



AN EVALUATION OF THE FEDERAL FARM AND RANCH LANDS PROTECTION PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary federal conservation program that provides matching funds to eligible entities to buy permanent conservation easements on farm and ranch land. The program was originally enacted in the Federal Agriculture and Improvement and Reform Act of 1996. It was reauthorized and expanded in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002.

By 2005, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) had allocated \$372.5 million to protect close to 449,000 acres nationwide with an estimated cumulative easement value of nearly \$1.1 billion. Funding for the FRPP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation, the same federal entity that finances farm income support payments and conservation payments. NRCS manages the program.

In 2004, the NRCS asked American Farmland Trust (AFT) to evaluate the effectiveness of the FRPP. AFT contracted with Dr. J. Dixon Esseks at the Center for Great Plains Studies of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) to conduct a survey of FRPP participants. The complete report is available online at: http://www.farmlandinfo.org/farmland_preservation_literature/index.cfm?function=article_view&articleID=30831. What follows is a short description of the methodology and summary of key findings.

METHODOLOGY

The UNL research team built the sampling frame of participating owners between January and September 2005 with assistance from the NRCS easement division staff and 99 public agencies and private land trusts. This process yielded contact information for 945 landowners from 32 states. The researchers then drew a random sample of 613 landowners.

The UNL Bureau of Sociological Research conducted the survey by telephone from June through December 2005. Interviewers used a 67-question survey instrument developed by Dr. Esseks in consultation with NRCS and AFT staff. Thirty-three sample members could not be reached by phone or mail. Of the 580 remaining FRPP participants, the research team interviewed 422 landowners. This represents an impressive 73 percent response rate.

FINDINGS

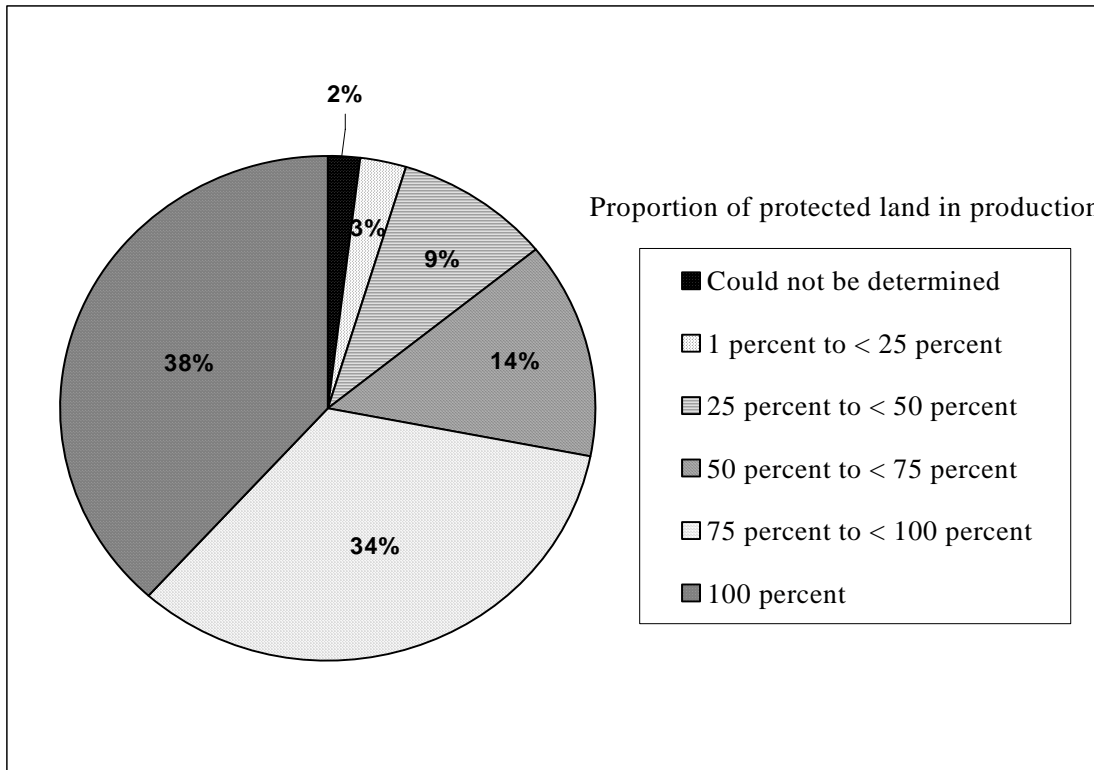
1. The FRPP protects threatened agricultural land.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents said that within one year prior to the sale of their easement they had received an offer to buy their land or an offer to buy an option on their land. Thirty-six percent of survey takers reported that at least some of the land protected by the FRPP was located within a half-mile of a public sewer or water line. Fifty-six percent of the landowners reported at least one of these indicators of vulnerability to development.

2. Land protected by the FRPP is in active agricultural use.

Ninety-seven percent of surveyed landowners—410 out of 422—said that at least some of their easement-protected acreage was being used to raise agricultural products. Of these landowners, 38 percent reported that all of their easement land was in production and another 34 percent said that 75 to 99 percent of the protected land is being farmed. Only 3 percent replied that less than 25 percent of FRPP-protected land is being used for agriculture. The percentage of protected land in production could not be calculated for eight respondents; in most cases total acreage under easement was not available. A handful of landowners failed to report the amount of land in active use.

