

Cost-Share Programs

Making Federal Farm Programs Work for You

by Wes and Leslie Burger

As a society, and as individuals, we think of sustainable wildlife populations as an integral component of a healthy environment. We value our encounters with wildlife of all kinds. Whether the sound of rushing wings in a covey rise, the twitter of songbirds about a backyard feeder, or frogs croaking from quiet backwater, all have intrinsic value that is worth protecting. However, as urban areas expand and production demands increase, remaining rural areas face additional pressure to meet commodity, financial, environmental, and recreational demands. Increasingly, the future viability of the environment in the U.S. is inextricably linked to land use decisions by private landowners. A recent study of motivations of non-industrial forest landowners in the Southeast reported that nature/aesthetics, family, and recreational opportunities were among the primary values of ownership. Economic returns, although important, ranked number 6 behind these more intangible values. Yet only 3% of landowners had a written management plan that prescribed how they intended to achieve their conservation objectives.

Conservation planning is becoming more complex as producers, land owners, government agencies, industry, and conservationists work to implement cost-effective production systems that meet landowner and world demands, compete in global markets, and yet maintain the integrity of natural ecosystems. This process is further complicated by the realization that the health of local wildlife populations and ecosystems is not only influenced by local environmental conditions, but also by conditions of the landscape at larger scales (such as watershed or regional levels).

In recognition of these complex and seemingly competing factors, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Watershed Science and Wildlife Habitat Management Institutes recently published **Conservation Corridor Planning at the Landscape Level: Managing for Wildlife Habitat, Part 190** National Biological Handbook (<http://www.wsi.nrcs.usda.gov/products/tools.html>).

The NRCS, an agency within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), provides assistance to private landowners who voluntarily participate in federal conservation programs. The Corridor Manual gives an overview of the principles of landscape ecology and shows how these principles can be applied to planning at watershed and larger scales.

Ultimately, the success of area-wide conservation planning is a function of the success of conservation planning and implementation at the farm or property level. However, many landowners do not have a clear vision of their land management objectives or the practices and financial means by which they will achieve these objectives. Federal farmbill conservation programs are an important vehicle for accomplishing conservation on private lands. Numerous studies have shown that lands enrolled in federal conservation programs, such as those administered by the USDA, can provide wildlife habitat and contribute to the stability or enhancement of some wildlife populations.



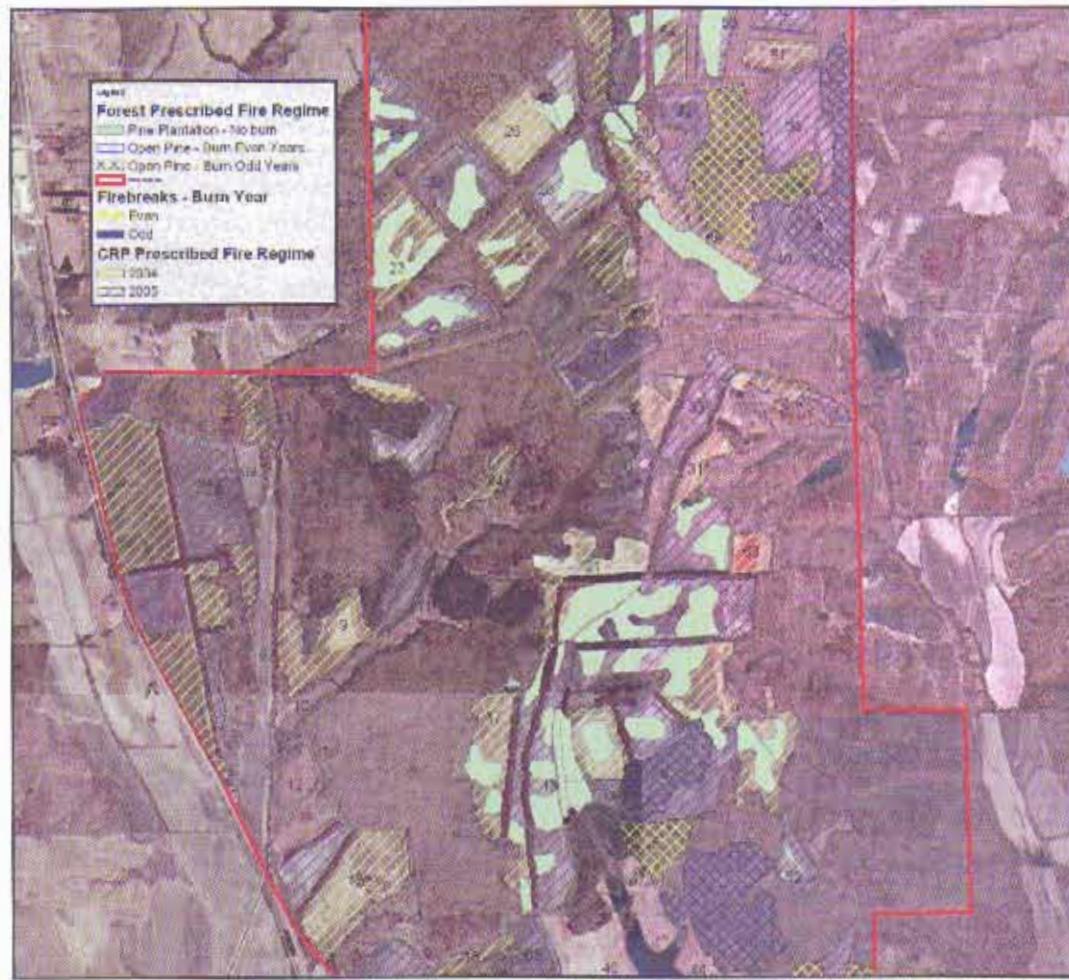
Annual mowing of grass CRP fields eliminates winter roosting cover and early season nesting cover and creates dense duff layer. Provides poor habitat for bobwhite.



