



STRENGTHENING CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE

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Purpose

Conservation compliance is a USDA requirement introduced in the 1985 Farm Bill for farmers receiving certain benefits such as crop insurance subsidies or conservation program payments. Conservation compliance aims to protect soil quality and wetlands to ensure the resilience and longevity of essential ecological and agricultural systems.

Two provisions exist under conservation compliance: **Sodbuster, to protect highly erodible land**, and **Swampbuster, to protect wetlands**. Under these provisions, farmers must develop an approved conservation plan and commit to preserving wetlands and highly erodible soils on their land to receive federal funding.

This project explored how federal conservation compliance could be strengthened by learning from state-level soil, wetland, and water quality conservation programs and from farmers' perspectives. Increasing awareness of conservation compliance can strengthen natural resource protection and give farmers clearer expectations around regulatory requirements.



Deliverables

State Policy Database

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Landscape analysis of state-level conservation policies related to Highly Erodible Land (HEL), wetlands, and agricultural water quality.

METHODS

Compiled information in a spreadsheet with 3 tabs:

- **Policies**
- **Definitions**
- **Program Websites**

Information included adoption dates, enforcement agency, enforcement process, and other key policy parameters.

Farmer Interview Summary

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A brief synthesis of farmer perspectives towards conservation compliance and programs, identifying common themes and insights.

METHODS

Interviewed 8 farmers to understand their experiences with:

- **Conservation Compliance**
- **Conservation Practices**
- **Experiences with USDA Staff and Programs**

Then coded the interviews to highlight the main themes and summarized each in the form of a memo.

ArcGIS Storymap

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An interactive ArcGIS StoryMap expanding on state database findings and farmer perspectives found via interviews.

METHODS

Created a GIS map and StoryMap where users can click on each state to access a summary PDF detailing:

- **State-specific conservation policies & programs**
- **Definitions, enforcement structures, and unique features**
- **Relevant insights from local farmers (when available)**

Key Findings

State Policy Database:

The database showed that while states have **numerous conservation policies**, particularly for **water quality**, there are **far less programs** that address **wetlands** and **highly erodible land** (Figure 1). Most **policies are mandatory**, but many states still rely on **voluntary or conditionally mandatory programs** to get farmers involved, which creates an inconsistent regulatory landscape (Figure 2).

Our findings allow stakeholders and community members to observe what policies and programs exist in their state, find examples that could potentially be implemented on a federal level, and see where there are areas for improvement in state level conservation.

Figure 1. Results of the state policy database.