Figure 1: Percentage of Landowners Reporting Proportion of Protected Land in Production



3. Income from easement sales is reinvested in farms and ranches.

Among surveyed landowners who sold easements—383 of the 422 respondents—81 percent reported that they reinvested at least some of the money from the sales into their operations. Fifty-five percent used the proceeds to pay off mortgages or loans on agricultural land. Fifty-eight percent bought land, purchased equipment, improved buildings and/or spent money on other farm business purposes. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents said that they spent most of their proceeds on agricultural expenses or spent as much on farm business-related items as on personal or household needs.

4. Protected agricultural land provides fresh local food, scenic views and recreational opportunities.

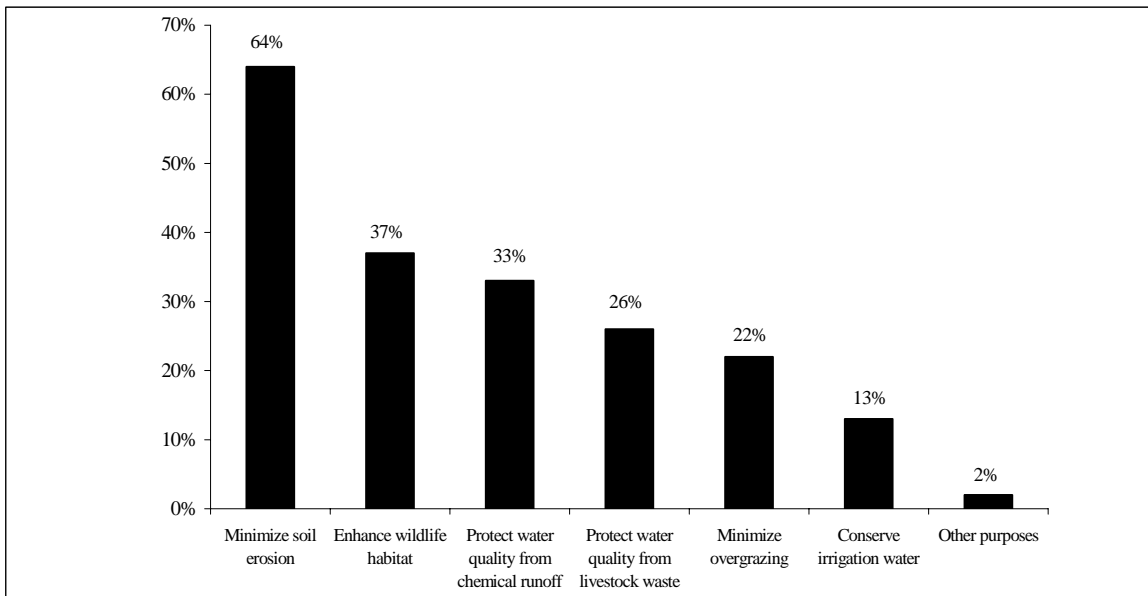
Twenty-two percent of the survey respondents reported that at least some of the products raised on easement-protected land were sold at local outlets (i.e., farmstands, farmers' markets, local grocery stores or subscription services). The proportion is higher among owner-operators. Twenty-five percent of owner-operators said they sold agricultural products locally. Twenty-one percent of these owner-operators marketed food items directly to consumers. By way of comparison, only 6 percent of the nation's 2.2 million operators sold food items directly to consumers according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture.

Ninety-one percent of all respondents said that their easement-protected land could be viewed from a paved public road, public park, bike path or walkway or a body of water used by the general public. Nearly half (48 percent) of respondents said that people outside the family used their easement-protected land for hunting, fishing, horseback riding, camping, picnicking, cross-county skiing, snowmobiling and/or sledding in the past year.

5. Farm and ranch lands protected by the FRPP are well-managed.

Eighty-three percent of all respondents reported adoption of at least one conservation practice in the past year. Sixty-four percent reported implementation of conservation practices to minimize soil erosion. Thirty-seven percent of respondents reported practices intended to enhance wildlife habitat. Thirty-three percent reported practices aimed at protecting water quality (i.e., reducing surface or ground water pollution from agricultural chemicals). Protecting water quality from livestock waste was reported by 26 percent of the respondents. Practices to minimize overgrazing were applied to 22 percent of the sample and 13 percent of owners reported practices to conserve water. Fifty-eight percent reported adoption of practices to achieve more than one conservation purpose.

Figure 2: Percentage of Protected Land Achieving Benefits through Applied Conservation Practices



6. Landowners are satisfied with the program.

Among surveyed landowners who sold easements—383 of the 422 respondents—69 percent said they “definitely made the right decision.” Another 24 percent said they “probably made the right decision.” Ninety-two percent of all survey respondents would recommend the program to others. Of these, 56 percent would recommend the program without qualms; 36 percent would refer others to the program with some reservations.

Esseks, J Dixon. *Evaluation of USDA’s Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) through Surveying a Random Sample of Owners of Agricultural Land Whose Development Rights Were Sold in Part through the FRPP.* Center for Great Plains Studies University of Nebraska-Lincoln. March 2006.