

Federal Policy

Conservation's Contradictions

Farm Bill Policy: The Good, the Bad & the Confusing

By Brian DeVore

On a vivid September day, Adam Griebie guides his F-150 pickup down a field road, parks it next to a soybean field, and launches a mini-tour of the many faces of federal farm conservation policy.

"It's really been fantastic," the farmer says of one way policy has manifested itself on his family's land in central Minnesota's McLeod County.

But then, there's the flip side. "It deters farming families from doing these projects — they want to do things that make more sense," he says of another aspect of ag policy.

Welcome to the Farm Bill, the piece of legislation that's responsible for all these reactions on the Griebie farm. Congress is currently debating the next iteration of this law, which is scheduled to be renewed every five years. This massive bill determines what our rural landscape looks like, who's farming that landscape, and what methods they use. Historically, the Farm Bill has promoted monocultural, industrialized systems of farming that aren't good for the land, let alone the farmers and rural communities they live in. That's why the Land Stewardship Project, in its 2023 Farm Bill Platform, is calling for major reforms (*see sidebar on page 13*).

But there are elements of current federal ag policy that have a sound foundation when it comes to promoting the kind of farming that's good for the landscape. A look at how these programs are implemented on one farm provides a few insights into how the Farm Bill can live up to its potential, and where there's room for improvement.

Stewardship Ethic

Adam Griebie has a big incentive to see a more conservation-friendly Farm Bill. As a youth, he spent many days hunting and fishing along Buffalo Creek, which flows through the 1,000 acres his family raises corn and soybeans on. He always had an interest in conservation and ecology, and eventually got a degree in environmental sci-

ence. Griebie went on to work for a time in the natural resource field, helping do raptor research, among other things.

So when he returned to his family's land



Adam Griebie in the prairie he had to replant because of a disconnect between two federal conservation programs. "We did it really well the first time, and the second time we did it good too, but we just shouldn't have to do it twice," he says. (LSP Photo)

around a decade ago, Griebie was set on farming in a way that protected water quality, preserved the soil, and produced good wildlife habitat. He remembers well the time agricultural runoff caused a major fish kill on Buffalo Creek.

"If you talk to some of the older folks, they remember swimming in the creek and it never flooding," he says. "Today you'd certainly be pretty apprehensive to go swimming in there and it floods often."

His parents, Joe and Sheila Griebie, had always farmed with a strong conservation ethic, and Adam wanted to continue that legacy, as well as build upon it.

Perhaps because he spent so much time on the banks of Buffalo Creek, water — its quality, quantity, and power to shape the land in ways good and bad — is on Griebie's mind a lot. At one point, he parks his truck next to a water monitoring station set

up on his family's land by Discovery Farms, a research initiative that gathers field scale water quality information from different types of production systems.

Putting in place conservation structures and adopting conservation practices can be costly, and today's commodity marketplace doesn't pay farmers for being good stewards. That's why tax-funded conservation programs are key to helping farmers provide public goods like clean water.

Over the years, Griebie's family has utilized numerous government conservation programs to help them steward their land better. For example, they've been enrolled in a couple of Conservation Stewardship Program contracts. Also known as CSP, this initiative was drafted by LSP member-farmers over two decades ago as a system for paying farmers to utilize practices on their working acres that preserve soil, protect water quality, and create healthy wildlife habitat. Griebie has used CSP to support precise applications of inputs, among other things.

The Griebies also have 100 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which pays farmers to retire working farmland and plant it to perennial habitat such as native grasses. The Griebies have been able to use CRP to protect environmentally vulnerable acres that didn't consistently produce a decent crop of corn or soybeans anyway, often because the land was in an area prone to flooding or washouts.

But there are times when wayward water and working farmland can come to an agreement, of sorts. For example, Griebie has used cost-share funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to establish water retention basins in crop fields.

A Step Forward, A Step Back

As he drives past a mosaic of ripening crop fields, riparian habitat, and natural grasslands, the farmer points out several places where Farm Bill conservation initiatives have helped his family strike a balance between protecting the environment and make a living. At the last stop on the tour, Griebie walks through a grassy buffer separating his family's land from a neighboring farm and climbs a small hump of soil the length of a suburban garage and half-a-dozen feet high. It's an almost imperceptible modification to the surrounding topography, which is dominated by the kinds of rolling farm fields that make up this part of Minnesota. But that slug-shaped rise has made all

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the difference when it comes to movement of water on this part of the farm, as well as the health of the watershed it sits in.

“Before, this would have been all washing out into a giant ravine and flooding out down there,” says Griebie as he gestures at the few hundred yards of land that lays between the hump and Buffalo Creek. The farmer describes how some years the water churned away at the soil with such velocity that it would leave a gully deep enough for him to stand in. “We would farm around the gully because it was unsafe to pull a piece of equipment through it.”

