

MAKING POLICY TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

American Farmland Trust

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ABSTRACT

In the past few decades, U.S. agriculture has steadily cleaned up “its footprint” on the landscape but major challenges remain. In 1999, USDA’s Economic Research Service looked at the sustainability of U.S. agriculture and concluded that “Environmental programs exist and the resource base is depreciating but the extent of the effects is in the range that can be adequately addressed by thoughtful policy.” Studies that look at agriculture’s impacts on the environment and the use of conservation practices to minimize those impacts are challenged by a continuing lack of qualitative and quantitative data. Nonetheless, they paint a complex picture. The policy options available to increase the environmental sustainability of farming are varied. Regulatory approaches, like expanding conservation compliance (i.e., tying eligibility for federal payments to conservation behavior) or enacting a national environmental law for farming could be very effective but may not be politically feasible. Incentive-based approaches to help farmers adopt more conservation practices are more palatable to lawmakers and landowners and have broad public support. These options include increasing funding for conservation programs, consolidating, refining and simplifying programs to make them easier to use and more focused on producing environmental benefits, and introducing conservation loan guarantees or encouraging more cooperative conservation partnerships. The most intriguing, and perhaps most promising long-term approach, however, is the possibility of creating markets for the environmental services offered by agriculture—including cleaner water, mitigation of greenhouse gases and flooding, wildlife habitat, and restoration of wetlands. With global climate change and the search for alternative energy sources, agriculture could potentially become a potent environmental service provider. For this reason, we are cautiously optimistic that the political will and policies to help agriculture implement the necessary conservation practices, create the necessary infrastructures and become a net provider of environmental services for this country are within our reach.

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