

# Great Lakes Commission Priority Recommendations for Conservation Success in the 2018 Farm Bill

*Presented by the GLC Water Quality Program Committee*

## Impetus for the Statement

The GLC's Strategic Plan includes multiple actions for the Water Quality Program to undertake to protect the waters of the Great Lakes basin from harmful effects of excess nutrient and other pollutant contributions from both urban and rural watersheds. With hearings and other discussions on the impending reauthorization of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (commonly referred to as the "Farm Bill"), commissioners participating on the GLC's Water Quality Program Committee requested that a subcommittee be convened to advise commissioners on priorities for agricultural conservation activities in the Great Lakes. This statement builds upon a report on priorities accepted by commissioners at the 2017 Annual Meeting in Duluth, Minnesota.

## Agriculture & the Great Lakes

Agriculture is a vital sector of the economy for each of the eight Great Lakes states. As GLC and its partners work to safeguard the economic and environmental benefits generated from the lakes, we face a variety of challenges. Protecting the region's soil and water resources from the impacts of soil erosion and sedimentation, along with preventing nutrient and other pollutant runoff from agricultural watersheds within the Great Lakes basin, are priorities. The Farm Bill represents the largest source of conservation funding in the federal budget. Its Conservation Title provides critical funding and other tools to protect the region's soil and water while preserving our agricultural heritage. GLC member states also support inclusion of Great Lakes issues within the Forestry, Research, and Rural Development Titles. The recommendations below are not in any order of priority.

## Priority Recommendations for Conservation Success

**Dedicate funding to or through state agencies for edge-of-field monitoring that aligns with ambient water quality monitoring priorities and helps protect public health and safety.**

### Issue and Rationale:

Monitoring funds to track conservation practice effectiveness at edge-of-field is key to understanding the impact of investments intended to stem the loss of nutrients from agricultural production. While the Conservation Title provides significant funding for the installation of conservation practices across our country's agricultural landscape, any monitoring of the effectiveness of those practices at "edge-of-field" has generally been deducted from the same pool of funds financing installation. This disincentive for monitoring is exacerbated by the fact that agricultural landowners and their partners are often well-equipped to manage the installation of practices, but lack experience and expertise in water quality monitoring. While

March 7, 2018

not all fields are suitable for edge-of-field monitoring, improved partnerships among state agriculture and environmental agencies, local conservation partners, and academic institutions would result in collaborative action to identify priority watersheds suitable for monitoring.

Enable information sharing to better connect and coordinate federal and state investments in conservation by:

- a. Clarifying Section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 to encourage data-sharing agreements between NRCS and the states, provided that individual farm information is protected; and
- b. Authorizing NRCS to provide producers receiving federal assistance with an option to voluntarily allow select conservation practice information to be publicly accessible.

Issue and Rationale:

State agencies are critical partners in promoting conservation activities and are well-positioned to connect conservation investments to water quality outcomes, if the right tools and information are available. Access to meaningful information on practice installation would improve governments' ability to direct scarce resources for maximum effectiveness. Section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (the 2008 Farm Bill) set prohibitions on the release of farm-specific information on conservation practices and other activities. While the protection of private information is laudable, state agencies should have access to aggregated data to help target investments and evaluate outcomes.

Improve coordination of USDA conservation investments with other federal and state priorities, including the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

Issue and Rationale:

Since 2010, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) dollars have supplemented Conservation Title investments in agricultural conservation. Passed through U.S. EPA to NRCS, GLRI funding is clearly directed toward GLRI priority watersheds and intended to go above and beyond baseline NRCS programs which traditionally rely on Farm Bill funds. Maximizing efforts through diverse sources of funds presents an opportunity for Great Lakes states to work with NRCS state conservationists in setting and accomplishing state-specific priorities.

Enhance RCPP by increasing flexibility for partners so all contributions are considered, while allowing greater use of federal dollars to maximize conservation outcomes with producers. Further, provide opportunities for award recipients within Critical Conservation Areas to convene and discuss best practices and lessons learned.

Issue and Rationale:

The Great Lakes was rightly identified as one of eight national Critical Conservation Areas for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) program established in the 2014 Farm Bill. As early test-beds for the RCPP, Great Lakes RCPP participants have shared lessons learned on ways to improve the effectiveness of the RCPP. The RCPP program hinges on private investments as well as in-kind contributions to meet the federal match requirement. However,

March 7, 2018

limitations on the use of public funds, most importantly, for project administration have stretched recipient capacity, potentially compromising effectiveness. RCPP offers the Great Lakes region-- stewards of 20% of the world's supply of fresh water--a unique opportunity to protect and promote the region as an economic powerhouse, in particular in the agriculture and food processing sector.

Provide increased funding and flexibility for working lands programs and require NRCS to invite state agencies to participate in annual discussions of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program priorities to assure efficient and effective coordination between federal and state investments in agricultural conservation efforts.

