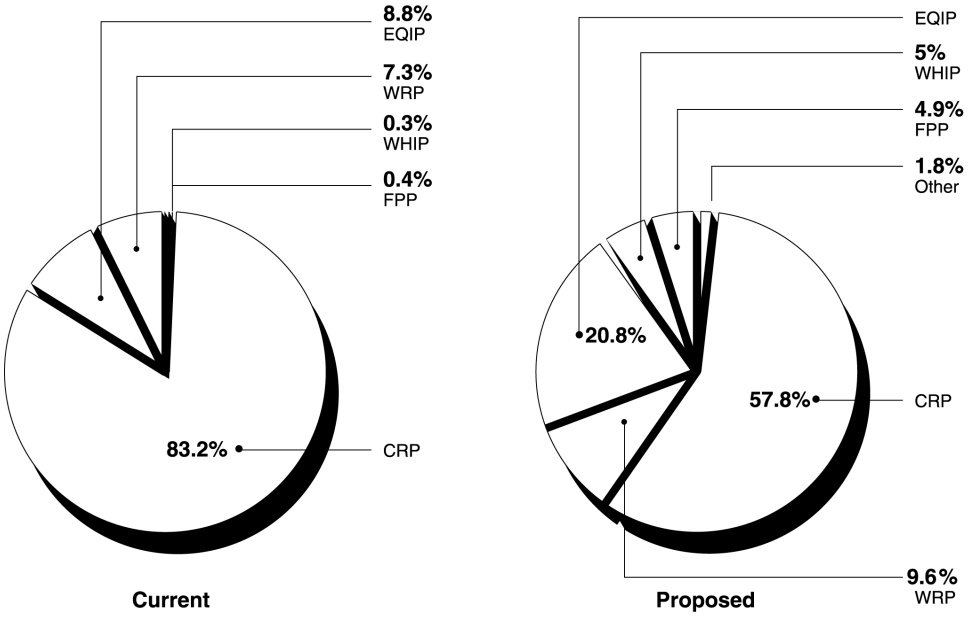
Figure 16: Estimated Percentage of Members Citing Program Elements as "Somewhat" or "Very" Important in Modifying or Creating New Programs



The 2002 omnibus farm bill is expected to increase emphasis on funding to programs that keep lands in production. Currently more than 80 percent of conservation funding is directed to CRP, a program that is directed at land removed from production and is managed at the national level. When asked how they would distribute conservation funding among current programs, state technical committee members indicated they would increase the percentage of funding to EQIP and WHIP, programs that are

decentralized in order to emphasize local environmental objectives. This response is consistent with a desire to increase funding to programs that implement conservation practices on land in agricultural production. Figure 17 compares the current actual allocation of USDA's conservation funds to the allocation suggested by committee members.

Figure 17: Actual and Member-Proposed Allocations of Fiscal Years 1996-2000 Funds to USDA Conservation Programs



Note: Total percentage may not equal 100 percent due to rounding. For FPP and WHIP, percentage estimates have sampling errors of plus or minus 8 and 10 percentage points, respectively.

Conclusions

Legislation modifying USDA's conservation programs is expected to become law in 2002 as part of the omnibus farm bill. The modification or development of regulations to implement the new law will present the department with an opportunity to increase the environmental benefits that result from its programs. We believe our survey of state technical committee members identified several avenues USDA could pursue to enhance the programs' effectiveness.

Specifically, our survey results indicate that USDA has the potential to enhance environmental benefits resulting from CRP, the federal government's largest conservation program, by increasing emphasis on programs that target specific environmental concerns. The department has

the ability to set acreage goals and offer additional incentives for landowners to enroll land into CRP Continuous and CREP. USDA has already taken some actions along these lines, setting aside 4.2 million of CRP's 36.4 million acres for CRP Continuous and CREP. However, as of October 2001, USDA had enrolled only 1.6 million acres in these programs and many states had very little enrollment. Moreover, USDA has noted these programs have significant untapped potential to generate environmental benefits.

Committee members believe USDA's conservation programs do not adequately address the needs of some regions and types of agricultural operations. Historically, USDA's conservation programs have focused on soil erosion resulting from crop production in the Corn Belt and Plains regions. Increasingly diverse agricultural operations, including those operations not served by the current conservation programs, play a role in conservation efforts. As USDA reported in September 2001, the success of USDA's conservation programs will depend on programs extending coverage to a broader base of agricultural operations across geographic regions.

USDA's conservation programs have resulted in environmental benefits, but according to state technical committee members, a number of provisions of the current programs hinder the achievement of environmental objectives. Although some of these provisions are important to ensuring that programs maintain the proper balance between accountability to the taxpayer and flexibility in the achievement of environmental objectives, committee members' views suggest the net effect of some of these provisions may constrain the programs' environmental benefits. If, after examination of the impact of these provisions on the accomplishment of environmental objectives, USDA decides action is needed, it can address this by modifying program regulations or by seeking legislative change.

Recommendation for Executive Action

As USDA modifies or develops implementing regulations for conservation programs reauthorized or created by the omnibus farm bill, which is expected to become law in 2002, we recommend that the secretary of agriculture consider state technical committee members' views on (1) increasing emphasis on CRP Continuous and CREP, programs that target specific environmental concerns, (2) modifying programs to make them more accessible to all regions and types of agricultural operations, and (3) revising elements in all programs that hinder achievement of environmental objectives. If USDA finds that revising the program

regulations to incorporate these views would require legislative action, the secretary should submit such proposals to the Congress.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided USDA with a draft of this report for its review and comment. We received oral comments from the NRCS deputy chief for programs and from the FSA director of conservation and environmental programs. NRCS agreed with our report. FSA generally agreed with the report but provided additional comments.

FSA did not agree that the environmental benefits of CRP-based programs would increase by placing more emphasis on CRP Continuous and CREP. It is more likely, FSA indicated, that certain environmental benefits would increase but others, such as wildlife habitat, could decrease. Therefore, FSA believed that any shifting of emphasis should be done only after evaluation of the costs and benefits of all environmental goals so that decision-makers could make the best-informed determinations.

We agree with FSA that the effects on all environmental goals should be considered before shifting the emphasis within CRP-based programs. As we acknowledge in the report, while some wildlife species benefit from large parcels of grassland that CRP General provides, some members noted that a wide variety of fish and wildlife species also benefit from habitat such as filter strips near water bodies provided by CRP Continuous and CREP. Committee members' views also indicate that these programs are more effective than CRP General in addressing surface water quality and the protection of native species, and about equally effective in protecting and improving wildlife habitat. Finally, these results are consistent with USDA's September 2001 report on developing future agricultural policy, which stated that CRP Continuous and CREP are very well suited to increasing environmental benefits per land retirement program dollar.

Both agencies also provided technical corrections, which we have incorporated into the report as appropriate.

Unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the secretary of agriculture, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, and other interested

parties. We will make copies available to others on request. This report will also be available on GAO's home page at http://www.gao.gov.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.

Lawrence J. Dyckman
Director, Natural Resources
and Environment

Appendix I: Program Enrollment and the Extent to Which Program Applications Exceed Funding and Acreage Limits

Table 2: CRP General Enrollment Applications and Acres, Fiscal Years 1986-2001

Fiscal year	Applications (in thousands)	Acres (in millions)
1986	21.0	2.0
1987	125.0	15.7
1988	88.0	24.5
1989	62.0	29.8
1990	38.0	33.9
1991	9.0	34.4
1992	15.0	35.4
1993	18.0	36.4
1994	0[a]	36.4
1995	0[a]	36.4
1996	11.0	34.5
1997	2.0	32.7
1998	185.0	29.4
1999	55.0	28.9
2000	60.0	30.2
2001	38.0	32.0

Note: Applications and acres are estimated.

[a]USDA did not offer enrollment in fiscal years 1994 and 1995.

Source: USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Table 3: CRP Continuous and CREP Contracts and Acres, Fiscal Years 1997-2001

	CRP Continuous[a]		CREP[b]	
Fiscal year	Contracts	Acres	Contracts	Acres
1997	11,351	99,559	-	-
1998	35,797	571,815	267	3,141
1999	26,727	213,489	1,792	26,674
2000	27,627	220,201	2,829	51,770
2001	37,609	304,906	7,396	103,128
Total	**139,111**	**1,409,970**	**12,284**	**184,713**

[a]CRP Continuous was authorized in the Food Security Act of 1985 but was not implemented until fiscal year 1997.

[b]The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) was authorized in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 and implemented in fiscal year 1998.

