



Funding Conservation Education in the Conservation Title of the Next Farm Bill

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Abstract

Funding for conservation practices was greatly expanded in the 2002 Farm Bill compared to that in the 1996 Farm Bill. However, funding for education about those practices (Conservation Title funding), provided in the 1996 bill under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), was eliminated in the 2002 bill. Several Land Grant Universities developed significant education partnerships with state NRCS staff under EQIP Education between 1997 and 2002. NRCS and the University of Minnesota developed and delivered statewide programs of workshops, publications, and software in the areas of nutrient and manure management and grazing management. This partnership, expanded to include state agencies, was able to facilitate rapid adoption of new state and federal feedlot rules in 2000 and 2003, as well as to assist many producers to meet requirements of practices under EQIP. Farmers and agricultural professionals benefited by hearing a coordinated message from the partnership of the university and agencies. Since 2002, without the Conservation Title funding, this education partnership has diminished. Preparation of the 2007 Farm Bill presents an opportunity for Land Grant Universities, working with CSREES, to reinvigorate the partnership on conservation education that existed between NRCS and the Land Grant Universities under EQIP Education.

Conservation Education in the 2002 Farm Bill

New conservation programs were created and others were expanded in the 2002 Farm Bill, increasing the number of participants and acreage under contract. The largest expansion was for conservation on "working lands", i.e. acreage under active production. Unfortunately, specific funding for education to enable producers to establish and maintain these practices was eliminated from the Conservation Title.

Conservation Education for Agricultural Producers:

Conservation education is mentioned in the 2002 Farm Bill under duties of the Secretary of Agriculture for carrying out EQIP: "To the extent possible the Secretary shall assist a producer in achieving the conservation and environmental goals of a program plan by...providing the producer with information and training to aid in implementation of the plan." No funds were dedicated for this task. The non-binding House-Senate Conference Committee Manager's report, conveyed the expectation that:

- Education be conducted as part of technical assistance for the conservation programs.
- Outside entities, including education institutions, be utilized in providing conservation education to producers.
- \$10 million per year from technical assistance funds be used for education, monitoring, and program assessment.

Technical Assistance Provider Training:

To meet the additional requirement for technical assistance inherent in new and larger conservation programs, the 2002 Farm Bill required NRCS to establish a system for approving non-NRCS individuals and entities as **Technical Assistance Providers (TSPs)**. Training is a necessary component of certifying TSPs for design and establishment of specific conservation practices.

Current Farm Bill Conservation Education Observations

1. Technical Service Provider Training and Certification

Program: Certification and training to ensure that services of Technical Service Providers meet NRCS standards. NRCS policy indicates that no funding will be provided for TSP certification and training. TSPs are expected to pay for their own training. Information on certification and training is available at <http://techreg.usda.gov/>.

Observations:

- **Group certification** is frequently attained through an NRCS memorandum of understanding with an existing national professional certification program such as Certified Crop Advisors. Demand for expansion of existing Extension professional education programs for these groups in Minnesota has been negligible. This is likely due to limited use of private TSPs by NRCS.
- The demand for TSPs for a few practices has been sufficient to warrant **multi-state certification training** for specific practices on a fee basis. An example is the Iowa State University training program for Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planning, which is rotated around the country. The University of Wisconsin, with a 406 Regional Water Quality grant, is developing and testing a training program for conservation planning. It remains to be seen how many multi-state training programs will find sufficient long-term demand to be self-sustaining.
- The **Conservation Security Program**, once expected to generate a large demand for TSP expansion, has been severely constrained by funding. The future is uncertain for this program.

3. Program-Participant Education

Program: Education of conservation program participants and other agricultural producers regarding conservation practices. Currently there is no dedicated funding. (See second column at left). When funding is identified, opportunities for Extension-NRCS teamwork at the state level would include:

- Development of publications, web sites, and other information sources for farmers and professionals.
- Workshops, field days, and on-farm demonstrations for specific conservation practices.
- On-farm trials to demonstrate and validate research-station-based Extension recommendations and associated NRCS practice standards. Data summaries across farms can be published for use in further education programs (e.g., Extension publication below right).