However, a few years ago this retention basin was placed in a strategic spot in the field, impeding the racing water and slowing it down enough to allow it to soak into the ground. That helps keep soil and fertilizer on the field and out of the river, which eventually drains into the South Fork of the Crow River. And that waterway, in turn, dumps its load into the Minnesota River.

A structure like this may look simple, but it takes engineering and planning. The farmer is appreciative of the technical support he received from the McLeod County Soil and Water Conservation District to put in this and eight other structures like it. He was also able get around 80% of the cost covered through EQIP. That’s significant, given that a structure like this can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

“It’s improved the quality of our land so much adding those retention basins,” says Griebie as a V of Canada geese flies over, honking its way south. And better water management on his family’s farm has translated into a public good for the community in the form of less flooding in the watershed.

But then the farmer walks over to a nearby five-acre patch of prairie that represents how, at times, the public is not always served well by the way federal conservation

programs are administered. Although the stand, which includes deep-rooted leadplant and big bluestem, seems to be thriving on a fall day, it represents a 2.0 version of this prairie. Previously, it had been established as pollinator habitat under a CSP contract. When that five-year contract expired, Griebie loved the prairie so much that he went to his local USDA Farm Service Agency office and asked if he could simply roll the land into a 15-year CRP contract. Nope, said government officials. It seems that by replacing an erodible piece of farmland with prairie, the farmer had eliminated the kind of “resource concern” that warranted government intervention. The problem is, the Griebies couldn’t afford to go without some sort of income on that land. So, to his great

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“If I could put my tax money towards this, this is where I’d spend it.”

— birders’ response to the Griebie prairie

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chagrin, Adam sprayed the prairie with herbicide, killing the plants and thus re-creating a resource concern. That act re-qualified the land for CRP enrollment.

“We did it really well the first time, and the second time we did it good too, but we just shouldn’t have to do it twice,” says the farmer of the re-establishment of the prairie. “You paid me to destroy a perfectly good prairie, and then you paid me to replant it.”

Griebie’s experience shows not only the shortcomings of a system that doesn’t communicate between programs well, but the need for technical help when navigating the regulatory maze. Since the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office is understaffed and lacking in resources, Griebie had to hire an outside

Give it a Listen

On *Ear to the Ground* podcast episode 317, Adam Griebie talks about how his stewardship ethic has been bolstered by federal farm policy, but how there’s room for improvement: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-317-policy-on-the-prairie.

consultant when applying to CSP. Farmers need to know there is consistency in how the programs are administered and that technical help is available locally, he says.

It’s clear that underfunding of farm conservation programs is having a negative impact on the land. Between 2010 and 2020, just 31% of farmers who applied for EQIP funding and 42% who applied to CSP were awarded contracts, according to an analysis by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. A 2022 update to those figures showed an improvement in acceptance rates, but the USDA still rejects more than three in four farmer applications to CSP. The denials were mostly due to lack of funds, according to IATP, which points out that many of the practices that are under-supported — conservation tillage, cover cropping, and rotational grazing, for example — have the potential to play major roles in making agriculture more climate-resilient.

Griebie says an increasing number of farmers in his neighborhood are showing an interest in establishing conservation practices, but he doesn’t see it as a “very good sales pitch” to have a situation where, for example, a farmer is incentivized to put in a pollinator planting that could be destroyed in a few short years. But sometimes the frustration of grappling with public red tape can be trumped by a private pat on the back.

Griebie recalls the day a group of birders visited the restored prairie. “They said, ‘If I could put my tax money towards this, this is where I’d spend it.’” □

LSP & the New Farm Bill

The current Farm Bill was set for renewal during the fall of 2023. However, having missed that deadline, Congress has extended the law to Sept. 30, 2024. In preparation, Land Stewardship Project members and staff are continuing to work to advance the organization’s platform priorities. LSP’s 2023 Farm Bill Platform addresses: agricultural consolidation; conservation and climate change; crop insurance reform; supporting young, beginning, and BIPOC farmers; and regional food

systems. The platform is at landstewardshipproject.org/federal-policy/farmbill2023.

In November 2023, LSP farmer-members and staff participated in a fly-in to Washington, D.C., to talk to Congressional agriculture leaders about supporting Farm Bill priorities such as the inclusion of the Whole Farm Revenue Protection Improvement Act.

“As the impacts of climate change continue to accelerate, our farmers, who are on the front lines of climate change, are at risk — this is especially true for farmers growing food crops.

This means the security and future of our farm and food system is at risk,” stated a letter signed by 125 LSP farmer-members and delivered to Minnesota Senators Tina Smith and Amy Klobuchar, as well as Minnesota Representative Angie Craig.

During the fly-in, LSP members and allies also lobbied to make the Environmental Quality Incentives Program more accessible to small and medium-sized farmers.

For the latest on LSP’s Farm Bill work, see landstewardshipproject.org/federal-policy or contact Amanda Koehler at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6355.