Source: USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Table 4: NRCS Conservation Program Contracts and Acres, Fiscal Years 1992-2001

	WRP[a]		EQIP[b]		WHIP[c]		FPP[d]	
Fiscal year	Contracts	Acres	Contracts	Acres	Contracts	Acres	Easements	Acres
1992	226	43,428	-	-	-	-	-	-
1993	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1994	457	75,017	-	-	-	-	-	-
1995	633	115,071	-	-	-	-	-	-
1996	540	92,405	-	-	-	-	161	29,795
1997	703	127,267	24,812	8,694,205	-	-	25	4,553
1998	1,080	211,917	20,261	9,312,597	4,600	672,000	154	31,143
1999	767	119,919	18,785	8,753,229	3,855	721,249	3	270
2000	2,103	149,915	16,249	7,448,478	-	-	4	241
2001	898	139,306	17,389	8,544,465	2,274	212,361	7	551
Total	**7,407**	**1,074,245**	**97,496**	**42,752,975**	**10,729**	**1,605,610**	**354**	**66,553**

[a]Authorized in 1985, the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was implemented in fiscal year 1992 and did not offer enrollment in fiscal year 1993.

[b]The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was authorized in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 and implemented in fiscal year 1997.

[c]The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) was authorized in 1996 but was not implemented until fiscal year 1998. NRCS allocated all the authorized funds during fiscal years 1998 and 1999, using funds authorized by the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 in fiscal year 2001.

[d]The Farmland Protection Program (FPP) was authorized in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996. Similar to WHIP, NRCS allocated all of the authorized funds during fiscal years 1996 through 1998. FPP received additional funding through the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000.

Source: USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Table 5: Eligible Acres That Exceeded Program Limits and USDA Estimate of Funding Required to Enroll Acres in USDA Conservation Programs As of October 2001

Program	Eligible acres that exceeded funding or acreage limits[a]	USDA estimated funding required to enroll acres (in millions)
EQIP	90,291,131	$1,638
WRP	647,172	783
WHIP	254,833	16
FPP	290,273	256
Total	**91,483,409**	**$2,693**

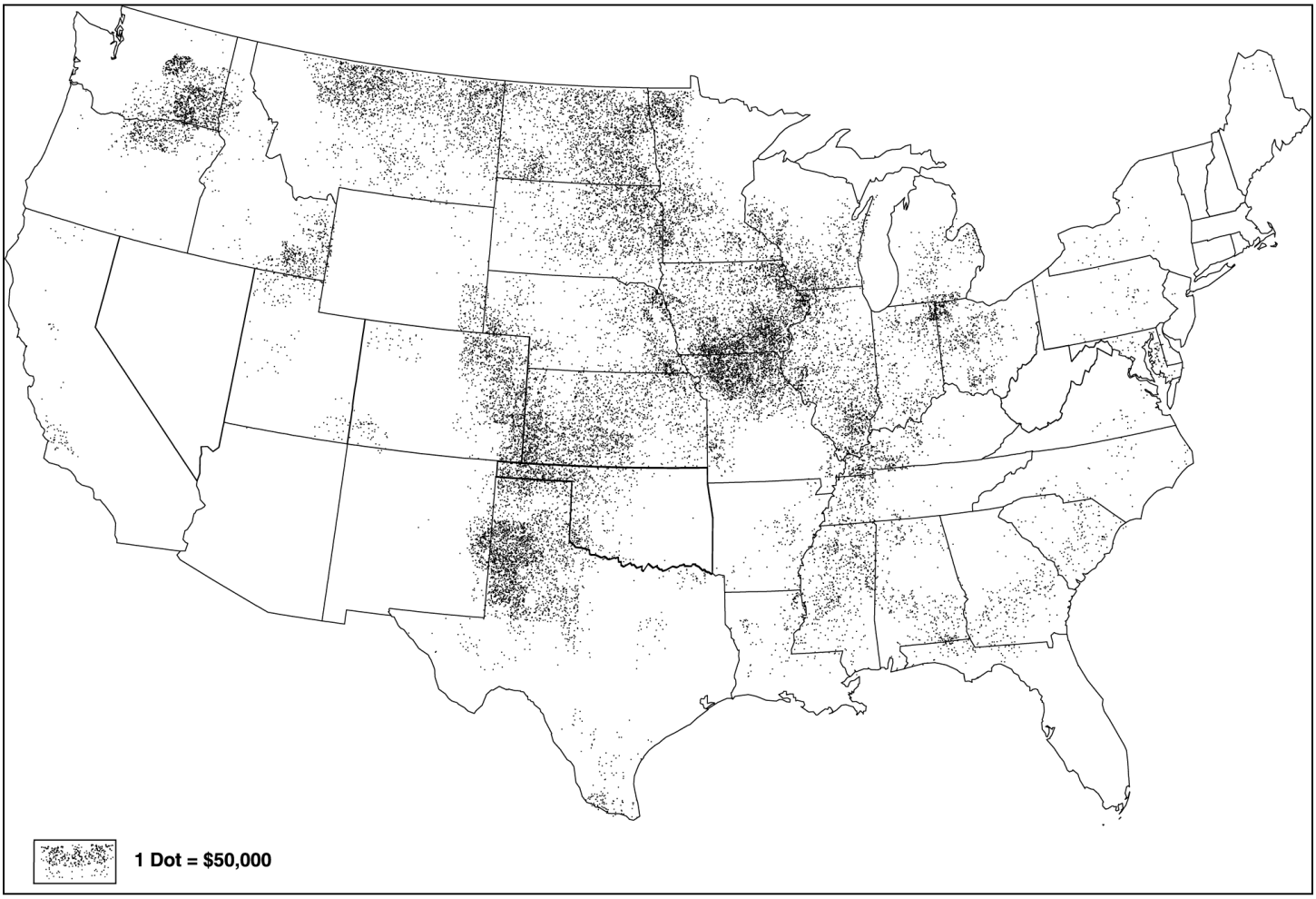
Note: During the most recent CRP General enrollment period, which occurred from January to February 2000, 1,030,085 acres met eligibility requirements but fell below the cut-off the Farm Service Agency used to select acres. The Farm Service Agency does not maintain an estimate of the funding required to enroll these acres.

[a]Includes acres that are otherwise eligible for the program but were not enrolled because they exceeded the level of funding or acres authorized.

Source: USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Appendix II: Distribution of Payments for USDA's Conservation Programs

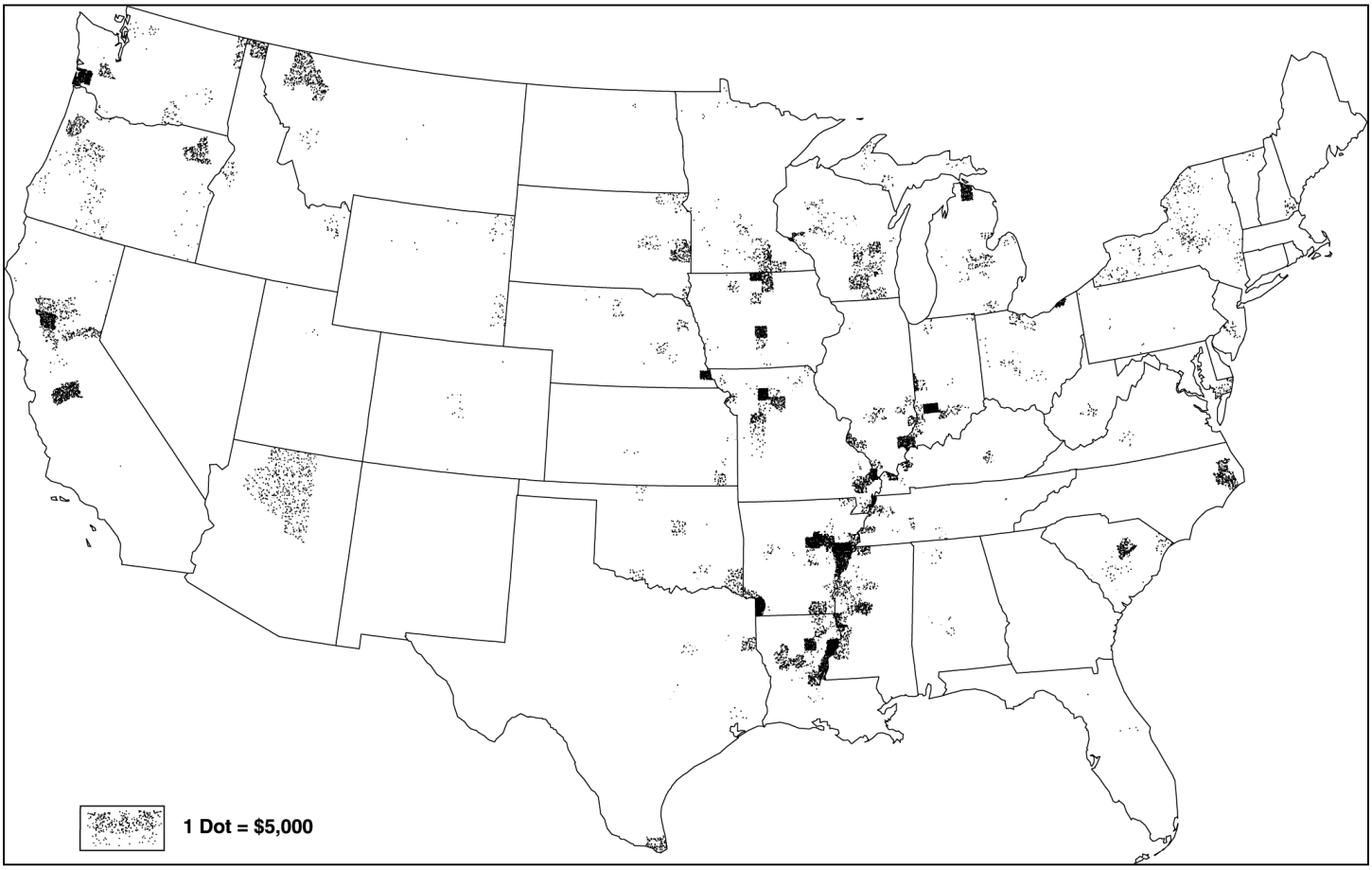
Figure 18: CRP Payments, Fiscal Year 2000



