

Cows, Crops or More CRP?

Approaching CRP Expirations Raise Questions for Producers

The clock continues to tick on a government program that over the past eight years has resulted in the protection of 36.4 million acres of U.S. cropland from severe soil erosion and water quality problems.

The first Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts, most of which were 10 years in length, are due to expire on Oct. 1, 1995. These contracts cover approximately 2 million acres. Between 1995 and 1997, contracts on about 24 million acres will expire.

Many of the farmers involved are expected to put those acres back into crop production unless the federal government continues the program in some form. A survey of CRP participants conducted by the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) in 1993 indicated that 23 percent of CRP acres will be left in grass cover for livestock grazing and hay production. (See table).

SWCS has called on Congress and the Clinton Administration to extend CRP beyond the 10-year period covered by most contracts. SWCS is an international organization of about 11,000 researchers and professional conservationists advocating the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources.

The future of CRP was thoroughly discussed at a national conference sponsored by SWCS Feb. 10-11 in Arlington, Va. Policymakers, researchers and representatives from leading agricultural and envi-

ronmental organizations spoke there.

SWCS's policy position statement, released a month before the conference, says permanent vegetative cover on the most erodible acres now in the program should be maintained. It also says land that serves critical environmental functions, such as buffer strips, riparian corridors, and habitat for endangered species, should be given high priority for continued enrollment.

SWCS also believes wetlands now enrolled in the CRP should be given special consideration for enrollment in the new federal Wetland Reserve Program.

"CRP should become a conservation program, first and foremost, and not an agricultural commodity supply management program," SWCS leaders say. To get more conservation "bang for the buck," SWCS suggests basing acreage and payment adjustments on a more accurate assessment of the land's productive capability and environmental values.

The CRP was created as part of the 1985 farm bill. Its intention was to encourage farmers to retire highly erodible and other environmentally fragile land from crop production. In return, participating farmers receive an annual rental payment for establishing and maintaining a permanent, soil-conserving cover of grass or trees on the enrolled acres.

The 36.4 million acres enrolled since 1985 represent about eight percent of all U.S. cropland. Annual cost of the program is slightly more than \$1.8 billion, or about \$19.2 billion over the life of all CRP contracts.

While some people consider the program to be expensive, no one has yet developed good estimates of its true costs and benefits," SWCS leaders say. "CRP clearly has been valuable in protecting soil productivity, reducing sediment damage, enhancing wildlife habitat, providing an emergency source of forage, reducing federal commodity program costs, and stabilizing land prices."

SWCS Proposals for CRP Acres

- CRP land returned to crop production be subject to a conservation compliance plan.
- Some economic use of less environmentally sensitive land enrolled in CRP, haying or grazing, for example, be allowed in return for a lower annual rental payment.
- State-level committees involving public and private sector representatives be created to help make CRP-related decisions.
- Management of vegetative cover on CRP acres be allowed to maximize program's environmental benefits.
- Research and demonstration projects be conducted on CRP acres to help farmers make the transition to more sustainable ag enterprises.
- The formation of grazing and wildlife cooperatives be investigated to maintain environmental benefits achieved on farms with land enrolled in CRP.
- State and local governments as well as private interests should act to protect and extend certain benefits achieved by CRP; for example, protection of critical wildlife habitat.

For copies of the SWCS policy position or for more information on the National CRP Conference, contact SWCS at 7515 Northeast Ankeny Road, Ankeny, IA 50021-9764; 1-800-THE SOIL.

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Anticipated Post-Contract Use of CRP Land

Planned land use	Percent of CRP acres
Plant to a crop	43
Leave in grass cover for hay or livestock grazing	23
Rent or lease land to other farmers	13
Idle to meet commodity program set-aside requirements	4
Leave in tree cover for commercial wood products	4
Sell	3
Enroll in 0/92 or 50/92 programs	3
Leave in grass or tree cover w/no specific use	3
Leave in grass or tree cover for wildlife	2
Other uses or unknown	2
Total	100

SOURCE: Preliminary results from 1993 SWCS survey of CRP participants.