



President signs five-year farm bill reauthorization containing several key wins for counties

[NACo applauds Congressional approval of 2018 farm bill, which preserves many key county priorities.](#)

On December 20, President Trump signed into law a five-year reauthorization of the farm bill. The president's signature comes after a bipartisan group of legislators worked for months to resolve disagreements between the two farm bills passed by the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate earlier this year. The five-year, \$867 billion reauthorization will help support county economies and provide critical investments to rural and underserved communities.

Throughout the farm bill process, NACo helped draft bill text and amendments to preserve and promote key county priorities. Specifically, the final package creates a new Rural Innovation Stronger Economy (RISE) grant program, reinstates the Undersecretary for Rural Development and codifies the interagency Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development.

Additional provisions include language that would allow counties with regional jails to exclude incarcerated individuals from population caps for funding eligibility under USDA Rural Development programs and a provision that allows counties to use USDA broadband loans and grants for middle-mile projects, which is prohibited under current law.

The final package also excluded several provisions that could have adversely impacted county governments, including a provision that would have prevented local governments from enforcing local food product regulations, language to prevent states and local governments from implementing pesticide permit programs and verbiage that would have made some counties ineligible for broadband funding under USDA's Rural Utilities Service programs.

Additionally, the nutrition title of the conferenced farm bill – which accounts for roughly 75 percent of overall spending within the package – did not include proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), which could have resulted in more than two million individuals losing or seeing a reduction in their SNAP benefits.

NACo applauds the Farm Bill Conference Committee and leadership for their bipartisan commitment to key county priorities in this farm bill and thanks the president for signing the reauthorization package into law.

Key provisions included in the final farm bill of importance to counties are listed below:

TITLE II - CONSERVATION

- **Sec. 2401. Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention.** The farm bill maintains the current authorization level of the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program at \$85 million through FY 2023. The Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program was created in the 2014 Farm Bill to assist communities with rehabilitating watershed dams.
- **Sec. 2201. Conservation Reserve.** The farm bill increases the acreage limit of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to 27 million by FY 2023. CRP provides annual rental payments to producers to place crops on highly erodible and environmentally sensitive land and with long-term resources-conserving plantings.
- **Sec. 2308. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).** The farm bill establishes a new Grassland Conservation Initiative within the Conservation Stewardship Program. The bill requires the USDA to establish this initiative beginning in FY 2019. CSP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers wishing to maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns.
- **Sec. 2703. Regional Conservation Partnerships Program (RCPP).** The farm bill streamlines the operation of the RCPP to increase program adoption by eligible partners and producers. RCPP furthers conservation, restoration and sustainability efforts on regional or watershed scales, and encourages partners to cooperate with producers in meeting or avoiding regulatory requirements and implementing projects.

TITLE IV - NUTRITION

- **Sec. 4005. Employment and Training for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.** The farm bill conference agreement protects the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) by maintaining existing eligibility and work requirements for SNAP recipients. The farm bill conference agreement contains reforms that encourage and prioritize approaches to job training and other employment-related activities that are proven to be effective by the SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) pilot programs authorized under the 2014 Farm Bill.
- **Sec. 4011. Interstate Data Matching to Prevent Multiple Issuances.** The farm bill conference agreement would establish a new National Accuracy Clearinghouse, which is designed prevent individuals from simultaneously receiving SNAP benefits in multiple states.
- **Sec. 4013. Quality Control Improvements.** The farm bill conference agreement would eliminate an awards program that gave states up to \$48 million a year in federal funding for high performances related to program access and payment accuracy. The projected savings from these changes will be reinvested into food banks and other nutrition assistance programs.

