

What the 2008 Farm Bill Means for Forestry

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A new farm bill is enacted every five to seven years which authorizes programs that shape the direction for the nation's agricultural industry. Congress enacted the first farm bill in the wake of the Great Depression. Forestry programs gained a place in farm bill legislation in the 1970s and '80s as agricultural production expanded and took an increasing toll on the land and water resources. Conservation programs were enacted which targeted retention of soil and water loss brought on by aggressive farming practices.

Today the 2008 Farm Bill provides new provisions and reauthorizes existing forestry programs that were created to restore, protect, and enhance forest stands and forest ecosystems. These traditional forestry practices not only help improve timber production and growth, but they provide benefits for wildlife as well. While traditional forestry practices still exist in Farm Bill programs for soil and water conservation efforts, there are changes that might affect your being able to qualify for certain forestry and wildlife practices.

First, let's look at the familiar forestry provisions. Tree planting, along with site preparation methods, prescribed burning, and fire-break establishment are the primary components of forestry and wildlife cost-share programs. However, the emphasis of these programs is no longer just soil and water conservation. It has been expanded to include habitat restoration for threatened and endangered (T&E) plants and animals, as well as entire ecosystems that might be declining. Realizing this can help you qualify for 2008 Farm Bill programs.

An example is the longleaf pine forest. It is the largest and most widespread of these threatened ecosystems in the South. Longleaf pine forests once dominated the upland landscape of the southeast from Texas to Virginia and provided habitat to many plant and animal species that are declining. In an effort to restore this ecosystem to some of its former range, funding is available through virtually all of the forestry cost-share programs. Landowners applying for longleaf restoration practices often get priority ranking. Another example at the other end of the spectrum is wetlands restoration. The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was also given extra emphasis through the 2008 Farm Bill. It provides restoration cost-share payments, as well as both short- and long-term easements to restore wet cropland to bottomland hardwoods.

What Farm Bill programs are available to forest landowners? The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), is available to owners of agricultural and farm land. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) also administers several programs that were authorized through the 2008 Farm Bill to continue through 2012. Specifically, these are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), The EQIP Forest Health Initiative, the EQIP Invasive Plants Management Project, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

What forestry practices are available through CRP, EQIP, WHIP and WRP? The following list contains practices that are cost shared (reimbursed at 50-75 percent of costs) under these FSA and NRCS programs. To determine your eligibility, visit your local Farm Service Agency or Natural Resources Conservation office.

- Prescribed burning
- Herbicide treatments
- Silvopasture establishment
- Firebreak and fuel break establishment
- Riparian forest buffers
- Site preparation practices for tree planting
- Hardwood tree establishment
- Softwood tree establishment (longleaf, loblolly, and shortleaf pines)
- Restoration and management of habitats for rare and declining species
- Upland wildlife habitat management
- Early successional habitat management
- Tree pruning
- Forest stand improvement
- Pine thinning
- Pre-commercial thinning
- Wildlife habitat improvement
- Wildlife openings
- Wetland re-establishment
- Invasive plant control
- Native grass establishment
- Stream restoration
- Easement programs

Other forestry and wildlife cost-share programs are also available to forest landowners that are not funded by Farm Bill programs. You can see a list of them by visiting the Alabama Forestry Commission website at www.forestry.alabama.gov. Click on the "Manage Your Forest and Wildlife," then click "Cost Share" to see a description of the programs. Contact your local county forester to schedule a visit to your property. 📍