
CRP Update

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the most popular governmental conservation program to date. Since its inception in 1986, nearly 40 million acres of highly erodible farmland has been taken out of production. The program is based on the voluntary participation of agricultural landowners. Accepted enrollees receive rental payments and cost-share assistance for establishing long-term, resource conserving grasses. Throughout the CRP's 25 year history, the benefits to soil, water, and wildlife have remained constant.

Since the first signup in 1986, the CRP has saved more than 8 billion tons of soil from wind and water erosion. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has stated that soil erosion has been reduced by an average of 19 tons per acre each year. In addition to reducing soil erosion, the CRP protects water quality by reducing the amount of sediment and chemicals that enter waterways. According to the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute, 607 million fewer pounds of nitrogen and 122 million less pounds of phosphorus have washed out of agricultural fields into the lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams.

The acres of wildlife habitat created by the CRP is twice as large as the National Wildlife Refuge System and state-run wildlife habitats in the lower 48 states combined. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has

attributed a number of dramatic improvements to the health and size of wildlife populations to the CRP. Wild duck nesting populations have grown in the Dakotas and Montana, and increased numbers of grasshopper sparrows, lark buntings, and eastern meadowlarks have been reported. Ring-necked pheasants in Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, and Montana have doubled and in some cases, tripled. Texas has seen a re-emergence of lesser prairie chickens. Notable increases in the number of elk, deer, and pronghorn have also been documented.

Despite all the benefits, the CRP is in jeopardy. The majority of the acres enrolled are in 10 or 15 year contracts that are renewed at the landowner's discretion. In many cases, it is more profitable to raise cultivated crops rather than renew their contracts. In 2011 more than 2 million acres expired nationwide. Another 28.6 million acres are set to expire by September 30, 2015. Federally funded conservation is governed by legislation contained in the Farm Bill. Historically, funding for the Farm Bill is heavily influenced by the current economic climate and the 2012 bill is no exception. Massive spending deficits, record high commodity prices, record low commodity reserves, increasing levels of exports, and diminishing production acres to produce food, feed, fiber, and fuel for a larger population could put the Conservation Reserve Program on the legislative chopping block.