Unmanaged grass CRP fields develop dense stands of grass with deep litter accumulation and little bare ground. Provides poor habitat for bobwhite.

However, despite the potential conservation benefits of programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), millions of acres of CRP provide relatively poor wildlife habitat. This is often because the landowner did not have a vision of the wildlife habitat objectives they intended to accomplish with their program enrollment. Proverbs 29:18 says "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The same could be said of wildlife populations. Producing wildlife habitat through federal conservation programs requires a vision of desired outcomes.

The value of conservation program lands as wildlife habitat will vary with target animal species, the size and shape of the enrolled parcels, the cover crop selected, the land management regime employed, and the surrounding landscape. For example, in the Southeast today more than 980 thousand acres are enrolled in mid-rotation CRP pines (CP11). Many of these stands provide relatively poor wildlife habitat because they are densely stocked, closed canopy pine stands with dense accumulation of litter and no herbaceous ground cover. In short, they are unmanaged. Studies of CRP pine plantations in the Southeast have shown that active management, including thinning, selective herbicide, and prescribed burning, increases ground cover of grasses, forbs, and legumes, biomass of preferred deer forage, nutritional quality, and abundance and diversity of bird species, particularly regionally declining



Management plan map illustrating prescribed fire regime on CRP grasslands and thinned mature pine stands. CRP prescribed fire cost-shared with CRP mid-contract management practices, mature pine prescribed fire cost-shared with WHIP.

ing early successional species. In the Southeast, another 769 thousand acres are enrolled in CRP as either exotic forage grasses or existing grass (CP1 or CP10), much of which is fescue or Bermuda. Exotic forage grasses provide relatively poor habitat quality for grassland birds and lack of management results in dense grass-bound fields. Studies of CRP grasslands in Kentucky, Mississippi, and Missouri, have shown that eradication of exotic forage grasses and conversion to native grasses substantially enhances habitat quality for bobwhite. In the Southeast, even those CRP fields that are not planted to pine trees or forage grasses are seldom intentionally managed. This limits their wildlife habitat value. Studies in Kentucky, Mississippi, and Missouri have shown that on CRP fields without fescue or Bermuda grass, disking and prescribed fire improve wildlife habitat quality by reducing litter accumulation and increasing bare ground, abundance of legumes and seed-producing annuals, and insects. The point is, that simply enrolling land in a conservation program and establishing the prescribed cover does not equate to wildlife habitat. Careful selection of both a cover crop and management regime determine the quality of the wildlife habitat produced. Wildlife habitat does not happen by accident.

These landowners did not intentionally set out to create poor wildlife habitat, they just signed up for a program without much thought as to how it might affect their wildlife management objectives. For many private land holdings, the management practices employed on their property are driven by the requirements of the specific conservation program in which the landowner enrolled. These practices may or may not meet the producers stated or unstated objectives for the property; they are simply required by the program in which he has elected to enroll.

Objective-driven Planning Process

The USDA-NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH) and the Corridor Manual provide an alternative to this approach. This objective-driven approach is illustrated in a new planning product from the NRCS Wildlife Habitat



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Management Institute, called "Creating Early Successional Wildlife Habitat Through Federal Farm Programs" (<http://www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/fieldborder.html>). Under this objective-driven approach, landowner objectives drive management



Strip disking renovates dense sod-bound grassfields, creates bare ground, can stimulate germination of important annual weeds and legumes. Strip-disking is a cost-shared mid-contract management practice on CRP fields.

NRCS Planning Process

Pre-planning

- Identify conditions that triggered the planning process
- Collect materials and information needed for planning process

Phase 1. Collection and analysis at the conservation planning scale

- Step 1. Identify problems and opportunities
- Step 2. Determine objectives
- Step 3. Inventory resources
- Step 4. Analyze resources

Phase 2. Decision support at the conservation planning scale

- Step 5. Formulate alternatives
- Step 6. Evaluate alternatives
- Step 7. Make decisions

Phase 3. Application at the conservation planning scale

- Step 8. Implement the plan
- Step 9. Evaluate the plan

practices, and management practices lead to conservation program selection, instead of program requirements driving management practices. In this scenario, the landowner's objectives for the property are clearly defined, the desired state of the landscape is visualized, the management practices required to produce this landscape are identified, and then the conservation programs under which these practices can be implemented are selected. Often, the necessary management practices can be accomplished under more than one government program, and in many cases, conservation practices from multiple programs are required to meet landowner objectives. Additionally, various programs differ in their eligibility requirements, cost share, incentive payments, or duration. This approach allows selection of programs that optimize both wildlife and economic objectives.

Clearly, this scenario is more involved than simply signing up for an appropriate conservation program and planting the required cover crop. However, this method has the additional benefits of providing quality wildlife habitat, improving overall local environmental quality, maximizing financial incentives as well as maintaining adequate commodity production.

The NPPH and the Corridor Handbook thoroughly describe a 9-step planning process (see side bar) that assists landowners in implementing objective-driven, rather than program-driven, management on their property. A brief summary of this process will be introduced here.