Note: Figure includes payments in the continental United States. Payments were also made in Alaska, Hawaii, and the Caribbean territory.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Figure 19: WRP Payments, Fiscal Year 2000



Note: Figure includes payments in the continental United States. Payments were also made in Hawaii.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Figure 20: EQIP Payments, Fiscal Year 2000

Note: Figure includes payments from cost-share programs that preceded EQIP, including the Agricultural Conservation Program, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Program. Figure includes payments in the continental United States. Payments were also made in Alaska, Hawaii, and the Caribbean territory.

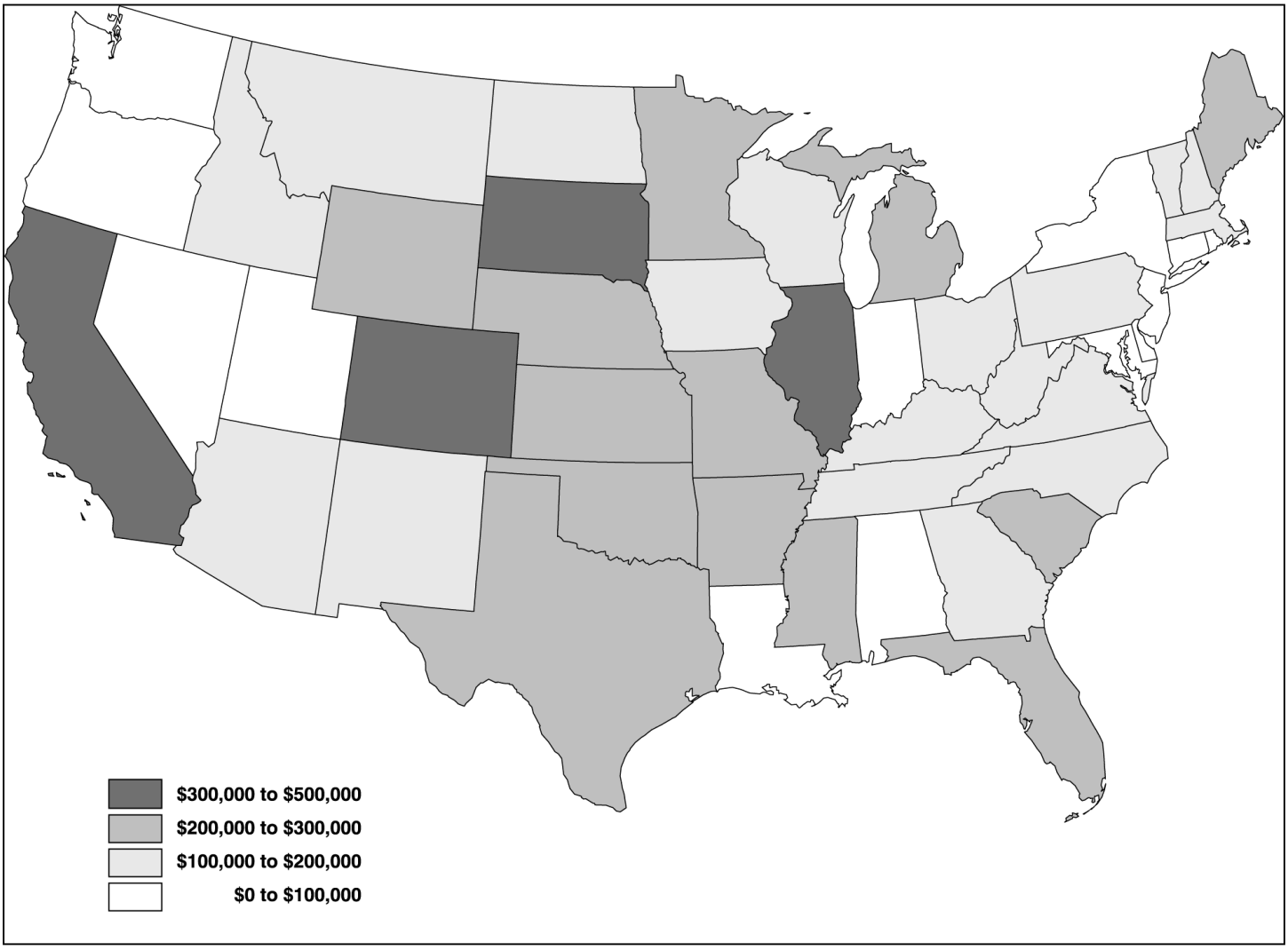
Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Figure 21: FPP Payments, Fiscal Year 2000

Note: Figure includes payments in the continental United States.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Figure 22: WHIP Payments, Fiscal Year 2000



Note: Payments in this figure are based on state-level data. Figure includes payments in the continental United States. Payments were also made in Hawaii and the Caribbean territory.

Source: GAO's analysis of USDA's data.

Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This appendix presents the objectives, scope, and methodology to review USDA's conservation programs. It discusses the methodology used in sampling and controlling for sampling error and nonsampling error, as well as sources and analyses conducted to provide additional information.

Objectives and Scope

The chairman and ranking member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry asked us to obtain the views of members of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) state technical committees on the effectiveness of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), including the Continuous Enrollment and CREP options; the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP); the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); and the Farmland Protection Program (FPP). Specifically, we were asked to determine committee members' views on

- the effectiveness of USDA's conservation efforts in addressing environmental concerns and
- any program elements that hinder the achievement of environmental objectives related to agriculture, as well as program characteristics that current or new programs might include to better meet these objectives.

In addition, the requesters asked us to provide information on program participation and the extent to which programs are oversubscribed as well as the geographic distribution of payments for each program.

Survey Methodology

To address the first two objectives, we mailed a questionnaire to all NRCS state conservationists, who chair the state technical committees, and a stratified sample of state technical committee members. To identify these members we obtained lists of state technical committee members from NRCS offices in all 50 states and two U.S. territories. The original population of 2,176 committee members (52 NRCS state conservationists plus 2,124 state technical committee members) was reduced by 193 to account for members who did not regularly attend state technical committee meetings, leaving 1,983. We stratified the sample by seven geographic regions collapsed from the ten USDA farm production regions on the basis of advice from USDA's Economic Research Service. In addition we stratified the sample by the organization that respondents represented. Within these strata, respondents were selected at random. This results in an adjusted sample size of 1,395. Of the 1,395 state technical committee members we surveyed, 996 (or 71.4 percent) returned our

survey. All percentage estimates from the survey have sampling errors of plus or minus 7 percentage points or less, unless otherwise noted.

Our sample was statistically drawn and weighted so that we could generalize the responses of the members we sampled within regional and organizational strata to the entire population for each question in the survey. See appendix IV for the entire questionnaire and the nationwide survey results. For survey results stratified by region and organization, see a special publication entitled *Agricultural Conservation: Survey of USDA State Technical Committee Members* (GAO-02-371SP), which is available on the Internet at http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?gao-02-371SP.

We pretested the questionnaire with committee members in Iowa, Maryland, Texas, and Virginia from USDA's Agricultural Research Service, and NRCS; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; state natural resource and environmental agencies; universities; and agricultural and environmental organizations. During these visits, we administered the survey and asked the officials to fill out the survey as they would if they had received it in the mail. After completing the survey, we interviewed the respondents to ensure that (1) the questions were clear and unambiguous, (2) the terms we used were precise, (3) the questionnaire did not place an undue burden on the agency officials completing it, and (4) the questionnaire was independent and unbiased.

