

# WATER AND THE FARM BILL

*Working Together to Improve Water Quality  
and Supply*



A crop being watered in the California's Central Valley. © Stuart Palley

**F**unding for conservation and development programs in the Farm Bill is a key driver of water use and management decisions on private land in the United States.

The Farm Bill can be a primary source of solutions to the nation's shared yet diverse water challenges. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) partners with agricultural water users to achieve a sustainable, flexible, and resilient water future.

The following policy recommendations for the Farm Bill will support our partnerships with agriculture and help the farming, ranching, and forestry communities identify solutions best suited to their local needs.

## **TNC'S WATER POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE FARM BILL**

### **Conservation Title**

#### *Conservation Technical Assistance*

- Enhance conservation technical assistance to fill both capacity and expertise gaps. Technical assistance from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and trusted partners is critical to help farmers and ranchers overcome barriers that impede the adoption of water conservation practices.

#### *Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program*

- Modernize the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program to support and prioritize funding for projects that provide multiple benefits to watershed health, rural communities, and agricultural producers.
- Congress should consider increasing funding levels to meet demand for the program, raising the per-project funding cap to \$50 million, streamlining the review process for watershed plans, and increasing transparency on program administration.

## **ENGAGING ON THE FARM BILL**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has a long history of working with producers, landowners, and other stakeholders across America to create opportunities that conserve natural areas and build more resilient working lands and communities. As owners, operators, and managers of agriculture and forest lands, TNC engages with and advocates for Farm Bill policies and priorities from an on-the-ground, in-field perspective.



Irrigation channels for seed bed on farm in Dome Valley, Yuma County, Arizona. © Charlie Ott

### *New Easement Programs (separate from Agricultural Conservation Easement Program)*

- Create a working lands floodplain easement program that limits voluntary participating landowners to planting flood-compatible crops and allows flooding. Participating landowners would not be eligible for crop insurance coverage or for disaster payments related to flooding.

### **Rural Development Title**

The Rural Development (RD) title's water program invests in projects across the country to provide safe drinking water to millions of rural residents.

While the program is orientated to support traditionally built infrastructure projects, nature-based solutions, such as forest conservation and restoration, can provide more resilient water supply sources to communities while increasing overall watershed health, drought resilience, and forest fire risk reduction.

- Clarify that water and waste facility loans and grants can be used for nature-based solutions.
- Require a report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the potential costs and benefits of investing in nature-based solutions through RD programs, including forest and watershed improvements, restoration and conservation.

### **Forestry Title**

Codify new authorities under the Water Source Protection Program (WSPP) and Watershed Condition Framework to improve the health of watersheds on national forests and grasslands and enable forest restoration and fire risk reduction.

- Reauthorize WSPP for 10 years at \$50 million annually while allocating a portion of the funds for project planning.

- Ensure WSPP is user-drive by emphasizing the leadership role of partners in assessments, planning, project design, and project implementation.
- Expand eligible entities to include acequias, wastewater treatment providers, community land grants, and smaller agricultural water providers such as private mutual ditch companies.
- Expand eligible lands to include adjacent and nearby non-federal lands within a watershed to allow for a more comprehensive approach to planning and restoration.
- Reduce the non-federal match requirement to 20% and allow the secretary to waive the match entirely for watersheds and infrastructure critical to rural and economically disadvantaged communities, Tribes, Pueblos, and acequias.
- Establish clear priorities within WSPP to ensure funding goes towards partners/projects that can provide measurable outcomes. Priorities could include:
  - Providing quantifiable benefits to water supply and/or quality.
  - Utilizing nature-based solutions such as restoring wetland and riparian ecosystems.
  - Building broader climate, watershed, and fire resilience.
  - Leveraging other public and private funds to support investments in source water protection and restoration.
- Reduce redundancy by allowing existing watershed plans or other applicable watershed planning documents to serve as the basis for a WSPP implementation plan.