The process begins with meetings between the landowner and a natural resource professional to identify and document the resource problems and opportunities of the property under consideration (Step 1). If federal farm programs are involved the NRCS District Conservationist will be an essential resource professional. However, if wildlife is a landowner objective, a competent wildlife biologist should be involved early in the process. Additionally, in the Southeast, most wildlife management involves forested lands, therefore, a competent registered forester should provide input. The resource professionals help the landowner to identify their objectives. These objectives, including production and conservation concerns, are clearly outlined and recorded (Step 2). The next steps require gathering all necessary information (Step 3) and analyzing the current,

baseline conditions of the area with respect to landowner objectives (Step 4). This process will include identifying the presence or distribution of wildlife species of interest, mapping existing plant communities and land use types, and inventorying those resources specifically related to the landowner's goals. Aerial imagery and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are indispensable tools for this step. It is important at this stage that the resource professional have a good understanding of the basic habitat requirements of the focal species. To be effective, District Conservationists need an understanding of basic wildlife biology and wildlife biologists need an understanding of federal farm programs. Landowners may need to put together a team of resource professionals that bring the desired set of skills to the planning table. This baseline information is then used to make comparisons between existing conditions and potential future opportunities that might be accomplished through management (Step 5). These comparisons allow for formulating various alternative management regimes that address the landowner's objectives (Step 6).

The alternative management scenarios are evaluated individually to determine their ability to solve resource problems, meet the landowner's objectives, and provide financial compensation and incentive. Finally, a conservation management system is finally selected (Step 7), and the landowner should have adequate information and understanding to implement, operate and maintain the planned conservation system (Step 8). Periodic evaluations of the success of the plan, including ecological, economic, and social values, will need to be performed, and, if necessary, adaptations made to the plan.

Case Study

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the methodology of this planning process is through an example from actual experience. The authors worked with a landowner who acquired a 3100 acre property in north Mississippi. The property had historically been managed for bobwhite and up until the mid nineties carried good bird densities, supporting

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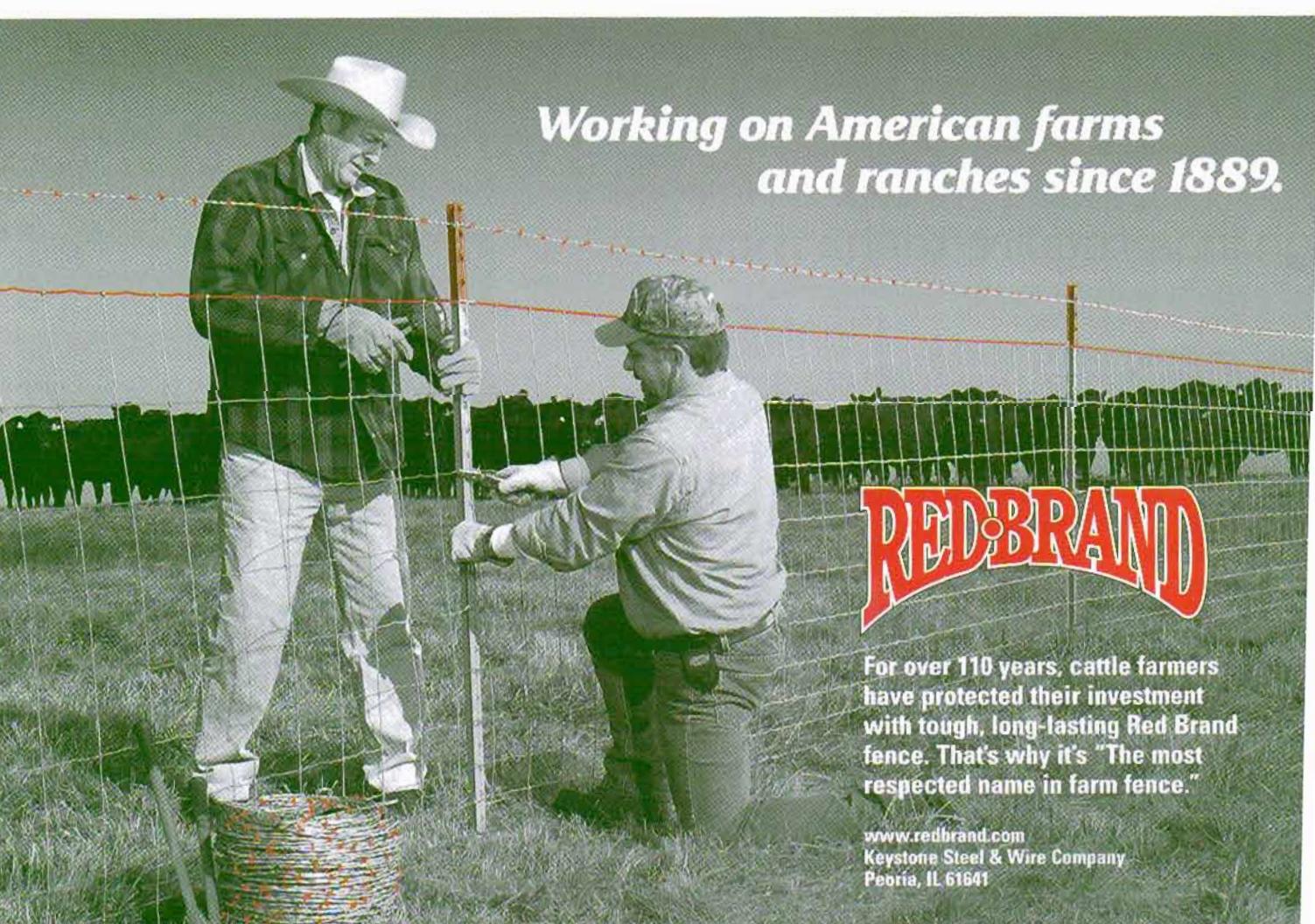
GSA Schedule
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as many as 140 coveys (1 bird/1.8 acres) in some years. During the late nineties, the property traded hands and during the transition the management program was in flux. As they say, natural succession happens, and in the absence of a regular disturbance regime, things grew up and quail populations declined to less than 1/3 of their previous levels. About 3 years into their ownership, the new owners decided they needed a plan to follow to ensure that their bobwhite population objectives were achieved. They engaged a professional wildlife biologist to develop this plan and help identify financial assistance programs to carry out the plan. The property was approximately 1/3 CP10 grass CRP, 1/3 second-growth hardwoods, and 1/3 open pine, mixed pine hardwood, and pine plantings. The 1000 acres of grass CRP was predominantly broomsedge, with very little fescue or Bermuda, however, the fields were annually clear-mowed and as such provided little bird habitat. The hardwoods had been high-graded and fire damaged. About 220 acres of mature pine had been thinned and regularly

