



Farm conservation programs: tending the garden

By Mary Minette, ELCA director for environmental education and advocacy

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." - Genesis 2:15

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest." - Leviticus 19:9

"When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land." - Leviticus 25:2b-5

Given that the biblical world was largely agrarian, it's hardly surprising that farming images and metaphors play a significant role in Scripture. God's first directive to the human formed from the earth is to be a good steward of creation. When God gives Moses basic rules to govern the lives of God's chosen people, those rules include good farm practices that make sense even today: allowing the land to periodically "rest" to rebuild depleted soil; planting buffer strips at the edge of plowed fields to prevent soil erosion and provide habitat for wildlife; and leaving unused produce and crop residue on the land to feed hungry neighbors and replenish the soil; all of these are good land management practices that help to protect soil fertility, water quality and the integrity of God's creation.

land in the United States. Given the amount of land used for agriculture, land that is a part of thousands of watersheds throughout the country, federal farm programs must recognize the enormous impact that farmers and ranchers can have on our natural environment. Farm policies can support farmers in protecting and rebuilding soil, preserving clean water, providing habitat for native wildlife, and supplying other conservation and environmental benefits. Agriculture can work with and for the environment.

Conservation policies and programs have been a part of the federal farm bill for decades, and the conservation programs run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture play a key role in encouraging good land stewardship. Conservation programs come in two basic categories: land set-aside programs, which encourage farmers and ranchers not to farm on marginally productive land (as in Leviticus 25); and programs that encourage the adoption of conservation practices on working farms and ranches (as in Leviticus 19). The largest land set-aside program is the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to take land out of production for ten-year contract periods. The smaller Wetlands Reserve Program puts permanent easements on wetlands, providing more permanent protection — unfortunately this program is currently without funding due to the expiration of the 2008 farm bill at the end of September 2012.

One of the primary programs for working farms and ranches is the Conservation Stewardship Program, which allows farmers and ranchers to receive support payments to fund both existing conservation activities on their land and additional conservation practices. The Conservation Stewardship Program and other programs that encourage conservation of working farm and ranch lands received nearly 50 percent of the 2008 farm bill's conservation funding; yet even with the increase in funding provided in the 2008 bill, farmer demand for conservation assistance dollars has continued to outstrip the funding available.

Each year since 2010, Congress has voted to cut conservation funding, including funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program, to fund other programs and priorities in the federal budget. In fact, last summer, when the House of Representatives was considering assistance to farmers and livestock producers suffering losses due to the Midwest drought, bill sponsors proposed taking the majority of funding for that assistance from the conservation title of the farm bill. These cuts were proposed despite the fact that good soil and water management practices can help reduce crop and animal losses during a drought. And in September, Congress passed a continuing resolution to fund the federal government through mid-March, which cut funding to the Conservation Stewardship Program. Fortunately, Congress voted to restore funding to the program in March 2013, but it and other conservation programs remain a target for lawmakers looking to cut the federal budget.

I recently had the opportunity to see some of these programs in action during a visit to a farm in northwest Illinois as part of an event hosted by the [ELCA World](#)

— growing a variety of fruits and vegetables and raising chickens, goats and cattle. The farm employs a variety of conservation practices from planting cover crops on fields to replenish the soil to adopting a complex system of rotating grazing sites for its growing cattle herd. From about 40 acres of land it grows enough produce to feed 1500 Chicago-area families through its Community Supported Agriculture program each summer and fall. It also operates a teaching facility, that provides on-site opportunities for area schoolchildren (and groups of Lutherans!) to learn about farming, teaches farming techniques to urban children through outreach programs in community gardens in Rockford and Chicago, and trains a new generation of farmers through an education and mentoring program. Farm bill conservation programs have played a key role in helping many of Angelic's programs get started and in supporting their stewardship of the land they farm.

Farm conservation programs help farmers around the country care for their land as stewards of God's creation. What can you do to help make sure that funds are available for these programs? In the next few weeks, the Senate will begin to draft a new farm bill — **now is a great time to write your Senators** in support of farm conservation and a strong, multi-year farm bill: **[click here to learn how](#)**.

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