To obtain the maximum number of responses to our survey, we included a letter from NRCS encouraging members to respond in the initial survey sent to members. We also sent a replacement survey to nonrespondents about 4 weeks after mailing the initial survey. At this time, we also requested that NRCS state conservationists in all 50 states and two U.S. territories encourage committee members to respond. We contacted nonrespondents by telephone about 4 weeks after replacement surveys were sent to request their cooperation, sending additional copies of the survey if needed.

Sampling Errors and Confidence Intervals of Estimates

Since we used a sample (called a probability sample) of committee members to develop our estimates, each estimate has a measurable precision, or sampling error, that may be expressed as a plus/minus figure. A sampling error indicates how closely we reproduce from a sample the results that we would obtain if we were to take a complete count of the population using the same measurement methods. By adding the sampling error to and subtracting it from the estimate, we can develop upper and lower bounds for each estimate. This range is called a confidence interval.

Sampling errors and confidence intervals are stated at a certain confidence level–in this case, 95 percent. For example, a confidence interval at the 95 percent confidence level means that in 95 out of 100 instances, the sampling procedure we used would produce a confidence interval containing the population value we are estimating.

We obtained a response rate of 71.4 percent. We did not test for potential differences between the respondents who did and did not respond to our survey because we had little or no information about the nonrespondents. As a result, we do not know the effect of these nonrespondents on the results of our survey. Our results are generalizable to the views and opinions of the regions and organizations committee members represented. In addition, some estimates do not always represent the entire population because some members did not answer all of the questions.

Controlling for Nonsampling Errors

In addition to reported sampling errors, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey may introduce other types of errors, commonly referred to as nonsampling errors. For example, differences in how questions are interpreted, errors in entering data, incomplete sampling lists, and the types of people who do not respond can all introduce unwanted variability into the survey results. We included steps in both the data collection and data analysis stages to minimize such nonsampling errors. Some of these steps included pretesting questionnaires with committee members, obtaining comments on the questionnaire from experts in the area, following quality control procedures to ensure data were entered correctly, and checking all computer analyses with a second analyst.

Methodology for Obtaining Additional Information

To provide information on participation levels and the extent to which USDA conservation programs are oversubscribed, we obtained data on program participation and backlogs from NRCS and FSA.

To provide information on the geographic distribution of fiscal year 2000 conservation program payments, we obtained data from NRCS and FSA. CRP and EQIP data were obtained from USDA's main database on farm payments, the Producer Payments Reporting System, which is maintained by FSA in Kansas City, Missouri. WRP data were obtained from the NRCS and FSA financial management divisions. WHIP data were obtained from the NRCS financial management division. FPP data were obtained from the program manager.

Although we did not independently assess the accuracy and reliability of the USDA data, we reviewed the data for reasonableness among regions and compared it with other USDA reports.

Appendix IV: Results of Survey of USDA State Technical Committee Members

United States General Accounting Office

Survey of USDA State Technical Committee Members

Introduction

The Congress has asked the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to review USDA's conservation programs. Specifically, the Congress is interested in the effectiveness of the current programs in addressing states' agricultural environmental and natural resource needs and the design elements that existing, and possibly new, programs should include to better meet these needs. The GAO is collecting information to assist the Congress as it prepares for discussions on the next omnibus farm bill, including authorizing agricultural programs, which is expected to become law in 2002.

This survey primarily addresses five existing USDA conservation programs: the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), including continuous signup and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP); the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP); the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); and the Farmland Protection Program (FPP). The survey explores the need, if any, to modify these programs or design new programs.

As part of this review, we are surveying Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationists and a sample of State Technical Committee members from all 50 states and the Pacific Basin and Caribbean Area to obtain their views on USDA's conservation programs. Because this is only a sample, it is critical that you respond so that all State Technical Committee members' views are represented in the results.

Your cooperation in completing this questionnaire is vital to our study. The survey's results will be discussed in our report to the Congress.

Instructions

When answering the questions in this questionnaire, please primarily consider the USDA conservation programs listed above. In addition, please base responses to the questionnaire from your organization's perspective. For more information about these programs, please refer to the "Definitions" enclosed.

Please return your completed questionnaire in the enclosed, pre-addressed business reply envelope within 10 business days of receipt. This will help us avoid costly follow-up. If you should lose or misplace the envelope, please send the completed questionnaire to:

U.S. General Accounting Office
ATTN: Tom Cook
1999 Bryan St.
Suite 2200
Dallas, TX 75201-6848

If you have any questions, please contact the following staff in our Dallas, TX office:

Tom Cook
Tel: (214) 777-5607
Email: cookt@gao.gov

Joanna McFarland
Tel: (214) 777-5623
Email: mcfarlandj@gao.gov

Please provide the following information for the person we should contact should we have any questions.

Name: _____

Title: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip Code: _____

Phone #: _____

1

Program Needs

1. To what degree, if at all, do you believe the following environmental or natural resource conditions related to agriculture on private land are concerns in your state? *(Check one for each row.)*

Environmental or Natural Resource Concern	Major concern	Moderate concern	Minor concern	Not a concern	N=
1. Air pollution from agricultural field operations	11.0%	24.0%	44.8%	20.2%	1868
2. Air pollution from livestock operations	13.0%	32.7%	41.8%	12.5%	1878
3. Depletion of groundwater sources	39.5%	29.1%	21.7%	9.7%	1930
4. Depletion of surface water	36.4%	28.8%	23.6%	11.1%	1918
5. Impaired groundwater from leaching from agricultural fields	27.1%	41.7%	25.7%	5.5%	1921
6. Impaired groundwater from livestock operations	26.8%	40.2%	25.9%	7.1%	1897
7. Impaired surface water from livestock operations	41.3%	38.7%	16.3%	3.8%	1908
8. Impaired surface water from runoff from agricultural fields	40.1%	38.9%	16.9%	4.1%	1932
9. Loss of native species	25.2%	30.6%	33.3%	10.9%	1896
10. Loss of agricultural land to urban sprawl	51.8%	32.7%	12.9%	2.6%	1942
11. Loss of wetlands	31.9%	36.9%	23.9%	7.3%	1919
12. Loss of wildlife habitat on farms and ranches	21.3%	41.3%	28.4%	9.1%	1913
13. Proliferation of invasive species	36.7%	36.9%	21.7%	4.8%	1889
14. Soil erosion from water runoff	36.5%	46.5%	15.0%	2.0%	1944
15. Soil erosion from wind	11.0%	32.2%	39.5%	17.3%	1887
16. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	76.4%	22.3%	1.3%	0%	199

2

2. How effective, if at all, are the following USDA conservation programs in addressing your state's environmental and natural resource concerns related to agriculture on private lands? (*Check one for each row.*)

Program	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) **General** Signup - provides annual rental payments to agriculture producers to retire lands that are highly erodible or environmentally sensitive	15.2%	34.4%	23.4%	14.6%	12.4%	1638
2. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) **Continuous** Signup - offers additional financial incentives and allows acreage devoted to conservation practices, such as riparian buffers and filter strips, yielding highly desirable environmental benefits to be enrolled at any time without going through the competitive bidding process	17.4%	34.4%	24.0%	14.6%	9.7%	1629
3. Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) - a federal-state conservation partnership program that targets environmental concerns related to agriculture by using financial incentives to encourage landowners to retire lands	21.1%	29.7%	22.6%	14.3%	12.3%	686
4. Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) - offers payment for the restoration of wetlands that have been previously drained and converted to agricultural uses, requiring landowners to sign an easement for thirty years or perpetuity	16.9%	25.0%	25.4%	20.9%	11.8%	1611
5. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - provides financial incentives to landowners to address soil, water, and related environmental concerns on lands in agricultural uses	19.0%	31.0%	32.4%	13.7%	3.9%	1808
6. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) - provides financial incentives to develop habitats for fish and wildlife on private land	11.2%	25.7%	32.1%	23.9%	7.1%	1697
7. Farmland Protection Program (FPP) - protects farmland from non-agricultural conversion by acquiring thirty-year or permanent easements on farmlands in cooperation with existing state, local, or tribal farmland protection programs or land trusts	19.1%	21.8%	17.7%	27.8%	13.6%	538
8. All programs	5.8%	31.9%	41.0%	18.4%	2.8%	1379

3

3. If you responded 'extremely effective' or 'slightly or not effective,' for any item in question 2 above, please provide the name of the program and explain the reason(s) for your response(s) below.