burned, but in recent years an irregular fire regime had allowed understory hardwoods to creep in. About 245 acres of mature pines had a substantial midstory and understory hardwood problem. About 50 acres of 25-yr old pine corridors badly needed to be thinned. The landowners purchased the property explicitly for quail hunting and did not mind investing additional resources in habitat management, however, they were interested in any cost-share or incentive programs that might be available.

Analysis

This was a perfect example of land enrolled in a conservation program producing very little wildlife habitat value. The quickest and easiest habitat improvement was to shift the CRP CP10 fields from an annual mowing regime to a strip-disking and prescribed fire regime. The annual mowing eliminated standing residual cover essential during winter and early breeding season. Additionally, annual mowing shifts the plant community to a grass-dominated stand with thick

A black and white photograph showing two men working on a wire fence in a field. One man, wearing a cowboy hat and a dark jacket, is standing and holding a piece of wire. The other man, wearing a cap and a light-colored shirt, is bending over and working on the fence. In the foreground, there is a large spool of wire on the ground. The background shows a fence line and some trees under a cloudy sky.

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thatch. The strip-disking would maintain approximately 1/3 of each field in an annual weed community providing brood habitat and winter food resources. The prescribed fire would manage litter accumulation and maintain the broomsedge at an appropriate density for nesting cover. Both disking and fire would manage succession. In Mississippi, strip-disking and prescribed fire are cost-shared mid-contract management practices on CRP (\$9/ac and \$10/ac, respectively). After modifying the CRP Conservation Plan of Operation (CPO), the landowners were eligible for approximately \$1000/year for strip-disking and \$3500/yr for prescribed fire. As a result of the long-term mowing, sweet-gum thickets had become a problem in some of these CRP fields. The mowing was in part to control woody invasion, but had the effect of simply top-killing the trees, leaving a living below-ground root-mass that would resprout with a vengeance. Long-term control of the trees required an initial herbicide treatment. With a second modification to the CPO, the owners received \$50/ac for selective herbicide (Imazapyr) control of invasive woody species. The thinned, mature pines were not enrolled in CRP, so they were not eligible for this cost-share. However, in Mississippi prescribed fire and selective herbicide are eligible practices under both the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and the Forest Land Enhancement Program. Separate contracts (on different stands) under WHIP and FLEP provided about \$5000 each to apply selective herbicide to control the hardwoods and implement a 2-year prescribed fire rotation. A substantial thin, followed by herbicide and fire was planned for 50 acres of pine corridors. The thinning would open the canopy, allowing sunlight to hit the forest floor. This would stimulate herbaceous ground cover. The one-time herbicide application was planned to control the sweetgum which would also respond to the sunlight availability. The prescribed fire would maintain the desired herbaceous ground cover. The herbicide and fire would be cost-shared under WHIP. The net result of thoughtful implementation of prescribed management practices was a dramatic improvement in wildlife habitat quality across the property. The landowners were able to achieve their wildlife habitat objectives and use federal farm conservation programs to ease the financial burden.

In a recent USDA News release, the Secretary of Agriculture touted the conservation achievements of federal conservation programs. These programs have certainly provided substantive environmental benefits. However, it does not happen by accident. Careful planning, using an objective-driven approach, followed by thoughtful and selective enrollment in these programs can help to accomplish landowner wildlife objectives and provide economic assistance as well. Programmatic enrollment should involve development of a conservation plan of operation that maintains the desired wildlife habitat over the life of the contract. As illustrated in this case study, involvement of a wildlife biologist who is knowledgeable about federal farm programs will increase both wildlife habitat value and economic returns from federal farm program participation. For additional information on the objective-driven planning process and 3 more case studies see "Creating Early Successional Wildlife Habitat Through Federal Farm Programs" (<http://www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/fieldborder.html>).

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Leslie Burger has B.S. and M.S. degrees in Biology from Murray State University and University of Missouri, respectively. She has conducted field research from the Galapagos Islands to Hudson Bay, and several places in between. She has held professional positions with the Missouri Department of Conservation as an assistant research biologist and Vertebrate Ecologist. She currently works full time home schooling the Burger's 3 sons.



Conservation Reserve Program

Overview

USDA Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers to help them safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolled in CRP plant long-term, resource-conserving covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat. In return, FSA provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance. Contract duration is between 10 and 15 years.

The Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, authorized CRP. The program is also governed by regulations published in 7 CFR, part 1410. The program is implemented by FSA on behalf of USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation.

Benefits

CRP protects millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion and is designed to safeguard the Nation's natural resources. By reducing water runoff and sedimentation, CRP protects groundwater and helps improve the condition of lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams. Acreage enrolled in the CRP is planted to resource-conserving vegetative covers, making the program a major contributor to increased wildlife populations in many parts of the country.

CRP Administration

FSA administers CRP, while technical support functions are provided by:

- USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS);
- USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service;
- State forestry agencies;
- Local soil and water conservation districts; and
- Private sector providers of technical assistance.

