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A Closer Look at Agriculture and the Environment

Long-time readers may recall that when ERS launched Amber Waves in 2003, one of our goals was to capture the full breadth of the ERS research program—the economics of food, farming, natural resources, and rural America—under a single cover. By combining accessible coverage of a broad range of issues with links to indepth analysis on the ERS website, we hoped to offer our readers the best thing since sliced bread, and we've been pleased with readers' responses to date.

This issue slices the loaf a different way. Rather than focusing broadly, we have reprinted and updated a selection of articles from our first 18 issues on a single topic: the relationship between agriculture and the Nation's land, air, water, and biological resources. Recent years have seen important changes in policy approaches to addressing the environmental impacts of agriculture, as well as in our understanding of those impacts. With farm policy again under discussion, it is timely to take stock of lessons learned from experience to date and consider emerging issues and options for the future.

Selected articles in this issue examine, among other things, the increasing policy emphasis on conservation on "working lands" (which remain in agricultural production), design options for enhancing program cost-effectiveness, characteristics of farmers who adopt conservation practices and participate in conservation programs, challenges in measuring program impacts, and the potential to address emerging environmental concerns through market-oriented solutions—within agriculture as well as between agriculture and other sectors of the economy. Such a review not only sheds light on the links between agriculture and the environment but also illustrates the opportunities and hurdles involved in balancing public goals and private choices more generally.

Any way you slice it, we hope you find this special issue both informative and enjoyable. We will return to the broader focus of our regular format in September.



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