



McGraw and the 2018 Farm Bill

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In the fall of 2016, the McGraw Center for Conservation Leadership brought together 10 conservation experts from government and the private sector to discuss innovations that could be implemented in the 2018 federal Farm Bill. That task force, joined by a few new members, ultimately produced the [Heartland Waters Initiative](#), a white paper suggesting ways to embrace emerging technologies and innovative financing to advance conservation.

Over the next two years, the Farm Bill took shape. The ideas developed at McGraw were brought forward by individual members of the task force and others who read the white paper and saw its potential.

The ultimate legislation, passed this month by Congress and signed Thursday by President Trump, reflects many of those ideas.

Most prominently, the legislation includes a completely new program, the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP), authorized as a pilot of 50,000 acres in the Prairie Pothole states of South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota.

Sen. John Thune (R-SD) introduced SHIPP as a standalone bill after his senior policy advisor, Lynn Tjeerdsma, participated in the Heartland Waters Initiative discussions.

SHIPP directly addresses a problem identified by the task force regarding the length of conservation enrollments. The task force recognized that “because commodity prices are cyclical, farmers may hesitate to put permanent or long-term restrictions on their

operation. Producers and conservationists alike would be interested in enrolling some marginal land in a long-term easement program, *and other sites in short-term programs that promote longer-term conservation.*”

Under current statutes, the shortest-term easement program is 10 years, for land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

The McGraw team recognized that thousands of acres remained in production simply because landowners did not want to commit to a 10-year easement. In addition, current programs such as CRP had become unnecessarily bureaucratic, restrictive and lacked the flexibility for multiple uses and common-sense management.

The team’s experts – including leaders in precision agriculture, commodity crop production, wildlife management and general conservation – agreed on the need for a short-term, flexible conservation program.

SHIPP emerged as a result of these conversations. It specifically addresses:

- **Short-term:** SHIPP is a 3-, 4- or 5-year program.
- **Landowner friendly:** Eligible land is selected by the landowner.
- **Only most recently cropped land eligible:** Land must have been cropped in the three crop years preceding enrollment.
- **Least productive land:** Enrolled land must be the least productive on the farm.
- **Restrictions:** Land cannot have been enrolled in CRP.
- **Flexibility:** Land can be hayed, grazed or harvested for seed outside of the primary nesting period.
- **Reasonable cost:** Rental rate is one-half of county CRP rental rates.
- **Beginning farmers/ranchers:** Greater benefits for beginning farmers and ranchers.
- **Accountability:** A report to Congress is required that provides the estimated conservation value of the land enrolled in SHIPP, and the estimated savings from reduced commodity program payment, crop insurance indemnities and crop insurance premium subsidies.

SHIPP was the only completely new program included in the 2018 Farm Bill, a noteworthy accomplishment because committee staff had warned that there was no money available for new programs.

Yet the technical expertise and collaboration of the Heartland Waters Initiative task force that provided the nucleus of SHIPP led agriculture committee staff and the four Conference Committee principals to recognize it as a program worthy of authorization and funding. It is the first short-term component authorized in the 30-plus-year history of the Conservation Reserve Program.

Supporters of SHIPP include the National Farmers Union, the South Dakota Corn Growers and the South Dakota Soybean Association, as well as Pheasants Forever and other conservation and wildlife organizations.

“I cannot put into words how much I appreciate the contribution McGraw has made to me in my career in conservation and natural resources,” Mr. Tjeerdma said, citing McGraw’s role in helping to finance his work as policy initiatives manager for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, hosting the TRCP policy team that prepared conservation recommendations for the 2008 Farm Bill, and helping to advance his work with Senator Thune on the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills.

“Although the McGraw contribution cannot be quantified, its role in the past three farm bills has been significant,” he added.

Alex Echols, a longtime conservation leader who served as team leader for the Heartland Waters Initiative, said that other parts of the bill influenced by the discussions at McGraw included the advancement of market tools and prioritization to improve conservation.

These include allowing individual states to pick priority conservation practices and pay a premium for them; basing enrollment in conservation programs on anticipated results; the establishment of a data base to improve the understanding of conservation practice effects and costs; and greater interdepartmental cooperation on wildlife conservation and water quality improvement.

“These are all significant shifts,” Mr. Echols said. “McGraw created the forum for each of these to be fleshed out and advanced broadly.”

Other ideas, including ones addressing conservation financing, were not included in this Farm Bill but are likely to gain traction in further discussions at the federal level, Mr. Echols said.

“This is one of the things we hoped the McGraw Center for Conservation Leadership would do when we launched it more than three years ago,” said Charles S. Potter Jr., president and CEO of the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation and the Center for Conservation Leadership. “We brought together thought leaders to create innovative ways to advance economic efficiency in conservation. Those leaders and others took those ideas and turned them into results.

“McGraw is a catalyst for creative thought and cooperation. We couldn’t be prouder of that team, and we are grateful for their hard work on behalf of conservation.”