CRP General Sign-up

Producers can offer land for CRP general sign-up enrollment only during designated sign-up periods. For information on upcoming sign-ups, contact your local FSA office. To find your local office, visit FSA's Web site at: http://oip.usda.gov/scripts/ndisapi.dll/oip_agency/index?state=us&agency=fsa

CRP Continuous Sign-up

Environmentally desirable land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time under CRP continuous sign-up. Certain eligibility requirements still apply, but offers are not subject to competitive bidding. Further information on CRP continuous sign-up is available in the FSA fact sheet "Conservation Reserve Program Continuous Sign-up."

Eligible Producers

To be eligible for CRP enrollment, a producer must have owned or operated the land for at least 12 months prior to close of the CRP sign-up period, unless:

- The new owner acquired the land due to the previous owner's death;
- The ownership change occurred due to foreclosure where the owner exercised a timely right or redemption in accordance with state law; or
- The circumstances of the acquisition present adequate assurance to FSA that the new owner did not acquire the land for the purpose of placing it in CRP.

Eligible Land

To be eligible for placement in CRP, land must be either:

- Cropland (including field margins) that is planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity 4 of the previous 6 crop years from 1996 to 2001, and which is physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity; or
- Certain marginal pastureland that is enrolled in the Water Bank Program or suitable for use as a riparian buffer or for similar water quality purposes.

Additional Cropland Requirements

In addition to the eligible land requirements, cropland must meet one of the following criteria:

- Have a weighted average erosion index of 8 or higher;
- Be expiring CRP acreage; or
- Be located in a national or state CRP conservation priority area.

CRP Payments

FSA provides CRP participants with annual rental payments, including certain incentive payments, and cost-share assistance:

■ Rental Payments

In return for establishing long-term, resource-conserving covers, FSA provides annual rental payments to participants. FSA bases rental rates on the relative productivity of the soils within each county and the average dryland cash rent or cash-rent equivalent. The maximum CRP rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted.

■ Maintenance Incentive Payments

CRP annual rental payments may include an additional amount up to \$5 per acre per year as an incentive to perform certain maintenance obligations.

■ Cost-share Assistance

FSA provides cost-share assistance to participants who establish approved cover on eligible cropland. The cost-share assistance can be an amount not more than 50 percent of the participants' costs in establishing approved practices.

■ Other Incentives

FSA may offer additional financial incentives of up to 20 percent of the annual payment for certain continuous sign-up practices.

Ranking CRP Offers

Offers for CRP contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). FSA collects data for each of the EBI factors based on the relative environmental benefits for the land offered. Each eligible offer is ranked in comparison to all other offers and selections made from that ranking. FSA uses the following EBI factors to assess the environmental benefits for the land offered:

- Wildlife habitat benefits resulting from covers on contract acreage;
- Water quality benefits from reduced erosion, runoff, and leaching;
- On-farm benefits from reduced erosion;
- Benefits that will likely endure beyond the contract period;

- Air quality benefits from reduced wind erosion; and
- Cost.

For More Information

For more information on CRP, contact your local FSA office or visit FSA's Web site at: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp.htm>

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Fact Sheet

March 2005

Farm Bill 2002

Conservation Security Program

Overview

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. CSP identifies and rewards those farmers and ranchers who are meeting the highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations.

CSP provides financial and technical assistance to promote the conservation and improvement of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life, and other conservation purposes on Tribal and private working lands. Working lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture, and range land, as well as forested land that is an incidental part of an agriculture operation.

CSP is available in all 50 States, the Caribbean area and the Pacific Basin area. The program provides equitable access to benefits to all producers, regardless of size of operation, crops produced, or geographic location.

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill) (Pub. L. 107-171) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to authorize the program. CSP is administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Benefits

CSP will help producers maintain conservation stewardship and implement additional conservation practices that provide added environmental enhancement, while creating powerful incentives for other producers to

meet those same standards of conservation performance.

The conservation benefits gained will help farms and ranches be more environmentally sustainable and will increase the natural resources benefits provided to all Americans.

How CSP Works

1. The CSP sign-up will be offered in selected watersheds across the Nation. Selected watersheds are listed on the Internet from:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/> and in NRCS offices nationwide.
2. Producers complete a self-assessment, including description of conservation activities on their operations, to help determine eligibility for CSP at this time. The self-assessment is available from:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp> and in NRCS state offices on compact disk or as a printed workbook.
3. Eligible producers in the selected watersheds complete the self-assessment and schedule an interview to submit an application at their local NRCS office.
4. Based on the application, description of current conservation activities, and the interview, NRCS determines CSP eligibility and in which program tier and enrollment category the applicant may participate.

Eligibility

The producer and the producer's operation first must meet the basic eligibility criteria:

- The land must be privately owned or Tribal land and the majority of the land

must be located within one of the selected watersheds.

- The applicant must be in compliance with highly erodible and wetland provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, have an active interest in the agricultural operation, and have control of the land for the life of the contract.
- The applicant must share in the risk of producing any crop or livestock and be entitled to a share in the crop or livestock marketed from the operation.

All applicants must meet the following minimum tier eligibility and contract requirements, plus any additional requirements in the sign-up announcement:

- For Tier I, the producer must have addressed soil quality and water quality to the described minimum level of treatment for eligible land uses on part of the agricultural operation prior to acceptance.
- For Tier II, the producer must have addressed soil quality and water quality to the described minimum level of treatment on all eligible land uses on the entire agricultural operation prior to acceptance and agree to address one additional resource by the end of the contract period.
- For Tier III, the producer must have addressed all applicable resource concerns to a resource management system level that meets the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide standards on all eligible land uses on the entire agricultural operation before acceptance into the program and have riparian zones adequately treated.