If extremely effective: **100%, N=679**

If slightly or not effective: **100%, N=643**

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) General Signup

4. How familiar are you with the CRP **General** Signup program? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Extremely familiar **14.6%**)
2. ❒ Very familiar **19.0%**))→ (*Continue.*)
3. ❒ Moderately familiar **26.4%**)
4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **13.2%**)
5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **26.8%, N=1919** →(*Go to Question 7 on page 6.*)

5. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the CRP **General** Signup program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the CRP **General** Signup program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	15.7%	36.2%	29.7%	14.3%	4.1%	1307
2. Protecting native species	5.3%	16.8%	37.7%	23.8%	16.5%	1270
3. Reducing soil erosion	27.0%	43.6%	18.0%	8.5%	2.9%	1310
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	12.2%	33.9%	26.4%	19.5%	8.0%	1255
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	17.3%	39.9%	25.7%	11.3%	5.9%	1295
6. Protecting or improving air quality	5.8%	19.2%	28.0%	23.3%	23.7%	1160
7. Preventing urban sprawl	3.9%	8.1%	17.4%	24.6%	45.9%	1111
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	25.9%	18.5%	6.8%	11.5%	37.3%	55

4

6. Do the following CRP **General** Signup provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? *(Check one for each row.)*

CRP **General** Signup Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	3.0%	22.3%	38.8%	30.3%	5.5%	1128
2. Specific signup periods rather than continuous signup	4.0%	16.3%	21.5%	50.2%	8.0%	1197
3. Acceptance selection process (EBI)	11.3%	27.0%	21.5%	31.0%	9.3%	1077
4. Length of contract (10 to 15 years)	20.9%	37.3%	22.5%	17.0%	2.3%	1242
5. Requirement that land be in crop production 2 of the past 5 years	7.3%	24.1%	20.8%	37.7%	10.0%	1248
6. Size of cost-share percentage	10.7%	35.8%	19.7%	29.2%	4.7%	1191
7. Size of annual rental rate per acre	15.2%	29.1%	11.9%	27.1%	16.6%	1210
8. No payment for maintenance of existing practices	1.4%	3.6%	25.4%	53.9%	15.8%	1193
9. Limit on the percentage of land that may be enrolled in a county (25%)	2.8%	6.4%	39.0%	40.3%	11.6%	1210
10. Limit on total rental payments ($50,000)	3.7%	9.6%	43.7%	37.5%	5.9%	1176
11. Restriction on economic uses of land	7.4%	14.0%	25.5%	43.9%	9.1%	1221
12. Restriction on haying and grazing of land	9.2%	11.9%	17.6%	45.9%	15.2%	1247
13. Restrictions on acceptable conservation practices	6.8%	18.1%	32.2%	35.5%	7.5%	1208
14. Having program promotion at the state or local level	25.8%	44.7%	24.7%	3.6%	1.2%	1208
15. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	11.8%	0%	1.9%	8.2%	78.1%	60

5

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Continuous Signup

7. How familiar are you with the CRP **Continuous** Signup? (*Check one.*)

   1. ❒ Extremely familiar **12.1%**)
   2. ❒ Very familiar **16.8%**))→ (*Continue.*)
   3. ❒ Moderately familiar **24.0%**)
   4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **13.0%**)
   5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **34.1%, N=1900** →(*Go to Question 10 on page 8.*)

8. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the CRP **Continuous** Signup program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the CRP **Continuous** Signup program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	14.0%	37.1%	33.6%	12.7%	2.6%	1193
2. Protecting native species	5.1%	24.0%	35.0%	23.1%	12.8%	1146
3. Reducing soil erosion	16.1%	48.9%	24.1%	8.8%	2.1%	1177
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	9.4%	33.9%	29.4%	20.1%	7.2%	1154
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	21.0%	46.0%	20.8%	9.1%	3.3%	1185
6. Protecting or improving air quality	4.6%	14.2%	24.2%	29.1%	27.9%	1006
7. Preventing urban sprawl	4.1%	7.0%	13.7%	19.6%	55.7%	987
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	12.2%	28.5%	7.4%	14.7%	37.2%	38

6

9. Do the following CRP **Continuous** Signup provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? *(Check one for each row.)*

CRP **Continuous** Signup Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	16.6%	30.8%	31.3%	18.2%	3.1%	1056
2. Continuous signup rather than specific signup periods	43.2%	41.2%	11.6%	3.6%	0.4%	1130
3. Length of contract (10 to 15 years)	21.2%	38.1%	23.4%	16.2%	1.1%	1149
4. Percentage of incentive payments (20%)	23.9%	38.0%	14.1%	20.4%	3.4%	1088
5. Size of cost-share percentage	16.1%	39.7%	17.2%	23.5%	3.4%	1093
6. Size of annual rental rate per acre	15.7%	36.0%	11.6%	26.0%	10.7%	1119
7. No payment for maintenance of existing practices	1.5%	3.4%	26.9%	52.8%	15.3%	1107
8. Restriction on haying and grazing of land	8.8%	10.7%	19.8%	46.2%	14.6%	1139
9. Restrictions on acceptable conservation practices	6.3%	14.8%	28.7%	42.3%	7.9%	1115
10. Having program promotion at the state or local level	32.1%	41.0%	22.9%	2.3%	1.6%	1112
11. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	33.2%	3.2%	5.0%	5.8%	52.8%	63

7

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

10. Does your state have a CREP program? (*Check one.*)

    1. ❒ Yes **44.8%, N=796** → (*Continue.*)
    2. ❒ No **25.7%, N=457**→ (*Go to Question 13 on page 9.*)
    3. ❒ Don't know **29.4%, N=523**→ (*Go to Question 13 on page 9.*)

11. How familiar are you with the CREP program? (*Check one.*)

    1. ❒ Extremely familiar **16.1%, N=149**)
    2. ❒ Very familiar **16.5%, N=152**) → (*Continue.*)
    3. ❒ Moderately familiar **22.4%, N=206**)
    4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **16.7%, N=154**)
    5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **28.2%, N=259** → (*Go to Question 13 on page 9.*)

12. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the CREP program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the CREP program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? *(Check one for each row.)*

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	26.7%	28.8%	26.7%	14.1%	3.6%	475
2. Protecting native species	15.0%	24.8%	27.0%	22.2%	11.1%	455
3. Reducing soil erosion	23.9%	35.2%	28.2%	8.4%	4.4%	466
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	17.0%	29.1%	28.8%	17.7%	7.4%	447
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	33.7%	36.0%	18.8%	7.5%	3.9%	469
6. Protecting or improving air quality	6.3%	10.4%	25.3%	26.3%	31.7%	416
7. Preventing urban sprawl	5.2%	6.4%	22.8%	17.4%	48.2%	408
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	36.5%	20.5%	4.4%	18.7%	19.8%	23

8

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

13. How familiar are you with the WRP? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Extremely familiar **11.6%, N=219**)
2. ❒ Very familiar **18.2%, N=346**) → (*Continue.*)
3. ❒ Moderately familiar **23.7%, N=448**)
4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **20.7%, N=392**)
5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **25.8%, N=489** → (*Go to Question 16 on page 10.*)

14. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the WRP program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the WRP program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	32.9%	34.6%	22.6%	7.7%	2.2%	1354
2. Protecting native species	19.3%	30.2%	30.9%	13.9%	5.6%	1301
3. Reducing soil erosion	10.6%	23.6%	32.1%	20.5%	13.2%	1280
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	14.3%	31.2%	28.7%	18.2%	7.5%	1296
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	20.1%	38.2%	25.5%	12.0%	4.2%	1326
6. Protecting or improving air quality	4.2%	9.3%	24.4%	26.4%	35.8%	1087
7. Preventing urban sprawl	6.4%	11.5%	22.0%	19.8%	40.3%	1134
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	17.0%	20.1%	27.8%	9.7%	25.4%	63

9

15. Do the following WRP provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? *(Check one for each row.)*

WRP Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	5.3%	17.3%	38.1%	33.3%	6.0%	1077
2. Determination of easement price based on the agricultural value of the land rather than the market value of the land	4.7%	16.5%	15.2%	46.0%	17.5%	1161
3. Length of easement (thirty years or perpetuity)	20.3%	24.8%	17.2%	29.8%	7.9%	1225
4. Size of cost-share percentage	19.3%	32.1%	19.8%	26.0%	2.8%	1135
5. No payment to maintain previously protected wetlands	1.2%	5.0%	29.9%	49.4%	14.6%	1197
6. Limit on the percentage of land that may be enrolled in a county (25%)	1.2%	3.6%	53.4%	34.5%	7.3%	1163
7. Restrictions on land use	9.8%	16.4%	23.1%	42.1%	8.6%	1234
8. Having program promotion at the state or local level	29.7%	43.0%	23.2%	2.8%	1.2%	1177
9. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	18.3%	3.4%	4.8%	6.4%	67.0%	66

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

16. How familiar are you with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Extremely familiar **19.1%, N=363**)
2. ❒ Very familiar **28.3%, N=539**) → (*Continue.*)
3. ❒ Moderately familiar **29.5%, N=561**)
4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **11.3%, N=214**)
5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **11.8%, N=224** →(*Go to Question 19 on page 13.*)