Issue:

In addition to the RCPP, other working lands programs like EQIP and CSP enable producers to seek assistance in conservation planning and the installation of conservation practices on land that is actively used to produce agricultural commodities, livestock, or forest products. These efforts require technical assistance on the part of the federal and state governments. Working together to align priorities and assure coordinated technical assistance will create efficiencies and deliver more conservation activities on the ground.

Consider block grants for states endeavoring to create conservation certification programs or otherwise maximize existing authorities to assist producers in attaining certification. For existing certification programs, continue to work with states to dedicate EQIP funding for farms to overcome barriers to certification.

Issue and Rationale:

Great Lakes states have been national leaders in establishing programs to recognize the efforts of producers taking action to conserve their land and protect the environment. Whether through acknowledgment of stewardship activities or certification of farm-scale efforts, states are crafting programs that capture the imagination of early adopters of conservation practices and set a course toward improved communication with conservation skeptics. Farm Bill support for state-led farm stewardship or certification programs can help farms achieve conservation goals and obtain recognition from their state.

Allow for innovation in supplying technical assistance to producers.

Issue and Rationale:

Lack of technical assistance providers is a key limiting factor in the adoption of conservation practices. Access to funding is generally contingent upon creation of a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan and technical service providers are in short-supply in many Great Lakes states. Agricultural retailers and certified crop advisors are trusted in the agricultural community. Due in part to increasing recognition of nutrient-related problems on Lake Erie, agribusiness partners launched the "4Rs" program (right source, right rate, right time, right place) to encourage improved use of commercial and manure-based fertilizers (nutrient management). Conservation organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever have also supported producers through cooperative agreements with NRCS. Increased recognition

and incentives for services from non-governmental providers of technical assistance could help more producers access funds for additional conservation activities.

Promote multi-year contracts for EQIP “annual” practices like cover crops to assure a sustainable funding source for growers willing to try a shorter-term practice, but unwilling to risk a loss of funding in subsequent years.

Issue and Rationale:

The lack of longer-term funding options threatens ongoing commitments to “annual” practices identified to improve soil health and resiliency. In recent years, the installation of cover crops (as well as interseeding of cash crops) has been highlighted as a potential win-win for both farm productivity and the environment. However, in an era of decreasing farm incomes, the additional cost associated with cover crops may not be sustainable over the multi-year time period required to see results. Traditional cost share arrangements have been on a per-project or annual basis, meaning that only one year of cover crop planting has been supported. This leaves producers to either self-fund for additional years or go through the enrollment process every year. Although additional research is necessary to better understand relationships among cover crop species, soil type, and nutrient utilization, farms around the Great Lakes basin are seeing meaningful improvements in soil health because of continuous cover cropping.

Increase the impact of land restoration programs by:

- a. Raising the cap on enrolled Conservation Reserve Program acreage
- b. Incentivizing the enrollment of less productive land that increases habitat for wildlife and improves water quality leaving while promoting retention of productive land for agriculture.
- c. Utilizing land held under easement or other long-term agreements for the management of rural stormwater.

Issue and Rationale:

CRP, CREP, and ACEP Programs can be refined to increase habitat for wildlife and improve water quality while encouraging highly productive lands to stay in production. This can be done by offering lower payment rights for highly productive lands and higher payment rates for less productive or marginal lands. This approach can also support targeting ecologically sensitive acres to maximize habitat and water quality benefits. Further, land held under long-term agreements should be eligible for installation of rural stormwater management structures which builds resiliency in the face of increasingly intense storm events and further reduces nutrient losses.

Amend the Forestry Title to include provisions controlling the introduction and spread of terrestrial invasive species. In addition, Conservation Title programs should support financial assistance for control efforts.

Issue and Rationale:

While much attention has been given to aquatic invasive species in the Great Lakes, threats also abound on the land. Protecting the region’s forests and cropland from terrestrial invasive

March 7, 2018

species is also a priority for Great Lakes states. CSP and EQIP have been valuable tools to the management of private lands; however, the Forestry Title could further support U.S. Forest Service efforts on public lands.

**Sustain or increase funding within the Rural Development Title and simplify processes for rural communities to work together toward regional problems, including infrastructure needs.**

**Issue and Rationale:**

Rural communities around the Great Lakes have suffered as the Nation's economy has shifted in recent years. Clean drinking water and wastewater treatment services are critically important to these communities as local leaders work to adapt to changing needs of residents and the business community. A recent Joint Action Plan<sup>1</sup> from the Great Lakes Commission highlighted the urgency of the situation and need for resources to understand infrastructure needs and manage assets to assist in long-term planning. Along with water and wastewater infrastructure, new technology development, and access to broadband connectivity has enriched the entrepreneurial spirit of Great Lakes communities, allowing many to engage in- and benefit from- the emerging "Blue Economy" of the region.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Joint Action Plan for Clean Water Infrastructure and Services in the Great Lakes Region* was endorsed by the Great Lakes Commission through a resolution dated September 20, 2017.