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Soil and Water Conservation Society and the Farm Bill: A Historical Review

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The US farm bill is a piece of legislation periodically passed by Congress that contains funding and programming guidelines for government assistance to and oversight of various elements of the agricultural sector. Though often identified by year, each of the 18 farm bills passed since 1933 (National Ag Law Center 2020) carries a different title (e.g., the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act is colloquially known as the 1973 Farm Bill) and is a product of compromise between the many diverse subsets of the agricultural economy including commodity sales and exports, loans and credit, financial assistance and price supports, nutrition and food availability, and conservation of soil and water resources. This diverse set of interests increasingly included a large concentration in every sector of the agricultural economy. The increasing dominance of commodity-focused agribusiness groups in these discussions, however, has led to market protections and access for only a few crops, and fostered the rise of biocide resistance and invertebrate kills, such as the pollinator problem. Congress generally passes a new farm bill every five or six years to coincide with the expiration of certain elements of its predecessor, with the last bill passed in 2018. The farm bill's story indicates how Americans' perceptions of agricultural production and consumption have changed over time. It also reveals the balance that exists between the promotion of economic growth and the conservation of natural resources fundamental to a stable and resilient food supply. Much overlap occurs between a bill's tendencies to produce wealth and conserve resources, as both generally promote the welfare of the American people. It is within those overlapping, gray areas of agricultural

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policy that change occurs from one farm bill to the next. Taken individually, each farm bill is a snapshot of a particular historical moment, with a bill's content the result of specific tensions among and between multiple people and groups having different, and at times contradictory, priorities, yet all staking a claim to the proverbial common ground of US agricultural policy.

This chapter provides a closer look at the role of the farm bill's origins and core elements, explores significant policy reforms after the Second World War, and takes a closer look at role of the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) to shape and guide farm bill policy since 1985.

1933 to 1949: Response to a Crisis

The expansion of conventional agriculture onto poor lands is currently impacting the loss of small farming on better lands, access to water rights, and urban sprawl, and is more generally caused by a developer-focus on land use and control measures (American Farmland Trust 2018). This modern-day situation was preceded by earlier crises that caused Congress to pass the first farm bill in 1933, in response to the Great Depression and the prolonged drought in the Midwest and Great Plains known as the Dust Bowl. The expansion of agriculture after World War I (1914 to 1918) coincided with high land values, access to credit, and favorable commodity prices. The impulse to produce more crops on more acres led growers to extend agriculture into environmentally sensitive areas of the North American grasslands that were unsuitable for farming. When a prolonged drought hit the Great Plains in the early- to mid-1930s, the loose, dry, and thin topsoil of western Kansas and the panhandles of Oklahoma, Texas, and Nebraska blew away with vigor, leaving behind empty fields, granaries, bank accounts, and stomachs. This self-inflicted environmental catastrophe caused a great deal of human suffering, dislocated many Americans and their families, and led one historian of the Dust Bowl to refer to the Great Plains as America's "cultural boneyard, where the evidence of bad judgement and misplaced schemes lie strewn about like bleached skulls" (Worster 2004). For the people who endured the Dust Bowl, stayed on the land, and continued to farm, recovery would take many years. This reestablishment coincided with a new, public presence of personnel, programming, monitoring, and financial support at the federal, state, and local levels of government in the form of soil conservation.

Conservation became the watchword and mode of action to avoid future food production crises akin to the Dust Bowl. For its part, the federal government responded by increasing its role in conserving the nation's soil resources. In 1933, Congress created a support wing of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) called the Soil Erosion Service. Two years later, this temporary entity was made permanent and renamed the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). Also in 1933, Congress passed the first farm bill. It declared a state of emergency caused by an increasing disparity between the value of farm and industrial commodities. The bill argued that the impact of low crop prices had "destroyed the purchasing power of farmers" and "burdened and obstructed the normal currents of commerce" to such a degree that it threatened the "national public interest" (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933). To remedy the problem of low commodity prices, the 1933 Farm Bill reduced the acreage of certain cash crops. For financial assistance, it authorized the sale of special bonds that gave farmers access to credit to help them avoid foreclosure. To raise the revenue needed to pay for acreage reductions, the 1933 Farm Bill included a processing tax on manufacturers, but this was later ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (United States v. Butler 1936).