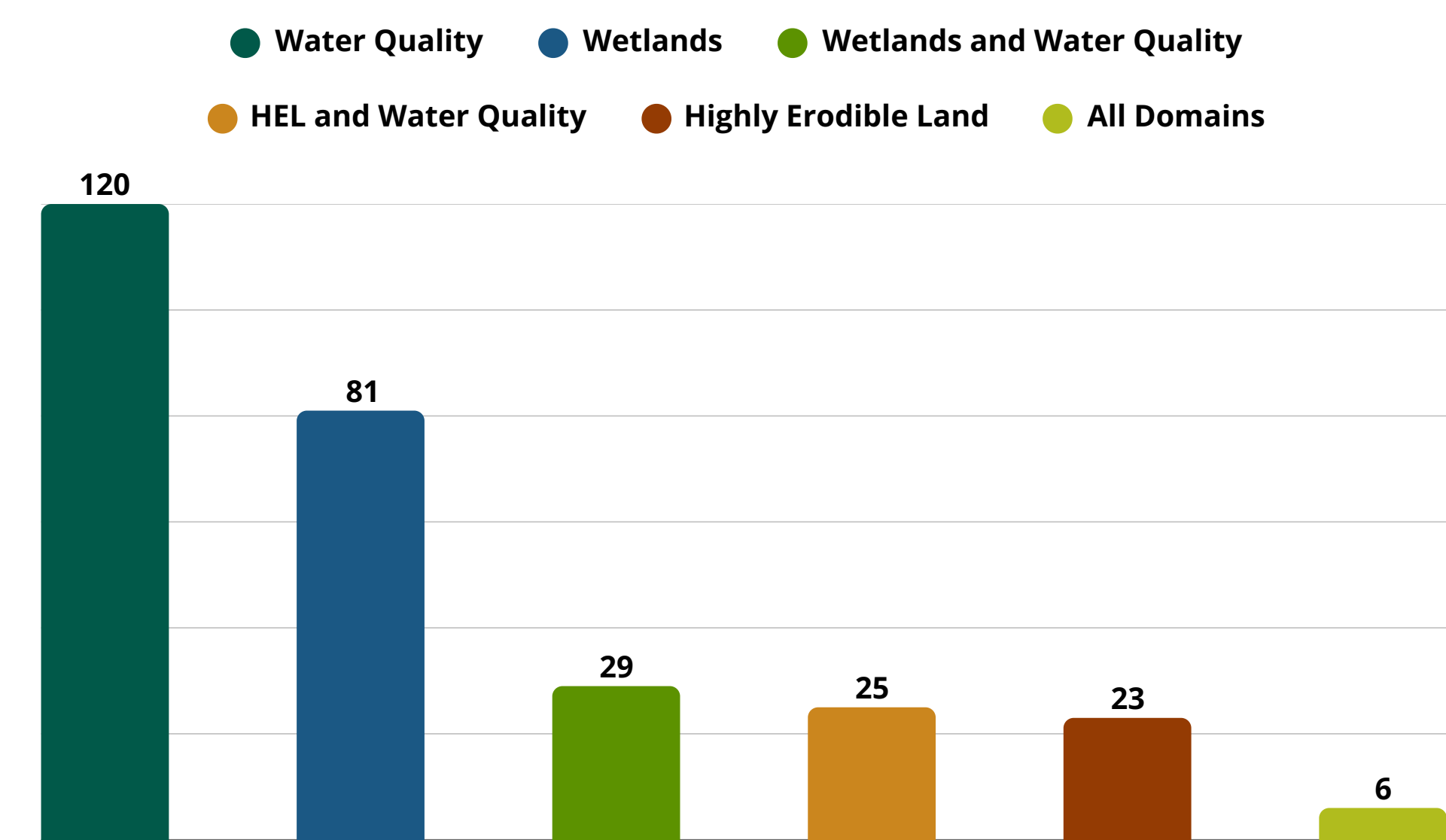


Figure 2. Number of mandatory vs. voluntary policies and programs.



Farmer Identified Issues in USDA Communication and Uniformity:

- 1. Communication**
Farmers expressed a lack of communication from their local USDA offices about regulations and program opportunities.
- 2. Uniformity**
Farmers reported inconsistencies with USDA agencies, noting that information they received varied depending on the staff member or office.

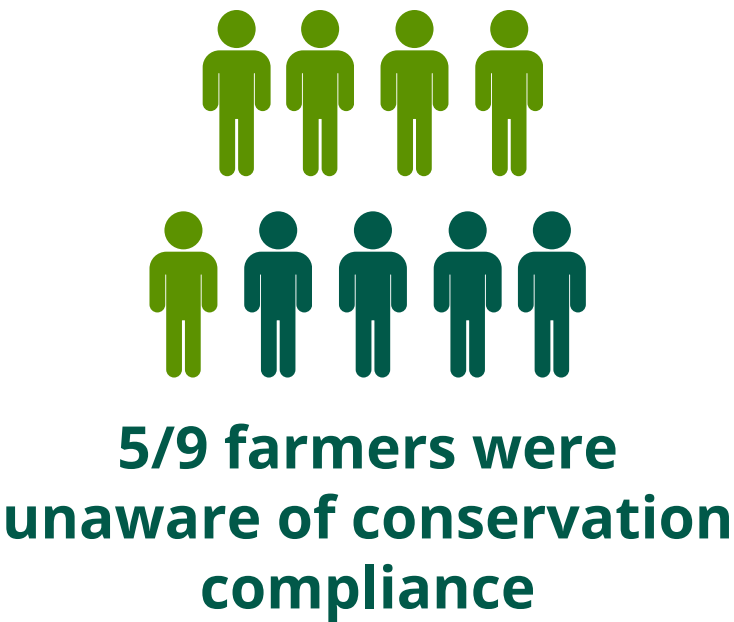


Figure 3. Number of farmers who were aware of conservation compliance.

Areas for Strengthening Conservation Compliance:

- 1. Increased Awareness**
Farmer interviews showed that conservation compliance is not widely recognized by name (Figure 3), suggesting a need for greater awareness and more support from the USDA to strengthen it.
- 2. Evaluation of State Policies**
More research should be done on the effectiveness and federal scalability of state level conservation policies and programs.
- 3. Expanded Coverage Possibility**
Conservation compliance could be strengthened by applying it not just to HEL and wetlands, but to water quality and all farmland that participates in USDA programs.

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