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Could the Farm Bill Devastate America's Birds?

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STRETCHING across the Upper Midwest is a 276,000-square-mile expanse full of wetlands and grasslands. This vast area — known as the prairie pothole region and extending from northwestern Iowa to Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana and into Canada — provides the breeding habitat for roughly half of North America's migratory waterfowl. But unless Congress acts, this priceless ecological domain could come under severe threat.

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Congress is debating reauthorization of the federal farm bill. The legislation is not just about the future of agricultural and nutrition programs. It is also about conservation and the fate of one of North America's most important breeding grounds for upland birds like grouse and pheasants, along with waterfowl like mallards, gadwall, blue-winged teal, northern pintail, redheads, northern shovelers, and canvasback ducks.

Since 1985, the farm legislation has required farmers to protect wetlands and fragile soils on their lands in order to qualify for billions of dollars a year in farm-program payments. But the bill that has emerged from the House Agriculture Committee lacks an important provision that would preserve those conservation incentives. Perhaps no place would be more threatened by this failure than the prairie pothole region, where, 10,000 years ago, decaying glaciers left behind an extraordinary landscape marked by thousands of shallow wetlands.

This region is already being plowed under because high commodity prices have enticed farmers to opt out of the less lucrative government assistance programs, freeing the drain wetlands and plant as much of their land as possible. A [recent study](#) by Defenders Wildlife and the Environmental Working Group found that the annual rate of grassland loss nationwide had doubled between 2006 and 2011, much of it in the prairie pothole region. If this rate continues, most of the remaining grasslands there will disappear over the next 15 years.

It is not an overstatement to say that this looming destruction is one of America's greatest conservation challenges.

The farm bill now being considered in Congress would eliminate longstanding direct

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federal payments to farmers. Instead, both the House and Senate bills would provide even more generous federal assistance for farmers who choose to purchase federal crop insurance. (At present, farmers who sign up for crop insurance are not required to conserve their lands and wetlands.) Unlike the House measure, the Senate bill would require farmers who do so to protect wetlands and fragile soils, as they were required to do as a condition of the direct payment program, and, until 1996, under the crop insurance program.

Thanks to the farm bill's long-standing conservation requirements, soil erosion in the United States dropped by 43 percent between 1982 and 2007, saving more than a billion tons of rich topsoil, according to the Agriculture Department. In the prairie pothole region, there has been a resurgence in the populations of pheasants and ducks. And that has translated into a boom in recreational hunting that has generated tens of millions of dollars in annual income for rural communities, landowners and the states. It has also benefited sport hunting in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, where the waterfowl retreat for the winter.

Recognizing the growing threat to the region, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service last year established the Dakotas Grasslands Conservation Area to save 2 million acres of wetlands through the purchase of permanent conservation easements from willing landowners. But if the new farm bill fails to retain the conservation compliance requirement as a condition of enrolling in the crop insurance program, there will be little incentive for landowners to participate in the Fish and Wildlife Service effort. Easement payments can't compete with high crop prices. And crop losses on farmland created by draining wetlands or plowing native prairie would qualify for insurance payments. So farmers would have every reason to plant as many acres as possible.

American taxpayers have always had a compact with farmers. In return for financial support when commodity prices were down and farm income was suffering, the government required farmers to conserve our soil and wetlands to protect our most precious and vulnerable places. This conservation compact has been a critical part of long-standing farm policy. It ensures that government payments protect not only our farmers, but also our natural heritage.

Members of Congress and President Obama should uphold this commitment. It is the kind of responsible leadership that our children deserve and American taxpayers should insist upon.

Jim Lyons is senior director for renewable energy at Defenders of Wildlife. Mark Rey is the executive in residence at Michigan State University's Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. Eric Washburn is a partner at BlueWater Strategies, a lobbying firm, where he focuses on energy and natural resource issues. Mr. Lyons and Mr. Rey both served as under secretary for natural resources and environment in the Agriculture Department, Mr. Lyons under President Bill Clinton and Mr. Rey under President George W. Bush.

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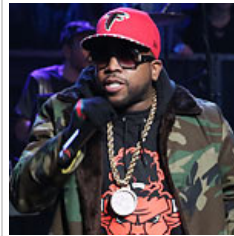
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