10

17. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the EQIP program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the EQIP program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? *(Check one for each row.)*

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	6.6%	23.5%	32.8%	23.3%	13.8%	1615
2. Protecting native species	5.6%	14.1%	31.0%	28.0%	21.4%	1553
3. Reducing soil erosion	14.5%	40.3%	31.8%	11.1%	2.3%	1643
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	14.2%	34.5%	32.5%	14.8%	4.0%	1584
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	21.0%	39.5%	29.3%	8.4%	1.7%	1644
6. Protecting or improving air quality	6.0%	15.2%	29.1%	25.2%	24.5%	1430
7. Preventing urban sprawl	3.4%	6.5%	15.8%	20.0%	54.3%	1322
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	39.5%	8.0%	13.7%	11.1%	27.7%	42

11

18. Do the following EQIP provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

EQIP Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	4.0%	16.0%	27.7%	36.6%	15.7%	1485
2. Method of allocating funds to states	2.3%	13.7%	20.0%	42.9%	21.0%	1359
3. Method of prioritizing environmental objectives in your state	9.9%	35.0%	15.3%	28.7%	11.0%	1565
4. Minimum of 65% of state funds allocated to priority areas	9.1%	29.8%	18.4%	32.4%	10.4%	1538
5. Length of contract (5 to 10 years)	7.2%	31.3%	33.7%	21.4%	6.3%	1547
6. Ability for producers to bid down cost-share to be more competitive	5.9%	40.1%	19.1%	21.2%	13.7%	1413
7. Size of maximum annual ($10,000/year)and total rental payments ($50,000/total)	4.9%	18.3%	27.6%	38.4%	10.8%	1490
8. Percentage (50%) of funds targeted to natural resource concerns relating to livestock production	12.7%	27.8%	27.1%	25.5%	7.0%	1520
9. No payment in first year	1.2%	3.9%	13.6%	52.5%	28.7%	1420
10. No payment for maintenance of existing practices	0.6%	3.9%	26.9%	50.9%	17.7%	1509
11. Requirement that FSA concur on policies and procedures	7.0%	13.6%	36.9%	29.0%	13.5%	1436
12. Limit on incentive payments (3 years)	2.0%	7.4%	34.9%	47.5%	8.3%	1405
13. Prohibition on cost-sharing animal waste storage or treatment facilities for large confined livestock operations	7.1%	10.9%	21.6%	40.4%	20.0%	1396
14. Having program promotion at the state or local level	30.2%	43.7%	21.8%	2.6%	1.7%	1482
15. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	16.6%	0%	1.5%	14.4%	67.5%	76

12

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

19. How familiar are you with the WHIP? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Extremely familiar **11.6%, N=225**)
2. ❒ Very familiar **15.1%, N=292**) → (*Continue.*)
3. ❒ Moderately familiar **23.2%, N=448**)
4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **21.1%, N=407**)
5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **29.0%, N=561** *to Question 22 on page 14.*)

20. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the WHIP program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the WHIP program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	32.7%	36.5%	24.1%	5.3%	1.5%	1327
2. Protecting native species	18.1%	34.8%	32.6%	10.7%	3.8%	1290
3. Reducing soil erosion	6.3%	26.2%	37.3%	22.1%	8.1%	1278
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	5.3%	18.9%	36.5%	26.9%	12.5%	1234
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	8.9%	29.3%	36.0%	19.0%	6.8%	1276
6. Protecting or improving air quality	2.2%	10.4%	25.1%	25.9%	36.4%	1099
7. Preventing urban sprawl	2.7%	6.1%	16.7%	20.1%	54.4%	1107
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	36.8%	21.6%	14.1%	6.4%	21.0%	35

13

21. Do the following WHIP provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

WHIP Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	7.6%	19.9%	42.9%	25.5%	4.2%	1106
2. Length of contract (5 to 10 years)	8.5%	33.7%	35.4%	20.1%	2.4%	1219
3. Size of cost-share percentage	6.7%	41.6%	18.7%	29.6%	3.4%	1188
4. No payment for maintenance of existing practices	0.6%	3.7%	27.2%	57.9%	10.6%	1216
5. Lack of annual rental payments	0.6%	3.2%	27.4%	53.8%	15.0%	1168
6. Having program promotion at the state or local level	31.2%	43.6%	20.5%	2.8%	1.9%	1190
7. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	17.5%	0%	5.4%	3.8%	73.3%	59

Farmland Protection Program (FPP)

22. Does your state have an FPP program? (*Check one.*)

4. ❒ Yes **30.9%, N=583** → (*Continue.*)

5. ❒ No **19.6%, N=370** → (*Go to Question 26 on page 16.*)

6. ❒ Don't know **49.6%, N=936** → (*Go to Question 26 on page 16.*)

23. How familiar are you with the FPP program? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Extremely familiar **8.6%, N=70**)
2. ❒ Very familiar **10.1%, N=82**) → (*Continue.*)
3. ❒ Moderately familiar **16.8%, N=135**)
4. ❒ Somewhat familiar **22.4%, N=180**)

5. ❒ Slightly or not familiar **42.2%, N=339** → (*Go to Question 26 on page 16.*)

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24. Consider only the parcels of land in your state that are enrolled in the FPP program. Where it is applied, how effective, if at all, is the FPP program in encouraging producers/landowners in your state to engage in practices that benefit the following environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	8.7%	18.5%	31.5%	30.5%	10.9%	274
2. Protecting native species	7.6%	9.7%	29.8%	25.9%	27.0-%	268
3. Reducing soil erosion	8.8%	20.4%	39.3%	23.0%	8.6%	280
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	9.2%	13.2%	39.3%	31.2%	7.1%	277
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	9.7%	21.0%	40.4%	21.5%	7.4%	278
6. Protecting or improving air quality	6.8%	10.1%	26.6%	26.1%	30.4%	251
7. Preventing urban sprawl	45.2%	24.1%	16.7%	5.8%	8.3%	287
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	62.9%	22.9%	14.2%	0%	0%	10

25. Do the following FPP provisions or factors help or hinder the achievement of the program's environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

FPP Provision or Factor	Greatly helps	Somewhat helps	Neither helps nor hinders	Somewhat hinders	Greatly hinders	N=
1. Application process	2.0%	15.7%	38.8%	30.8%	12.7%	251
2. Permanent easements rather than limited year contracts	30.3%	28.0%	16.2%	17.3%	8.3%	277
3. Size of federal contribution (up to 50%)	22.1%	27.9%	13.2%	30.3%	6.4%	282
4. Requirement that a state, local, or tribal government program sponsor be in existence	21.0%	28.3%	25.3%	23.0%	2.3%	273
5. Requirement that land is prime, unique, or productive	18.8%	31.0%	22.4%	25.2%	2.5%	277
6. Having program promotion at the state or local level	40.0%	31.6%	24.5%	0.8%	3.1%	276
7. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	64.7%	0%	7.3%	22.7%	5.3%	20

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Conservation Plans for USDA Conservation Programs

26. Consider the conservation plans that producers are required to adopt for various USDA conservation programs. How effective, if at all, are these conservation plans in addressing the following areas? *(Check one for each row.)*

Conservation Plan Area	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Opportunities for conserving natural resources on entire agricultural operations	9.5%	30.4%	35.5%	16.9%	7.6%	1689
2. Opportunities for improving the profitability of entire agricultural operations	3.9%	19.4%	35.0%	27.5%	14.2%	1578
3. Long-term strategies for addressing the needs of entire agricultural operations	7.3%	27.8%	31.8%	20.0%	13.1%	1606

27. If you responded 'extremely effective' or 'slightly or not effective,' please explain the reason(s) for your response(s) below.

If extremely effective: **100.0%, N=201**

If slightly or not effective: **100.0%, N=300**

Land Maintenance and Conservation Practices

28. Consider lands in your state for which CRP contracts have expired and have not been renewed. To what extent, if any, are these lands being used in the following ways? *(Check one for each row.)*

Land use	Very great extent	Great extent	Moderate extent	Some extent	Little or no extent	N=
1. Forestry	6.5%	13.8%	13.0%	24.4%	42.3%	943
2. Grazing/haying	2.8%	18.3%	37.7%	33.4%	7.8%	1008
3. Crop production	9.1%	29.3%	28.9%	23.9%	8.8%	1032
4. Commercial development (non-agricultural)	3.0%	7.6%	16.5%	30.2%	42.7%	899
5. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	6.8%	26.0%	29.0%	30.7%	7.4%	36

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29. In your opinion, do producers/landowners in your state either discontinue or avoid desirable conservation practices in order to qualify for USDA conservation programs? (*Check one for each row.*)

Program	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably No	Definitely no	N=
1. CRP **General** Signup	5.0%	19.3%	57.5%	18.2%	1212
2. CRP **Continuous** Signup	3.8%	14.8%	61.5%	19.9%	1182
3. CREP	0.8%	13.5%	65.3%	20.4%	846
4. WRP	0.9%	10.7%	65.3%	23.1%	1124
5. EQIP	1.9%	14.0%	63.8%	20.3%	1268
6. WHIP	0.7%	7.8%	67.0%	24.6%	1145
7. FPP	0.8%	5.5%	68.0%	25.8%	666

30. If you responded 'definitely yes' or 'probably yes,' how could the program(s) be modified to discourage this? In your response, please provide the name of the program(s) for which you are responding.