Soil quality practices include crop rotations, cover crops, tillage practices, prescribed grazing, and providing adequate wind barriers.

Water quality practices include conservation tillage, filter strips, terraces, grassed waterways, managed access to water courses,

nutrient and pesticide management, prescribed grazing, and irrigation water management.

CSP Contract Payment

Applicants may submit only one application for each sign-up. Producers who are participants in an existing conservation stewardship contract are not eligible to submit another application.

CSP contract payments include one or more of the following:

- An annual stewardship component for the existing base level conservation treatment.
- An annual existing practice component for the maintenance of existing conservation practices.
- An enhancement component for exceptional conservation effort and additional conservation practices or activities that provide increased resource benefits beyond the prescribed level.
- A one-time new practice component for additional needed practices.

Enhancements will be made for exceptional conservation effort and additional conservation practices or activities that provide increased resource benefits beyond the prescribed level. There are five types of enhancement activities:

1. The improvement of a significant resource concern to a condition that exceeds the requirements for the participant's tier of participation and contract requirements.
2. An improvement in a priority local resource condition, as determined by NRCS, such as water quality and wildlife.
3. Participation in an on-farm conservation research, demonstration, or pilot project.
4. Cooperation with other producers to implement watershed or regional resource conservation plans that involve at least 75 percent of the producers in the targeted area.
5. Implementation of assessment and evaluation activities relating to practices

included in the conservation security plan, such as water quality sampling at field edges, drilling monitoring wells and collecting data, and gathering plant samples for specific analysis.

Total payments are determined by the tier of participation, conservation treatments completed, and the acres enrolled:

- For Tier I, contracts are for 5 years; maximum payment is \$20,000 annually.
- For Tier II, contracts are for 5 to 10 years; maximum payment is \$35,000 annually.
- For Tier III, contracts are for 5 to 10 years; maximum payment is \$45,000 annually.

For More Information

If you need more information about CSP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the Internet at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.

Fact Sheet

October 2004

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. Through EQIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides assistance to agricultural producers in a manner that will promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimize environmental benefits, and help farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental requirements.

EQIP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). Funding for EQIP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Benefits

Since EQIP began in 1997, USDA has entered into 117,625 contracts, enrolled more than 51.5 million acres into the program, and obligated nearly \$1.08 billion to help producers advance stewardship on working agricultural land. These efforts have concentrated on improving water quality, conserving both ground and surface water, reducing soil erosion from cropland and forestland, and improving rangeland. EQIP also was used to improve riparian and aquatic areas, improve air quality, and address wildlife issues. The increased funding for EQIP in the 2002 Farm Bill greatly expands program availability for optimizing environmental benefits.

How EQIP Works

The objective of EQIP, optimize environmental benefits, is achieved through a process that begins with the definition of National priorities. The National priorities are:

- Reduction of non-point source pollution, such as nutrients, sediment, pesticides, or excess salinity in impaired watersheds, consistent with Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) where available, as well as reduction of groundwater contamination and conservation of ground and surface water resources;
- Reduction of emissions, such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides (NO_x), volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters that contribute to air quality impairment violations of National Ambient Air Quality Standards;
- Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation from unacceptable levels on agricultural land; and
- Promotion of at-risk species habitat conservation.

These priorities are used by the Chief of NRCS to allocate available EQIP funds to State Conservationists. The State Conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Committee, then identifies the priority natural resource concerns in the State that will be used to help guide which applicants are awarded EQIP assistance. After identifying the priority natural resource concerns, the State Conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Committee, decides how funds will be allocated, what practices will be offered, what the cost-share rates will be, the ranking process used to prioritize contracts, and which of these

authorities will be delegated to local level. The local designated conservationist, with the advice of local work groups, adapts the State program to the local conditions. As a result, EQIP can be different between states and even between counties.

The selection of eligible conservation practices and the development of a ranking process to evaluate applications are the final steps in the optimization process. Applications will be ranked based on a number of factors, including the environmental benefits and cost effectiveness of the proposal.

More information regarding State and local EQIP implementation can be found at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/EQIP_signup/2004_EQIP/2004_EQIP.html

New Provisions

The 2002 Farm Bill added EQIP funding for Ground and Surface Water Conservation (GSWC) which provides cost-share and incentive payments to producers where the assistance will result in a net savings in ground or surface water resources in the agricultural operation of the producer. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2002, eight states, considered high plains aquifer states, received funding (Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming). In FY 2003, in addition to the high plains aquifer states, eight western drought states (Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) also received GSWC funding. GSWC provided \$45 million for FY 2003. An additional \$50 million was appropriated for fiscal years 2002-2007 to support use and installation of ground and surface water conservation practices in the Klamath River Basin, located on the Oregon and California state boundary.

Eligibility

Persons engaged in livestock or agricultural production are eligible for the program. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, private non-industrial forestland, and

other farm or ranch lands. Persons interested in entering into a cost-share agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for EQIP assistance may file an application at any time. To be eligible to participate, applicants must:

- Be an agricultural producer;
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions of the 1985 Farm Bill;
- Provide the Social Security number of all individuals who will benefit from the assistance; and
- Develop an EQIP plan of operations, including:
 - The participant's specific conservation and environmental objectives to be achieved;
 - One or more conservation practices in the conservation management system to be implemented to achieve the conservation and environmental objectives; and
 - The schedule for implementing the conservation practices.

If an EQIP plan of operations includes an animal waste storage or treatment facility, the participant must provide for the development and implementation of a comprehensive nutrient management plan.