To legitimize financial assistance, Congress tied acreage reductions to soil conservation through the passage of a farm bill-adjacent act called the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 (Helms 2012c). This act is not included in the USDA's official list of farm bills. However, it legitimized the 1933 Farm Bill by tying soil conservation to acreage reductions on certain cash crops deemed "soil depleting," created the chief financial support mechanism in the Agricultural Conservation Program, and was the predecessor to the 1938 Farm Bill, which contained amendatory language that added acreage allotments to the soil depleting cash crops (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938). The federal government thereafter began paying farmers a share of the overall cost of specific conservation practices. The 1938 bill stated that payments "based on soil-building or soil-conserving practices" were "divided in proportion to the extent which [the recipients] contribute to the carrying out of such practices," thus giving rise to the policy of "cost sharing" (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938). Although these actions did not reduce production as intended, they did satisfy the general welfare clause of the Constitution and thereby establish the enduring precedent of providing financial and technical assistance to farmers through farm bill legislation.

The fact that the central tenets of the farm bill were borne from a crisis is supported by the words of Hugh Hammond Bennett—pioneering soil conservationist, the first chief of the SCS, and founding member of the Soil Conservation Society of America (SCSA, the former name of SWCS). In his keynote address at the SCSA's first annual meeting in 1946, Bennett emphasized the relationship between soil conservation and national security. He told members that "…neither the world nor any nation can afford to lose any more productive land. Too many nations have much too little now…In some countries the danger line was crossed long before World War II" (Bennett 1946).

With the gun smoke of World War II still clouding the air, Bennett's words resonated with attendees who in the preceding decade likely witnessed first-hand tremendous suffering caused by farm failure, food scarcity, and the depravities of war. Soil conservation, it seemed, was the stabilizing force needed to protect the nation's natural resources and the people caring for them.

1954 to 1981: New Markets, New Concerns

The postwar recovery of global markets in the 1950s caused changes to the farm bill's reach and intent. At the end of the Second World War, US producers exported surplus commodities to war-torn nations desperately needing food. With foreign markets readily available, there was little need to address overproduction through additional acreage reductions. The recovery of European agriculture, however, gave rise to a new mode of farmer assistance—that of finding new markets for the growing surplus of products. The 1954 Farm Bill provided for the establishment of trade offices in foreign countries through the Foreign Agricultural Service (Agricultural Act of 1954). With market access diminishing, Congress moved beyond selling grain abroad to simply giving it away via the Food for Peace Program (Paarlberg 2013). The ramping up of Cold War tensions in the 1950s also likely fueled the search for new, democratic markets abroad. The loss of Cuba as a trading partner in 1959, for instance, left a sizable void in the US export market. Between 1956 and 1959, Cuba was the ninth leading destination for US agricultural exports, consisting mainly of rice, and was the second leading supplier of imports, consisting mainly of sugar (Zahniser et al. 2015). The search led to Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, and South Vietnam (figure 1), where between 1960 and 1968 the annual value of agricultural exports increased by 92%, 163%, and 591%, respectively (Corley 1969). With an easing of Cold War tensions in the 1970s, the search for markets led to not-so-democratic nations as well. By 1976 the Soviet Union had become the second-largest foreign market for US agricultural products (Breedlove 1976).

On the domestic side, tensions of overproduction and conservation continued to dominate policy discussions. Similar to the original legislation, the farm bills of the 1950s were in response to twin crises of overproduction and drought, although the latter response was significantly diminished compared to the Dust Bowl years (Weiner et al. 2015). The 1956 Farm Bill addressed overproduction by establishing Soil Banks—a program to voluntarily retire land by "renting" it to the federal government. The Soil Bank program was twofold. For short-term reduction there was the Acreage Reserve Program (ARP), and for long-term reduction there was the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The ARP operated on an annual basis while the CRP ran for contracts of 3, 5, or 10 years. The ARP

