
OLR Bill Analysis

sSB 243

AN ACT CONCERNING CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES.

SUMMARY

This bill generally expands the farmland restoration program's purposes to include climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices in farmland restoration plans. The matching grant program, which the Department of Agriculture (DoAg) administers, encourages farmers to restore farmland that has gone out of production.

Under the program, the DoAg commissioner may partially reimburse a farmer for the cost to:

1. comply with a comprehensive farm nutrient management plan or a farm resources management plan that the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection commissioner has approved or
2. develop, implement, and comply with a farm resources management plan or a farmland restoration plan, which the bill renames the farmland restoration and climate resiliency plan, that the DoAg commissioner has approved.

The bill allows the DoAg commissioner to pay up to 50% of those amounts in advance. It also explicitly allows a farmer to seek this advance payment or reimbursement for farm equipment purchases under a farm resources management or farmland restoration and climate resiliency plan.

The bill requires the DoAg commissioner, when making the first type of grant listed above, to prioritize capital improvements made under a farmland restoration and climate resiliency plan, in addition to those made under a comprehensive farm nutrient management plan or farm

resources management plan as under current law. However, the impact of this is unclear, because the bill does not expand the grant's purpose to include the cost of complying with a farmland restoration and climate resiliency plan.

Under the bill, a "farmland restoration and climate resiliency plan" is a conservation plan (1) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), (2) of a soil and water conservation district or (3) the DoAg commissioner approves. It includes agricultural restoration purposes, which the bill expands to include climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices.

Additionally, the bill authorizes the DoAg commissioner to pay or reimburse certain entities (i.e., a municipality, nonprofit organization, soil and water conservation district, or UConn Extension Services) for a variety of services designed to increase the number of farmers implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices, as defined by USDA NRCS. These include activities that store carbon, improve soil health, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., cover crops, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, manure management).

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2022

AGRICULTURAL RESTORATION PURPOSES

The bill broadens the term "agricultural restoration purposes" to incorporate climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices, as defined by USDA NRCS, including practices in urban areas, and soil health improvements, water source improvements, woodlot management, and farm equipment purchases intended to improve soil health.

By law, "agricultural restoration purposes" already includes the following:

1. reclaiming grown-over pastures and meadows;
2. installing fences to keep livestock out of riparian areas;
3. replanting vegetation on erosion-prone land or along streams;

4. restoring water runoff patterns;
5. improving irrigation efficiency;
6. conducting hedgerow management, including removing invasive plants and timber; and
7. renovating farm ponds through farm pond management.

The “agricultural restoration purposes” definition also applies to the vacant public lands program. The law authorizes the agriculture commissioner to establish this program to encourage the use of vacant state property for gardening, agricultural purposes, or agricultural restoration purposes (CGS § 22-6e). To date, he has not established this program.

ENTITIES’ SERVICES PAYABLE OR REIMBURSABLE

The bill authorizes the DoAg commissioner to pay or reimburse a municipality, nonprofit organization, soil and water conservation district, or UConn Extension Services for any of the following services:

1. providing technical assistance;
2. distributing grant funding to producers;
3. coordinating training programs;
4. coordinating projects piloting or demonstrating conservation practices;
5. creating tools that help reduce barriers to accessing help for on-farm conservation practices;
6. establishing equipment sharing programs; or
7. other activities that increase the number of farmers implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices, as defined by USDA NRCS.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Environment Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute

Yea 30 Nay 1 (03/22/2022)