TITLE VI - RURAL DEVELOPMENT

- **Sec. 6101. Combating substance use disorder in rural America.** This section creates a 20 percent set-aside of financial assistance for telemedicine projects aimed at addressing the opioid crisis.
- **Sec. 6102. Distance learning and telemedicine.** The farm bill increases annual authorizations for the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program from \$75 million a year to \$82 million a year.
- **Sec. 6201. Access to broadband telecommunications services in rural areas.** This section expands the federal resources for broadband investments to include grants (in addition to the loan and loan guarantee programs already available).
- **Sec. 6202. Expansion of middle mile infrastructure into rural areas.** This section allows counties to use USDA broadband loans and grants for middle-mile projects – prohibited under current law.
- **Sec. 6214. Rural broadband integration working group.** This section creates a federal advisory committee that is required to work with state, local, tribal and territorial governments, telecommunications companies, utilities, trade associations, philanthropic entities, policy experts and other interested parties to identify, assess and determine possible actions relating to barriers and opportunities for broadband deployment in rural areas.
- **Sec. 6301. Exclusion of Certain Populations from Definition of Rural Area.** This section would allow counties with regional jails to exclude incarcerated individuals from population caps for funding eligibility under USDA Rural Development programs.
- **Sec. 6306. Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development.** Much like the previous administration's White House Rural Council, this section creates a federal interagency council to coordinate the development of policy recommendations, maximize the impact of federal investment on rural communities, promote economic prosperity and quality of life in rural communities and use innovation to resolve local and regional challenges faced by rural communities.
- **Sec. 6401. Strategic economic and community development.** This section of the package expands the Strategic Economic and Community Development program to allow the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to prioritize funding for projects that support the implementation of a strategic community development plan that encompasses two or more jurisdictions.
- **Sec. 6403. Water, waste disposal and wastewater facility grants.** This section doubles the size of allowable grant awards from \$100,000 to \$200,000, but cuts the authorization in half from \$30 million to \$15 million each year.
- **Sec. 6424. Rural innovation stronger economy grant program.** This section creates a new Rural Innovation Stronger Economy (RISE) grant program, which would help counties strengthen local economies through job accelerator partnerships with the private sector and institutions of higher education.
- **Sec. 6507. Cybersecurity and grid security improvements.** This section of the package authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to make loans or loan guarantees available to communities for cybersecurity and grid security improvements.

TITLE VIII – FORESTRY

- **Sec. 8624. Good Neighbor Authority.** The bill reauthorizes Good Neighbor Authority and expands it to allow counties and tribes to enter into agreements with the U.S. Forest Service to assist in forest restoration activities. Further, the bill ensures that any payments made by the county to the Secretary under a good neighbor agreement are not considered to be funds received from National Forest System land or Bureau of Land Management land, ensuring counties continue to receive their fair share of revenues from forest management activities.
- **Sec. 8702. Resource Advisory Committees.** The bill would reduce the mandatory minimum size of USDA Resource Advisory Committees (RAC) from 15 to 9 and reduce the minimum number of members that must be “representative of community interests” from 5 to 3. The bill also creates a pilot program under which regional foresters, as designated by the Secretary, may approve RAC appointments in certain areas.
- **Sec. 8611. Categorical Exclusions to Expedite Forest Management Activities.** The farm bill would establish new categorical exclusions (CE) for critical forest management activities. The bill would create a new CE of up to 4,500 acres for certain forest management activities for the purpose of protecting, restoring or improving habitat for the greater sage-grouse or mule deer.
- **Sec. 8401. Promoting Cross-Boundary Wildfire Mitigation.** The farm bill authorizes \$20 million per year through FY 2023 for cross-boundary hazardous fuel projects. The package also authorizes grants to state foresters to support hazardous fuels reduction projects that include both federal and non-federal land and authorizes the Secretary to use other related authorities relating to cooperation and technical assistance – including good neighbor authority – to fund and conduct projects. Further, the bill requires state foresters to consult with non-federal land owners for all projects conducted on non-federal land. Lastly, the bill reauthorizes the hazardous fuel reduction on federal land program at \$660 million per year through FY 2023.

TITLE XII - MISC.

- **Sec. 12407. Under Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development.** This section requires the Department of Agriculture to reestablish the position of Under Secretary for Rural Development. The bill outlines a permanent, mandatory position that is not subject to any administrative reorganizations.



AUSTIN IGLEHEART aigleheart@naco.org
LEGISLATIVE ASSOCIATE

(FULL BIO) Austin joined NACo in January of 2015

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- [Sens. Crapo, Wyden unveil bill to create SRS endowment fund, provide certainty for forest counties](#)