Figure 1

United States involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s included a nearly 600% increase in the importation of agricultural goods and enabled South Vietnamese farmers to purchase fertilizer and new, mechanized equipment for their operations. Photo credit: VA000826, Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

targeted only leading cash crops and incentivized temporarily idling lands that would be cropped again. The CRP, on the other hand, had a broader incentive package. In addition to rental payments, an owner received cost-share for installing pasture, rangeland, forests, water impoundment, and marshlands. The CRP struggled to use its allotment in the first few years, as owners favored the higher paying and impermanent nature of the ARP. After 3 years, the ARP was discontinued, and the CRP rates raised to more appealing levels. By 1960, CRP enrollment jumped to 11.6 million ha (28.7 million ac), or about 6% of all cropland (Helms 2012b). With a resounding conservation success on their hands, the USDA faced new concerns about sustaining CRP enrollment acres beyond the initial lease period. A report from the 1963 *Yearbook of Agriculture* forecasted that "in the absence of continued payments for land diversion, it can be expected that the incentive to return lands to crop production will be great, unless profitable alternative uses…are developed" (Hill and Maier 1963). The final enrollment year for CRP was 1960, and the final year of payments was 1973. Following the expiration of these contracts, the CRP would itself be idled until the passage of the 1985 Farm Bill (Food Security Act of 1985).

For its part, the SCSA and its membership identified innovative conservation practices later included on the list of practices eligible for cost-share. Research on the benefits of no-till and reduced tillage practices appeared in the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* (JSWC) as early as 1961 (Hays 1961; Larson 1962). By the end of the decade, supporting research published in the JSWC found that "plowing was not necessary for good corn production" and that no-tillage was "extremely promising from the standpoint of soil and water conservation" (Harrold et al. 1967). Pioneering studies of alternative tillage practices published in the JSWC succeeded in opening the public's mind to reduced tillage and no-till farming. In 1973 the SCSA organized a National Conservation Tillage Conference. It was themed on "the use of surface vegetative residue in crop production for maintaining a quality environment" and attended by several hundred people (SWCS 1973). With firm backing from the SCSA and kindred organizations by 1973, the USDA made no-till and conservation tillage eligible for cost-share (Helms 2012c). The eligibility of no-till farming for cost-sharing resulted from conservation professionals studying the practice for a decade or more before building a consensus and effectively communicating its benefits to members of Congress and their agricultural constituencies.

1985 to 2018: Common Ground

With the SCS celebrating its 50th anniversary, the passage of the 1985 Farm Bill was a moment to reflect on conservation's past accomplishments. Speaking at a conservation tillage conference in the spring of 1984, SCSA CEO Walt Peechatka praised the accomplishments of the past 50 years yet urged conservationists of the difficult road ahead. With farmers still recovering from the prolonged farm crisis that saw prices drop and forced many farmers into dire economic straits, Peechatka noted that progress recently slowed could again be accelerated by the upcoming farm bill of 1985. A longstanding criticism of the farm bill was its lack of connectivity between supports for commodities and conservation practices. Peechatka called on the bill's framer to right this wrong by making participation in commodity support programs contingent on a grower's stewardship of soil and water resources (Peechatka 1984). Peechatka's words proved prophetic, as the 1985 Farm Bill contained provisions linking eligibility for financial assistance to certain conservation requirements. Producing crops on highly erodible lands or converted wetlands, for instance, made one ineligible for other benefits (Food Security Act of 1985).

The 1985 Farm Bill's linkages between conservation and financial aid addressed the insinuation that price supports enabled poor soil stewardship. SCS Historian Douglas Helms identified the cause of this policy change to be in response to a growing disconnect between ethical land stewardship and market-driven management practices that emerged in the early 1970s. Motivated by relaxed conservation requirements, foreign market access, and a temporary price surge, growers plowed "from fencerow to fencerow" and severely threatened long-established conservation measures (Helms 2012a). With collateral damage to public resources and wildlife seemingly on the rise, a new coalition formed among established organizations such as the

SCSA, the Natural Resources Council of America, American Farmland Trust, and the National Association of Conservation Districts. Joining the coalition were kindred organizations such as the Izaak Walton League of America, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the American Forestry Association. Support also came from environmental advocacy groups such as the Wildlife Society and the National Wildlife Federation (SWCS 1984). The emergence of a new, conservation-focused coalition brought additional voices and stakeholders to a farm subsidy conversation that has often favored large, wealthy operators over small farmers, the landscape, and the intrinsic ecological connections therein (Environmental Working Group 2020).

