

Pass a Farm Bill That Prioritizes Clean Water

The Alliance for the Great Lakes requests of Congress:

Pass a Farm Bill that prioritizes clean water by restoring conservation resources, ensuring equitable distribution of funds, and tying investments to proven, science-based practices that reduce nutrient runoff. These actions are essential to protecting the Great Lakes by curbing harmful algal blooms, safeguarding drinking water for millions of people, sustaining fisheries and recreation, and preserving one of the world's most important freshwater ecosystems. A strong Farm Bill would:

- Reverse harmful conservation funding cuts and restore Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) to protect Great Lakes waters.
- Increase funding for core conservation programs—including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional

Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—and restore dedicated funding for the CRP Transition Incentive Program (CRP-TIP) to scale up proven tools where nutrient reductions are most needed in the Great Lakes Basin.

- Ensure equitable distribution of conservation funding by reinstating payment limits for EQIP and CSP so conservation dollars can be distributed broadly across priority landscapes in the Great Lakes.
- Authorize the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to link payments to demonstrated reductions in nitrogen and phosphorus to move toward performance-based conservation for the Great Lakes.
- Target federal funding for efforts to increase water quality monitoring in priority watersheds.

Background: Agricultural pollution remains a threat to the Great Lakes

Excess nitrogen and phosphorus runoff, along with manure-related bacterial contamination, continue to drive harmful algal blooms, hypoxia, drinking water challenges, and ecosystem degradation throughout the Great Lakes Basin. These impacts impose real costs on communities, ratepayers, fisheries, and local economies and reflect systemic nutrient management issues across the region.

The Farm Bill remains the nation's most powerful tool for addressing these threats, yet current program funding and design do not match the scale or urgency of the problem—particularly in the Western Lake Erie Basin, where current investments in states like Ohio and Michigan are still woefully inadequate to meet phosphorus reduction targets.

Conservation practices deliver water-quality benefits only when they are properly planned, implemented, and maintained. Recent cuts to Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) have significantly reduced the capacity of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff across the Great Lakes region — particularly in high-priority watersheds such as the Western Lake Erie Basin. As a result, producers face long wait times for assistance, reduced access to nutrient management planning, and limited support for practice verification and follow-up. Restoring CTA funding would allow NRCS to provide hands-on assistance for nutrient management planning, manure management, and soil health practices. It would also support site-specific conservation strategies tailored to local soils, hydrology, and drainage conditions common across the Great Lakes.

In priority watersheds such as Western Lake Erie and Green Bay, increased funding for EQIP, CSP, RCPP, and CRP would:

- Expand adoption of edge-of-field and in-field practices that intercept nutrients before they reach Great Lakes tributaries;
- Support watershed-scale projects through RCPP that align federal dollars with state, local, and private funding; and
- Preserve and expand buffers, wetlands, and grassed waterways through CRP and CRP-TIP, which are among the most effective tools for reducing nutrient and sediment loading.

In the Great Lakes region, water-quality outcomes depend on widespread adoption of conservation practices. Reinstating payment limits for EQIP and CSP is critical to ensure that conservation dollars are distributed broadly across priority landscapes rather than concentrated among a small number of very large operations.

Finally, to achieve meaningful water-quality improvements, conservation funding must move beyond participation-based payments and prioritize practices that deliver measurable nutrient reductions. Congress should explicitly authorize USDA to link payments to demonstrated reductions in nitrogen and phosphorus, allow programs to prioritize funding in high-impact areas, and support verification and monitoring frameworks that confirm practice effectiveness before full payment is issued. In practice, this would allow USDA and partners to deliver greater environmental returns per dollar invested in impaired Great Lakes watersheds.

A 2026 Farm Bill that restores technical assistance, strengthens and targets conservation funding, ensures equitable access, and rewards measurable outcomes will provide the tools needed to reduce nutrient pollution and protect the Great Lakes. These changes are essential to meet long-standing nutrient reduction commitments and ensure that the world's largest freshwater ecosystem remains healthy, resilient, and safe for the millions of people who depend on it.