Observations:

- Education funding is dependant on the initiative of each NRCS State Conservationist. Since they must be budgeted under Technical Assistance, commitments to farmer training in this Farm Bill period will not be significant unless overall funding for Technical Assistance is improved and explicit education program guidance is provided to the State Conservationists.
- In those few cases where the State Conservationist is willing to provide funding for education, formal agreements and joint program work teams are recommended (see box in next column).

2. Conservation Innovation Grants

Program: Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG). CIGs were authorized under EQIP to stimulate adoption of innovative, cost-effective approaches to conservation needs. Cooperative Extension would have opportunities to participate in projects such as:

- Design and evaluation of market systems for pollution reduction.
- Cooperation with farmers and other organizations in designing, implementing, and evaluating on-farm trials with innovative conservation practices. (See example at right).

Observations:

- **Universities have participated** in some CIG projects. The MN Department of Agriculture, with UM faculty, are conducting a drainage design project for water quality on-farm demonstration.
- The NRCS **CIG grant rules severely restrict university participation**, primarily due to a requirement for a 100% non-federal funding match, of which 50% must be cash. Typically the only source of match universities can offer is faculty/staff time, which, for Extension, is part federal. Agricultural industry grants (a potential source of match funds) are usually focused on profit-enhancing technologies, not resource-conserving technologies. More innovative proposals would be submitted were this problem fixed.
- CIGs are awarded primarily in **national competition**, so projects exist in only a few states.

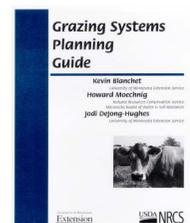
Conservation Education Examples from the 1996 Farm Bill

Under the 1996 Farm Bill, provision was made in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for NRCS State Conservationists to allocate up to 5% of program financial assistance funds for farmer education on resource needs and program practices. In several states NRCS partnered with Cooperative Extension to deliver this education. Examples from the Great Lakes states include:

- The University of Minnesota provided publications, workshops and field demonstrations in the areas of nutrient and manure management, grazing management, strip tillage, and conservation on small acreages. (See examples at right.)
- The U of Illinois provided workshops and publications on livestock manager certification, pest management, conservation tillage, soil and water management, stream protection, and nutrient management planning.
- The Ohio State U developed fact sheets explaining conservation programs and, with NRCS, provided workshops for local agency personnel on Farm Bill program specifics.
- Extension in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota administered local grants for education on natural resources and conservation practices supported by EQIP.



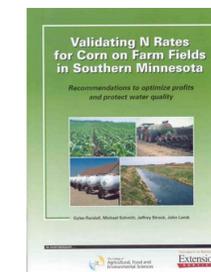
Grazing Management Workshops and a Publication for EQIP Education in Minnesota under the 1996 Farm Bill



Nutrient Management Software and Strip-Till Demonstrations for EQIP Education in Minnesota under the 1996 Farm Bill



On-farm trials/demonstrations for validation of nutrient management recommendations.



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- Incentives for implementation of conservation practices must be accompanied by education about why and how to establish and maintain those practices if we are to ensure effective implementation.
- Teamwork across agencies and education providers is essential to ensure consistent education messages to the producer.
- Teamwork is fostered by a joint education program with dedicated funding.

For Land Grant Universities and Cooperative Extension to participate as full partners in improving conservation on agricultural lands, they must take a more active role in shaping the Conservation Title of the next Farm Bill. A mandate for education and associated funding must be part of the Conservation Title. Land Grant Universities, through national associations and CSREES, have been successful in shaping legislation for research funding. A similar effort is needed in the area of conservation education in the Conservation Title.

Agreements with NRCS State Conservationists

Cooperative Extension can contribute significantly to objectives of the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill through formal partnerships with NRCS in education and training programs. The extent of these partnerships depend on relationships that are built through participation in the State Technical Committee, practice standard review committees and education programs.

Elements for successful EQIP Education partnership arrangements with NRCS in Minnesota during the 1996 Farm Bill period included:

- A **formal contract** specifying jointly decided deliverables, cost per deliverable, and a schedule, to ensure common expectations. Contracts were adjusted to meet changing circumstances.
- University and NRCS **joint work teams** that designed, produced, and delivered publications and programs. This ensured a unified message to farmers and agricultural professionals.
- **Participation by state agency staff.** Coordination among state and federal requirements, practice standards, incentive programs, and associated educational messages was carried out by that team.