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MILLIONS IN FEDERAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM MONEY IN THE MIDWEST GOES TOWARD LARGE FARMS, PRACTICES THAT MAKE THE ENVIRONMENT WORSE

New report reveals EQIP funds large agricultural operations for practices that keep emissions high, drain wetlands, close out small, sustainable farms from financial assistance

MINNEAPOLIS—A new report from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) finds that in 2020, in the 12 Midwest states, over \$56 million in federal conservation dollars were spent on industrial agricultural practices. The report analyzes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the practices it helps farmers pay for, identifying EQIP-supported 10 specific practices that prop up high-emission or otherwise environmentally detrimental models of agriculture.

The report, [*Payments for pollution: How federal conservation programs can better benefit farmers and the environment*](#), identifies 10 “industrial” practices paid for by EQIP. While IATP underscored the importance of EQIP in targeted on-farm conservation in a previous report, [*Closed Out*](#), the program is not perfect. While a majority of EQIP practices help farmers pay for proven agroecological practices, there is a share that goes toward harmful ones.

In some cases, EQIP-funded practices concentrate liquid animal manure in ways that emit high amounts of methane and nitrous oxide, and in other cases, drain water from fields into the Midwest’s already overburdened creeks and rivers, often carrying nitrates with it. The full list of industrial practices includes underground outlet, waste facility cover, waste storage facility, subsurface drain, closure of waste impoundment, manure transfer, animal mortality facility, emergency animal mortality management, roof runoff management and pumping plant for water control. Many of these industrial practices are expensive. In some states, the average cost of a waste storage facility is over \$100,000.

“The more EQIP money that goes toward harmful, industrial practices, the less that goes toward good conservation,” says IATP Program Associate for Climate and Rural Communities Michael Happ, author of the report. “When fewer than one-third of EQIP applicants are awarded contracts nationwide, we need to reexamine what we are spending our money on and whether it deserves the label of ‘environmental.’”

The amount each Midwest state spends on industrial practices through EQIP varies. Illinois and Minnesota spent 37.3% and 30.8% of their 2020 EQIP funds on industrial practices, respectively, whereas North Dakota spent only 2.1%.

The report lays out policy solutions, including removing industrial practices from EQIP, prioritizing sustainable practices and making the payment schedule work better for low-capital farmers. It also highlights how farmers and others can get involved in their state technical advisory committees to push for more equitable conservation implementation.

“EQIP helps pay for crucial practices like erosion controls, better pasture management for livestock and practices that keep runoff out of our waterways,” says Happ. “We need to double down on these beneficial practices and target them toward farmers who need help the most. We can’t waste precious resources on expensive structures that clean up messes that shouldn’t have been made in the first place.”

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Based in Minneapolis with offices in Washington, D.C., and Berlin, Germany, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. To learn more, visit: www.iatp.org.