

Landowner Incentive Programs for Species Management

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It has been estimated that nearly 80% of this nation's wildlife habitat is interspersed over privately owned landscapes. This, plus the growing interest in the environment and in wildlife conservation by the United States' citizenry, has resulted in a plethora of incentive programs for private landowners if they choose to participate. The current collection of farm program payments and benefits constitute the largest package of landowner incentives the world has experienced. These programs are typically administered by state and federal governments, in partnership with a wide variety of non-government organizations (NGOs).

Incentive programs have traditionally been categorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as education, technical assistance, and financial assistance. Financial assistance is offered as cost share or direct incentive payments. Incentive payments include rentals, easements, and tax benefits, such as tax credits or direct deductions. In recent years most private landowner incentive programs have been associated with the USDA Farm Bill. However, U.S. Department of Interior (USDI), primarily through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has also administered several programs. Many USDI programs offer incentives to landowners by reducing regulatory impact. In addition, most states now have a wide variety of landowner programs. Incentives programs are typically either built upon land retirements from production agriculture or by providing incentives for land stewardship.

Conservation programs can help reduce the gap between level of environmental quality the public demands and level of environmental quality that farmers and other landowners would otherwise provide. At the outset it is important to recognize that federal farm programs like Swampbuster, Sodbuster, and Conservation Compliance are also incentive programs wherein the public rewards landowners for protecting natural resources they care about. It is only because the nation's taxpayers care about natural resources that conservation incentive programs exist. Compliance provisions require certain resource conservation activities for farmers to remain eligible for benefits.

In the 1996 Farm Bill, wildlife habitat was elevated to join soil and water as the "big three" conservation goals. In fact, the 1996 Farm Bill became one of the major pieces of conservation legislation in this country's history. This is significant, and many people feel that if conservation had not been a major component of the 1996 Farm Bill there may not have been a Farm Bill. Much effort is on going to ensure that the 2002 Farm Bill has a major conservation role.