100.0%, N=284

Conservation Compliance/Sodbuster/Swampbuster Provisions

31. Currently in your state, how effective, if at all, are the conservation compliance/sodbuster/swampbuster provisions of The Food Security Act (Farm Bill) of 1985 in protecting highly erodible lands and wetlands? (*Check one for each row.*)

Provision	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Conservation compliance	5.6%	33.7%	32.2%	19.5%	9.1%	1284
2. Sodbuster	6.2%	31.0%	30.0%	21.5%	11.3%	1212
3. Swampbuster	8.9%	31.0%	28.4%	22.1%	9.7%	1270

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32. If you responded 'extremely effective' or 'slightly or not effective' for any provision in Question 31, please indicate for which provision(s) you are responding and explain the reason(s) for your response(s) below.

If extremely effective: **100.0%, N=122**

If slightly or not effective: **100.0%, n=176**

Program Assistance

33. In your opinion, does your state have enough NRCS technical assistance available for the following programs? (*Check one.*)

Program	Much more than enough	More than enough	Enough	Less than enough	Much less than enough	N=
1. CRP **General** Signup	1.6%	4.4%	35.7%	38.9%	19.4%	1476
2. CRP **Continuous** Signup	1.7%	4.1%	34.6%	37.5%	22.0%	1462
3. CREP (if applicable)	0.5%	4.0%	25.3%	34.9%	35.3%	581
4. WRP	1.5%	5.4%	27.9%	38.9%	26.2%	1442
5. EQIP	1.5%	3.3%	23.0%	37.2%	35.0%	1604
6. WHIP	1.3%	3.9%	32.8%	37.5%	24.5%	1485

34. In your opinion, overall, what is the quality of the technical assistance that NRCS provides in your state? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Excellent **22.2%. N=413**
2. ❒ Good **51.2%, N=955**
3. ❒ Fair **19.3%, N=359**
4. ❒ Poor **1.7%, N=31**
5. ❒ Very poor **0.9%, N=16**
6. ❒ Don't know **4.8%, N=90**

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35. How effective, if at all, are the USDA conservation programs in assisting farming operations of the following sizes in your state in addressing environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Size of Operation	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Small Operations (gross farming revenues of less than $100,000)	4.9%	27.5%	33.2%	24.6%	9.9%	1426
2. Medium Operations (gross farming revenues of $100,000 - $500,000)	3.5%	31.6%	44.5%	18.4%	2.0%	1388
3. Large Operations (gross farming revenues greater than $500,000)	4.6%	22.2%	39.1%	22.7%	11.4%	1315

36. Are all sizes of operations receiving adequate assistance in addressing your state's environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Yes **25.9%, N=478**

2. ❒ No→ Please briefly describe below which operations are not receiving adequate assistance and the reason(s) for this. **43.2%, N=799**

3. ❒ Don't know **30.9%, N=571**

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37. In your experience, overall, how effective, if at all, are the USDA conservation programs in assisting the following types of operations in your state in addressing environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one for each row.*)

Type of Operation	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Somewhat effective	Slightly or not effective	N=
1. Field crops	5.8%	39.2%	36.3%	15.4%	3.3%	1573
2. Specialty crops	1.8%	13.8%	29.21%	36.0%	19.2%	1361
3. Small confined animal feeding operations	3.0%	27.0%	38.4%	22.8%	8.8%	1474
4. Large confined animal feeding operations	2.1%	17.9%	33.5%	25.8%	20.6%	1339
5. Combined crop/animal operations	3.0%	27.3%	47.0%	18.8%	3.9%	1472
6. Grazing	4.4%	29.6%	39.2%	20.6%	6.1%	1529
7. Forestry	2.6%	16.1%	27.5%	31.3%	22.4%	1291
8. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	6.7%	19.4%	17.6%	25.5%	30.8%	69

38. Are all types of operations receiving adequate assistance in addressing your state's environmental or natural resource objectives? (*Check one.*)

1. ❒ Yes **24.1%, N=439**

2. ❒ No→ Please briefly describe below which operations are not receiving adequate assistance and the reason(s) for this. **46.8%, N=851**

3. ❒ Don't know **29.1%, N=529**

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Effect on Economy of Rural Communities

39. What is the overall impact, if any, of the following USDA conservation programs on the local economies in your state's rural communities? (*Check one for each row.)*

Program	Very positive	Somewhat positive	No impact	Somewhat negative	Very negative	N=
1. CRP **General** Signup	12.3%	46.3%	21.7%	16.3%	3.5%	1267
2. CRP **Continuous** Signup	8.8%	47.9%	34.1%	7.8%	1.4%	1248
3. CREP	16.8%	45.9%	31.8%	4.4%	1.1%	478
4. WRP	9.0%	46.2%	37.1%	5.6%	2.2%	1200
5. EQIP	14.8%	62.9%	19.6%	2.3%	0.4%	1401
6. WHIP	7.7%	49.4%	40.5%	1.6%	0.7%	1273
7. FPP	16.3%	36.5%	41.5%	4.4%	1.4%	359

40. For those programs that have a 'very positive' or 'very negative' impact on the local economies in your state's rural communities, please provide the name of the program and explain the reason(s) for your response(s) below.

If very positive: **100.0%, N=375**

If very negative: **100.0%, N=106**

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Conservation Program Emphasis

41. From fiscal year 1996 through fiscal year 2001 (estimates), federal funding was distributed nationally among USDA conservation programs as follows:

Program	Percentage
CRP (including CREP)	83.2 %
WRP	7.2 %
EQIP	8.8 %
WHIP	0.3 %
FPP	0.4 %
Total	100.0 %

Note: Total does not add due to rounding.

Given current federal funding, how do you believe conservation funds should be distributed nationally among these programs? *(Your total should equal 100%.)*

Program	Percentage
CRP (including CREP)	57.84 %
WRP	9.62 %
EQIP	20.82 %
WHIP	5.01 %
FPP	4.91 %
Other *(please specify.)* _____	1.82 %
Total	100.0 %

N=1386

22

42. In your opinion, overall, how cost-effective, are the following USDA conservation programs; that is, how well are these programs achieving results given the money spent for these programs? (*Check one for each row.*

Program	Extremely cost-effective	Very cost-effective	Moderately cost-effective	Somewhat cost-effective	Slightly or not cost-effective	N=
1. CRP **General** signup	7.0%	36.6%	31.4%	17.3%	7.6%	1377
2. CRP **Continuous** signup	10.3%	40.3%	29.2%	15.9%	4.3%	1340
3. CREP	14.6%	33.4%	26.9%	16.1%	9.1%	524
4. WRP	11.0%	28.8%	32.4%	20.8%	6.9%	1313
5. EQIP	7.3%	38.1%	33.2%	15.3%	6.1%	1546
6. WHIP	7.7%	34.1%	32.0%	19.6%	6.6%	1342
7. FPP	8.7%	36.5%	25.4%	18.7%	10.8%	360

43. If you responded 'extremely cost-effective' or 'slightly or not cost-effective' for any program, please provide the name of the program and explain the reason(s) for your response(s) below.