NRCS works with the participant to develop the EQIP plan of operations. This plan becomes the basis of the cost-share agreement between NRCS and the participant. NRCS provides cost-share payments to landowners under these agreements that can be up to 10 years in duration.

The 2002 Farm Bill limits the total amount of cost-share and incentive payments paid to an individual or entity to an aggregate of \$450,000, directly or indirectly, for all contracts entered into during fiscal years 2002 through 2007.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for EQIP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

Practice Payments

Cost-sharing may pay up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation practices, such as grassed waterways, filter strips, manure management facilities, capping abandoned wells, and other practices important to improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. The EQIP cost-share rates for limited resource producers and beginning farmers and ranchers may be up to 90 percent. USDA has established a self-determination tool for applicants to determine eligibility as a limited resource producer. The tool can be found at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/smlfarmer/tool.asp>.

Incentive payments may be made to encourage a producer to perform land management practices, such as nutrient management, manure management, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, and wildlife habitat management. These payments may be provided for up to three years to encourage producers to carry out management practices that they otherwise might not implement.

How to Apply for EQIP

Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov Web site at: <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>. Enter "Natural Resources Conservation Service" in the Agency field, "Environmental Quality Incentives Program" in the Program Name field, and "CCC-1200" in the Form Number field. Applications also may be accepted by cooperating conservation partners approved or designated by NRCS.

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. The local decision makers periodically will announce a ranking date when applications received will be ranked.

For More Information

If you need more information about EQIP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.

***At a Glance:
Environmental Quality
Incentives Program***

May 2008

Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. Through EQIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial incentives to producers to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimize environmental benefits, and help farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental regulations.

Legislative Changes

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) clarifies EQIP purposes to include forest management and energy conservation, as well as practices related to organic production and fuels management.

The 2008 Farm Bill authorizes increased payments for socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers in addition to beginning and limited resource producers – up to 90 percent. It further allows these individuals to receive in advance up to 30 percent of the amount needed for purchasing materials or contracting.

Priority will be given to water conservation or irrigation efficiency applications that will reduce water use or where the producer agrees not to use any associated water savings to bring new land under irrigation production.

Assistance to organic production operations will be based on producers agreeing to develop

and carry out organic system plans. Payments for conservation practices related to organic production may not exceed \$20,000 per year or \$80,000 during any 6-year period.

The overall payment limitation is reduced to \$300,000 per person or legal entity over a 6-year period. The Secretary of Agriculture may raise the limitation to \$450,000 for projects of special environmental significance, including those involving methane digesters.

Applications that improve conservation practices or systems already in place at the time of offer acceptance will be given priority. Offers shall be grouped by similar crop or livestock operations for evaluation purposes.

Funding for each fiscal year is authorized as follows: \$1.2 billion for 2008; \$1.337 billion for 2009; \$1.45 billion for 2010; \$1.588 billion for 2011; and \$1.75 billion for 2012.

More Information

For more information and updates about EQIP and other Farm Bill topics, please refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill> or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Web site <http://www.nrcc.usda.gov/programs/eqip>.





Farm Bill 2002

Fact Sheet

September 2004

Grassland Reserve Program

Overview

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is a voluntary program that helps landowners and operators restore and protect grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, shrubland, and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. The program emphasizes support for working grazing operations; enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity; and protection of grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under threat of conversion to cropping, urban development, and other activities that threaten grassland resources.

GRP is authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill). The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) administer the program, in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service. Funding for the GRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

Benefits

Restoring and protecting grasslands contributes positively to the economy of many regions, provides biodiversity of plant and animal populations, and improves environmental quality.

How GRP Works

Applications may be filed for an easement or rental agreement with NRCS or FSA at any time. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land while retaining the right to conduct common grazing practices; produce hay, mow, or harvest for seed production (subject to certain restrictions during the nesting season of bird species that are in significant decline or

those that are protected under Federal or State law); conduct fire rehabilitation; and construct firebreaks and fences.

GRP contracts and easements prohibit the production of crops (other than hay), fruit trees, and vineyards that require breaking the soil surface and any other activity that would disturb the surface of the land, except for appropriate land management activities included in a conservation plan.

Each state will establish ranking criteria that will prioritize enrollment of working grasslands. The ranking criteria will consider threats of conversion, including cropping, invasive species, urban development, and other activities that threaten plant and animal diversity on grazing lands.

The program offers several enrollment options:

Permanent Easement. This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payments for this option equal the fair market value, less the grassland value of the land encumbered by the easement. These values will be determined using an appraisal.

Thirty-year Easement. USDA will provide an easement payment equal to 30 percent of the fair market value of the land, less the grassland value of the land of the land encumbered by the easement.

For both easement options, USDA will provide all administrative costs associated with recording the easement, including appraisal fees, survey costs, title insurance, and recording fees. Easement payments may

be provided, at the participant's request, in lump sum or annual payments (equal or unequal amounts) for up to 10 years.

Rental Agreement. Participants may choose a 10-year, 15-year, 20-year, or 30-year contract. USDA will provide annual payments in an amount that is not more than 75 percent of the grazing value of the land covered by the agreement for the life of the agreement. Payments will be disbursed on the agreement anniversary date each year.

Restoration agreement. An approved grassland resource management plan identifying required restoration activities will be incorporated within the rental agreement or easement. CCC may provide up to 90 percent of the restoration costs on lands that have never been cultivated, and up to 75 percent of the cost on restored grasslands and shrub lands that were previously cropped. Participants will be paid upon certification of the completion of the approved practice(s) by NRCS or an approved third party. Participants may contribute to the application of a cost-share practice through in-kind contributions. The combined total cost-share provided by Federal or State Governments may not exceed 100 percent of the total actual cost of restoration.

