



**Statement as Delivered by
Sara Hopper, Agricultural Policy Director
Environmental Defense Fund**

**Before the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Energy, and Forestry
April 26, 2012**

Concerning

Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill: Conservation Programs

Chairman Thompson and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on conservation programs and the 2012 farm bill. My name is Sara Hopper, and I'm the Agricultural Policy Director for Environmental Defense Fund.

EDF is a nonprofit organization dedicated to using science and economics to find practical and lasting ways to meet our biggest conservation challenges. We believe that economic prosperity and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand, and nowhere is that more true than in the management of America's working farms, ranches and private forestlands.

The continuing economic prosperity of agriculture is critical to the nation. But it is also true that agriculture has a significant environmental footprint. That's why EDF is so interested in ways to advance both the economic and the environmental sustainability of agriculture.

In the past, periods of high commodity prices have spurred the conversion of marginal, environmentally sensitive lands to crop production. When this happened in the 1970s, Congress recognized that the dramatic increases in soil erosion that followed threatened not only environmental quality but also long-term productivity. In the 1985 farm bill, it created the Conservation Reserve Program and designed other new policies to reduce erosion and the loss of wetlands.

Each farm bill since then has reaffirmed the commitment to conservation that Congress made in 1985. Funding for conservation incentives has increased significantly over the years, helping producers improve stewardship as they've increased productivity.

But while significant progress has been made, environmental problems associated with agricultural production persist, and in some cases they are getting worse. Pressure on the American landscape is building. The need to increase production to feed a growing global population means it's more important than ever to maintain and strengthen our commitment to conservation.

As you know, however, this is a difficult time to write a farm bill, given the budget challenges we face. Fortunately, Members and staff of this committee have already done considerable good work on which to build.

Last fall, when committee leaders worked to develop recommendations to the Supercommittee, they didn't focus only on cutting spending. They also thought carefully about what policy improvements could be included to make conservation programs more effective.

We believe the work done last fall showed a continuing commitment to conservation in the face of significant budget pressure. As you develop the 2012 farm bill, we urge you to maintain that commitment by doing 2 things:

1. Minimize cuts to conservation programs; and
2. Improve policies within the conservation title to ensure that we can accomplish more even with fewer resources.

We believe it is important that Members recognize that any cuts to conservation programs will be painful. These programs are oversubscribed now, at current funding levels. Many of you have producers in your districts who may have applied and been turned away. When funding is cut, that gap between producer demand and available resources will grow. Policy improvements can help reduce – but can't eliminate – the impact of cuts, so minimizing the cuts is critical.

With respect to policy improvements, I want to focus today on one thing that can help us get the most bang for the federal conservation dollar, and that's promoting partnerships.

The 2008 farm bill included two new initiatives – the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program – designed to engage state and local partners in projects to help producers address state and local conservation priorities. These initiatives share three important features:

- First, they leverage resources from partners, bringing additional money to the table to help producers solve environmental problems;
- Second, they rely on local leadership to focus resources where they are most needed; and
- Third, they help demonstrate results, because partners have to help with the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of project outcomes.

We strongly support the inclusion of a larger, stronger partnership program in the 2012 farm bill. This program should build on the best aspects of the 2008 farm bill's cooperative conservation provisions. Emphasizing partnerships in the next farm bill will help stretch federal conservation dollars further, focus resources to solve environmental problems, and demonstrate results.

Demonstrating results is important. We need to get better at quantifying the environmental benefits that conservation programs help producers deliver to the public. Doing more to engage partners who can help with that would be a big step in the right direction.

The policies included in the conservation title of the 2012 farm bill will do a lot to determine whether conservation programs will be effective in helping the nation meet its conservation challenges. EDF looks forward to working with this committee to ensure that the 2012 farm bill includes the strongest possible conservation title. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.