If extremely cost-effective: **100.0%, N=317**

If slightly or not cost-effective: **100.0%, N=252**

23

44. Consider the degree that current USDA conservation programs emphasize environmental or natural resource objectives. Should more or less national emphasis be placed on each of the following environmental or natural resource objectives in the future? *(Check one for each row.)*

Environmental or Natural Resource Objectives	Much more emphasis	More emphasis	No change	Less emphasis	Much less emphasis	N=
1. Protecting or improving wildlife habitat	17.8%	32.5%	35.6%	11.9%	2.2%	1808
2. Protecting native species	16.1%	29.6%	40.3%	10.5%	3.5%	1779
3. Reducing soil erosion	13.1%	45.7%	39.1%	1.9%	0.1%	1801
4. Protecting or improving ground water quality	21.0%	51.3%	26.6%	1.0%	0.1%	1809
5. Protecting or improving surface water quality	26.1%	53.8%	19.2%	0.9%	0%	1829
6. Protecting or improving air quality	8.6%	30.5%	50.8%	8.8%	1.2%	1750
7. Preventing urban sprawl	29.7%	38.9%	23.4%	5.2%	2.8%	1757
8. Other (*Please specify.*) _____	77.9%	19.1%	2.2%	0.8%	0%	118

45. USDA conservation programs emphasize environmental and natural resource priorities at different levels. At what levels of environmental and natural resource priorities should USDA programs place more or less emphasis? *(Check one for each row.)*

Levels	Much more emphasis	More emphasis	No change	Less emphasis	Much less emphasis	N=
1. National	7.4%	17.0%	34.9%	31.6%	9.1%	1736
2. Multi-state regional	8.2%	28.5%	38.2%	21.4%	3.7%	1722
3. State	24.0%	50.1%	20.6%	4.7%	0.6%	1774
4. Multi-county regional	22.2%	55.2%	18.8%	3.4%	0.5%	1738
5. Local (county)	38.2%	41.8%	16.1%	3.1%	0.8%	1759

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46. Congress is considering modifying existing USDA conservation programs or designing new programs. How important, if at all, are the following elements in modifying or designing these programs? *(Check one for each row.)*

Design elements that:	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Somewhat important	Slightly or not important	N=
1. Provide flexible eligibility	28.0%	49.9%	14.5%	5.9%	1.7%	1796
2. Allow economic use of lands	23.1%	38.4%	21.9%	10.6%	5.9%	1794
3. Provide payment for maintenance of existing practices	13.7%	35.5%	27.4%	14.3%	9.2%	1778
4. Emphasize local environmental priorities	34.5%	45.2%	13.2%	5.8%	1.3%	1838
5. Keep lands in production	18.7%	29.5%	26.5%	14.5%	10.7%	1806
6. Emphasize construction of waste structures	11.3%	33.5%	31.4%	17.7%	6.2%	1734
7. Allow a broad array of conservation practices	35.1%	48.7%	10.4%	4.6%	1.3%	1837
8. Make participation voluntary	46.0%	32.2%	11.3%	6.2%	4.4%	1791
9. Provide eligibility to all types of operations	30.6%	39.5%	18.2%	7.3%	4.4%	1786
10. Provide financial rewards for conservation practices	35.7%	40.8%	15.5%	5.9%	2.0%	1831
11. Allow non-NRCS entities to provide technical assistance	27.1%	29.4%	20.7%	12.9%	9.9%	1763
12. Provide up-front payments	18.2%	31.8%	27.3%	13.0%	9.7%	1702
13. Other *(Please specify.)* _____	78.8%	19.1%	0%	0%	2.1%	124

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Respondent Information

47. Which one category best describes your organization? *(Check one.)*

U.S. Department of Agriculture

1. ❒ NRCS State Conservationist
2. ❒ NRCS, Other
3. ❒ Farm Service Agency
4. ❒ Farmer Service Agency State Committee
5. ❒ Forest Service
6. ❒ Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
7. ❒ Rural Development
8. ❒ Other *(Please specify.)*

_____

Department of Interior

9. ❒ Fish and Wildlife Service
10. ❒ Bureau of Land Management
11. ❒ Bureau of Indian Affairs
12. ❒ Bureau of Reclamation
13. ❒ U.S. Geological Survey
14. ❒ Other *(Please specify.)*

_____

Department of Defense

15. ❒ Army Corps of Engineers
16. ❒ Other *(Please specify.)*

_____

State or local departments and agencies

17. ❒ Fish and wildlife agency
18. ❒ Forestry agency
19. ❒ Water resources agency
20. ❒ Department of agriculture
21. ❒ Association of soil and water conservation districts
22. ❒ Coastal zone management agency
23. ❒ Soil and water conservation agency
24. ❒ Other *(Please specify.)*

_____

Indian Tribes

25. ❒ Federally recognized American Indian Tribal Governments or Alaskan Native Corporations encompassing 100,000 acres or more in the state

Other

26. ❒ Agricultural producers (farmers)
27. ❒ Representatives from for-profit agribusinesses
28. ❒ Nonprofit organizations *(Please specify.)*

_____

29. ❒ Universities
30. ❒ Other knowledgeable persons *(Please specify.)*

_____

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Comments

48. Please provide below any comments you have about your state or local agricultural environmental needs.

49. Please add any other comments or suggestions you have about the current or future agricultural conservation programs.

50. Please add any comments or suggestions you have about this questionnaire.

Thank you for your help!

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Definitions

Agricultural conservation programs – Refers to the following federal agricultural conservation programs administered by USDA: the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), including continuous signup and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP); the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP); the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); and the Farmland Protection Program (FPP).

Air quality – Refers to the chemical and physical characteristics of air, including particulate matter, smoke, dust, and odor. Air quality may be impacted by agricultural production.

Conservation compliance/sodbuster provision/swampbuster provision – Compliance provisions, first introduced in the 1985 Food Security Act, requiring certain resource conservation activities on highly erodible lands and wetlands in return for benefits from selected federal agricultural programs.

Conservation plan – A combination of land uses and farming practices to protect and improve soil productivity and water quality, and to prevent deterioration of natural resources on all or part of a farm.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) – Authorized in 1996, CREP is a federal-state conservation partnership program that targets environmental concerns related to agriculture. Leveraging federal funds with state funds, CREP uses financial incentives to encourage landowners to enroll in ten- to fifteen-year contracts to remove land from agricultural production.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – Continuous Signup – An extension of the CRP program introduced in 1996, the CRP Continuous Signup offers additional financial incentives and allows acreage devoted to certain conservation practices, such as riparian buffers and filter strips, yielding highly desirable environmental benefits to be enrolled at any time without going through the competitive bidding process.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – General Signup – USDA program authorized in 1985, which provides annual rental payments to agriculture producers to retire lands that are highly erodible or environmentally sensitive. CRP includes a 50 percent cost-share to install vegetative cover and requires that landowners sign a ten- to fifteen-year contract.

Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) – Ranking criteria used for CRP general signup applications, which weights wildlife habitat benefits, water quality benefits, the on-farm benefits of reduced erosion, the likely long-term benefits of reduced erosion, air quality benefits, benefits of enrollment in conservation priority areas, and cost.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – USDA program authorized in 1996 which provides technical, educational and financial assistance to landowners to address soil, water, and related environmental concerns on lands in agricultural uses. EQIP provides cost-share and incentive payments and requires that landowners sign a five- to ten-year contract.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP) – USDA program authorized in 1996 created to protect farmland from non-agricultural conversion by acquiring productive farmland near urban areas. In cooperation with existing state, local or tribal farmland protection programs or land trusts, USDA contributes up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the land to acquire 30-year or permanent easements on farmlands.

Federal farm policy – Refers to programs set forth in past omnibus farm bills (1985, 1990, and 1996), and the farm bill expected to become law in 2002.

Field crop operations – An agricultural operation whose principal function is the production of mainstream crops such as wheat, corn, peanuts, cotton, and soybean.

Forestry operations – An agricultural operation whose principal function is the development of woodlands.

Grazing operations – An agricultural operation whose principal function is raising animals in nonconfined situations.

Ground water quality – Refers to the chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of groundwater. Groundwater quality and quantity may be impacted by agricultural production.

Invasive species – Alien (non-native) species of plants, animals, and pests whose introduction causes, or is likely to cause, economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.

Large confined animal feeding operations – An agricultural operation with over 1,000 animal units whose principal function is keeping and raising animals in confined situations where feed is brought to animals.

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Small confined animal feeding operations – An agricultural operation with 1,000 or fewer animal units whose principal function is keeping and raising animals in confined situations where feed is brought to animals.

Soil erosion – Refers to the impact of agricultural production on the wearing away of land surface caused by wind and moving water.

Specialty crop operations – An agricultural operation whose principal function is the production of farm commodities other than livestock and field crops, including all fruits, vegetables, and horticultural crops.

Surface water quality – Refers to chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of surface water. Surface water quality and quantity may be impacted by agricultural production.

Native species – Refers to the impact of agricultural production on species native to a state or local area.

Urban sprawl – Refers to the conversion of land surrounding urban areas to non-agricultural or non-natural uses.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – USDA program authorized in 1990 which offers payment for the restoration of wetlands that have been previously drained and converted to agricultural uses. USDA acquires easements for thirty years or perpetuity based on the agricultural value of the land and offers cost-share payments for restoration costs.

Wildlife habitat – Refers to the impact of agricultural production on wildlife habitat and species.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – USDA program authorized in 1996 which provides financial incentives to develop habitats for fish and wildlife on private land. USDA provides cost-share for the wildlife habitat development and requires landowners to enter into five- to ten-year agreements.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Linda Libician (214) 777-5709

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