

## Sodsaver in the Farm Bill: A Reasonable Solution to a Pressing Problem

### **Problem: Grasslands and grazing land are in danger of disappearing.**

Throughout the country, native ecosystems are being converted to cropland. Recent research shows that 23 million acres of native ecosystems were converted to cropland from 2008-2011 - approximately the size of the state of Maine.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, grassland wildlife populations, and particularly grassland bird populations, are declining at alarming rates.

### **Crop prices and subsidies drive the problem.**

During the last decade, crop prices have doubled.<sup>2</sup> Crop insurance has expanded to cover 282 million acres in 2012, and the government pays on average 62% of individual crop insurance premiums.<sup>3</sup> This combination of high prices and taxpayer funded subsidies are encouraging farmers to convert more land. A study by Iowa State University found that modest levels of crop insurance can a big difference in farmers' decisions to convert native grasslands. Crop insurance that decreases crop income risk by 20% increases the amount that farmers are willing to spend to convert native prairie (on such things as removing fences, picking rocks and flattening gopher mounds) by over 40%. A recent study by South Dakota State University documents that:

- Cropland has expanded into more arid regions of the western Corn Belt, and
- Cropland conversion has mostly occurred on marginal lands with high erosion potential, drained wetlands, or rangeland.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, farmers are, in fact, taking on higher risks because there is a strong safety net and the potential for higher profits.

### **Solution: A strong national Sodsaver provision in the next Farm Bill.**

Sodsaver is a simple provision that would reduce farm program benefits, including crop insurance, disaster payments, and conservation programs, from applying to newly broken lands. *Sodsaver does not prohibit farmers from breaking out new land; it ensures that they do so at their own risk, and not at the expense of taxpayers.*



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## Sodsaver is fiscally and morally responsible.

***Farming marginal lands is not beneficial in the long-term.*** Bringing native lands into production provides little benefit to consumers, increases long-term costs due to erosion and nutrient loss, and ultimately leads to lower water quality, reduced flood mitigation capacity, and lost outdoor recreation activity. We are in danger of repeating the conditions that created the Dust Bowl if we do not act soon.

***Sodsaver is not a question of property rights.*** A Sodsaver provision will not prevent landowners from converting their land to cropland if they choose to do so; it merely ensures that taxpayers do not subsidize practices that are not beneficial to the public.

***Sodsaver reduces government spending.*** A 2009 estimate determined that Sodsaver's annual savings are \$299 million, or \$2.99 billion over a 10 year period.<sup>5</sup> In tough economic times, saving money while protecting the environment would be a true victory for everyone.

## Sodsaver provisions and the Farm Bill

Sodsaver is often confused with the Sodbuster provision, which is currently required to receive certain farm bill benefits, including direct payments and conservation programs. Sodbuster prohibits farming highly erodible soils without a conservation plan. Sodbuster reduced erosion significantly over the last 10 years, but it does not apply to most newly broken native lands, since most would not be defined as highly-erodible.

### ***The Protect Our Prairies Act (H.R. 686)***

In 2012, both the Senate and the House Agriculture Committees passed farm bills that included a Sodsaver provision, though both versions only limited subsidies for cropland converted from native grassland. Neither version eliminated such subsidies entirely; furthermore, the House version only applied regionally. Since Congress did not succeed in passing a final five-year farm bill in 2012, they must write a farm bill in 2013. NWF recommends that Congress include a strong, national Sodsaver provision in the next farm bill. Specifically, NWF supports the Protect Our Prairies Act (H.R. 686), a bipartisan bill introduced by Representatives Noem (R-SD), Walz (D-MN), and six other cosponsors in February 2013, which would enact a national sodsaver provision to reduce taxpayer-funded incentives to destroy vital grassland resources.



**Grasslands in bloom (left) and the greater prairie chicken (right) Photos: Flickr, pam's pics. Aaron Price.**

<sup>1</sup> Environmental Working Group and Defenders of Wildlife. 2012. [Plowed Under](#).

<sup>2</sup> National Wildlife Federation. 2012. [America's Grasslands: Status, Threats, and Opportunities](#).

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service. 2012. [Federal Crop Insurance: A Background](#).<sup>4</sup> Ruiqing, Miao, David Hennessy, Hongli Feng. Native Grassland Conversion: the Roles of Risk Intervention and Switching Costs. Working Paper 13-WP. Center for Agricultural and Rural Development. February, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, Christopher, and Wimberly, Michael. 2013. *Recent land use change in the Western Corn Belt threatens grasslands and wetlands*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Senator Harkin and Representative Peterson to Secretary Vilsack. July 20, 2009.