The 1996 Farm Bill followed a significant reorganization within the USDA. The SCS transitioned into the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service became the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The NRCS came into existence with a new mandate to dispense financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Whereas the SCS had engaged only in conservation planning and technical assistance, personnel in the NRCS were challenged to strike a balance between the traditional and expanded roles. A balance became more elusive in the 21st century, as between 1996 and 2003 EQIP expenditures increased by 250% (Helms 2012c). With more obligations to dispense, review, and account for financial assistance programming, the NRCS has an arguably different identity than its SCS predecessor.

The SCSA also underwent an identity shift at this time. In response to members' calls to broaden its reach and mission, in 1987 the SCSA rebranded itself as the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS). The Society's rebranding coincided with a new, supporting role in the framing of future farm bills. Following the renewal of the CRP in the 1985 Farm Bill, the SWCS collaborated with the SCS to survey CRP participants about their management intentions when the leases expired in 1995. The 1990 report gauged respondents' willingness to keep marginal lands out of production via easements, extended contracts, and reforestation (Nowak et al. 1990). The bleaker, follow-up survey in 1993 found that participants "now intend to return more of their acres to crop production and keep fewer acres in grass" (Osborn et al. 1993). SWCS's engagement in farm bill policy planning continued in 1994 with regional, issue-based forums. A key takeaway from the forums was a perceived lack of trust between agricultural, conservation, and environmental groups; yet, as the discussions unfolded, attendees found they shared more common ground than previously thought. Forum attendees' positive feedback on CRP foreshadowed its extension in 1996 and thereafter (SWCS 1995).

The Society's mediating presence abided in the 21st century. Ahead of the 2002 Farm Bill, SWCS reported a gradual shift in conservation planning. Whereas conservation traditionally served agriculture as a means to enhance production, in the last two decades its service role changed to "managing and mitigating its effects on the environment" (SWCS 2001). Feedback gathered at workshops in 2000 to 2001 led the Society to recommend 22 policy reforms to farm bill framers. A recommendation for the CRP was to deepen the applicant pool by eliminating cropping history requirements and allowing rangelands and pastures into the program. On management reforms it recommended expanding the authority of state technical committees to modify rules and funding allocations (SWCS 2001). The Society further identified the systemic problem of a conservation assistance gap. The demand for conservation assistance outstrips the supply of public funding, thereby opening a gap between people and groups who must compete for limited resources instead of forming coalitions on the proverbial common ground.

Between 1987 and 2007, the Society actively shaped farm bill policy by conducting surveys, hosting regional forums, and reporting on the myriad needs and wants of stakeholders. Cooperative agreements with the SCS/NRCS and financial support from charitable organizations enabled the Society to be a highly visible and recognized player in the debate. Ahead of the 2008 Farm Bill, the Society produced targeted reports on improving water quality in the Great Lakes basin, adjusting policies to the realities of climate change, and assessing farm bill technical assistance programs. The latter report found that the conservation assistance gap first identified in 2001 was widening due to reduced staffing at the NRCS and the FSA. The emergence of third party technical service providers addressed this problem somewhat, albeit unevenly across regions (SWCS and Environmental Defense 2007). Yet unexplored by the Society but arguably relevant to future farm bill discourse is the relationship between farm income, CRP enrollment rates, and the tributary role of marginal farmlands in the biofuels production boom of the early and mid-21st century (Hellerstein and Malcolm 2011).

Chipping Away

On the eve of the passage of the 1985 Farm Bill, at the Society's 39th annual meeting, SCSA President Floyd Heft envisioned the conservation movement of the new millennium. He predicted reduced federal spending and sizable growth in state and local funding. He believed the next big management problem to be a response to highly visible, off-site damages caused by on-farm practices. He praised the possibility of at-scale, perennial row cropping as nothing short of revolutionary. Heft urged the Society to be cautiously optimistic, and that success would not come all at once, but "by continuing the chipping away process already begun" (Heft 1984). Chipping away aptly summarizes the Society's historic relationship with the farm bill. Since the beginning, the Society has recognized agriculture's importance to the welfare of the United States and around the world.

Out of this foundational ethos the Society chips away the excesses and inefficiencies that threaten the health of our soil and water resources. Through sound research and discussion, novel approaches become promising studies, which become innovative examples and best management practices. From JSWC research on conservation tillage in the 1970s to organic farming in the 1980s and carbon sequestration in the 2010s, the Society is an enduring pillar of support for conservation-friendly farm bill policies that will abide in the future (Hays 1961; Olson et al. 1981; Morgan et al. 2010).

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