Eligibility

Landowners who can provide clear title on privately owned lands are eligible to participate for either easement option. Landowners and others who have general control of the acreage may submit an application for a rental agreement.

There is no national maximum limitation on the amount of land that may be offered for the program. However, there is a minimum requirement established in law. Offers for enrollment must contain at least 40 contiguous acres, unless special circumstances exist to accept a lesser amount. These special circumstances are determined by the NRCS State Conservationist.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for GRP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

Eligible land includes privately owned and Tribal lands, such as grasslands; land that contains forbs (including improved rangeland and pastureland or shrubland); or land that is located in an area that historically has been dominated by grassland, forbs, or shrubland that has the potential to serve as wildlife habitat of significant ecological value. Incidental lands may be included to allow for the efficient administration of an agreement or easement.

For More Information

If you need more information about GRP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/> and <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/GRP/default1.htm>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

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At a Glance:
Grassland Reserve Program

May 2008

Overview

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is a voluntary program for landowners and operators to protect, restore, and enhance grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, shrubland, and certain other lands. The program emphasizes support for working grazing operations; enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity; and protection of grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under threat of conversion.

In the last 5 years, GRP has closed on over 250 easements covering more than 115,000 acres in 38 states.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) jointly administer this program. Funding for GRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

Legislative Changes

- The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) increases the acreage that may be enrolled in the program by 1.2 million acres during the years 2009 through 2012.
- The 2008 Farm Bill provides priority for enrollment of expiring acreage from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), limited to 10 percent of the total acres enrolled in any year. Eligible lands can be enrolled into either a permanent easement (or maximum allowed under State law); or a 10-, 15-, or 20-year rental contract. Restoration agreements, based on a 50 percent cost-share, may be placed on land enrolled under a rental contract or easement.

- The definition of eligible land has also been expanded to include land that contains historical or archeological resources and land that addresses State, regional, or national conservation priorities.
- The Bill requires a grazing management plan for participants.
- Valuation of an easement is required to be at the lowest of either an appraisal or market survey; a rate set by the Secretary of Agriculture; or the landowner's offer.

Easements may now be acquired by eligible entities based on a 50 percent cost-share with the Federal government. Eligible entities are defined as units of State, local or Tribal government or nongovernmental organizations that have a charter describing a commitment to conserving ranchland, agricultural land, or grassland for grazing and conservation purposes.

Enforcement of the easement is the responsibility of the eligible entity; failure to do so will result in Federal enforcement, as mandated by the 2008 Farm Bill.

The 2008 Farm Bill establishes an annual payment limitation of \$50,000 for both rental and restoration agreements.

More Information

For more information and updates about the GRP and other Farm Bill topics, please refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill> or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Web site <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/grp>.



Fact Sheet

September 2004

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

Overview

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program that encourages creation of high quality wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal, and local significance. Through WHIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitat areas on their property.

WHIP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). Through WHIP, NRCS works with private landowners and operators; conservation districts; and Federal, State, and Tribal agencies to develop wildlife habitat on their property. Funding for WHIP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Benefits

Since WHIP began in 1998, nearly 14,700 participants have enrolled more than 2.3 million acres into the program. Most efforts have concentrated on improving upland wildlife habitat, such as native prairie, but there is an increasing emphasis on improving riparian and aquatic areas. The 2002 Farm Bill greatly expands the available tools for improving wildlife habitat conditions across the Nation.

Species that have benefited from WHIP activities include the grasshopper sparrow, bobwhite quail, swift fox, short-eared owl, Karner-blue butterfly, gopher tortoise, Louisiana black bear, Eastern collared lizard,

Bachman's sparrow, ovenbird, acorn woodpecker, greater sage grouse, and salmon.

How WHIP Works

The State Technical Committee advises the State Conservationist in the development of a State WHIP plan. The State WHIP plan serves as a guide for the development of the State WHIP ranking criteria.

Persons interested in entering into a cost-share agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop wildlife habitat may file an application at any time. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land for a period of time, but retain private ownership.

NRCS works with the participant to develop a wildlife habitat development plan. This plan becomes the basis of the cost-share agreement between NRCS and the participant. NRCS provides cost-share payments to landowners under these agreements that are usually 5 to 10 years in duration, depending upon the practices to be installed.

There are shorter-term agreements to install practices that are needed to meet wildlife emergencies, as approved by the NRCS State Conservationist. NRCS also provides greater cost-share assistance to landowners who enter into agreements of 15 years or more for practices on essential plant and animal habitat. NRCS can use up to 15 percent of its available WHIP funds for this purpose.

NRCS does not place limits on the number of acres that can be enrolled in the program or the amount of payment made; however, some

States may choose to establish such requirements. NRCS welcomes projects that provide valuable wildlife habitat and does not want to discourage any landowner who desires to implement practices that will improve habitat conditions for declining species.

NRCS continues to provide assistance to landowners after completion of habitat development activities. This assistance may be in the form of monitoring habitat practices, reviewing management guidelines, or providing basic biological and engineering advice on how to achieve optimum results for targeted species.

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov Internet site at: www.sc.egov.usda.gov. Click on Register to open a USDA account and then have access to a WHIP application (CCC-1200) or other USDA programs. Applications also may be accepted by cooperating conservation partners approved or designated by NRCS.

Eligibility

Eligible lands under the program are:

- Privately owned land;
- Federal land when the primary benefit is on private or Tribal land;
- State and local government land on a limited basis; and
- Tribal land.

If land is determined eligible, NRCS places emphasis on enrolling:

- Habitat areas for wildlife species experiencing declining or significantly reduced populations;
- Practices beneficial to fish and wildlife that may not otherwise be funded; and

- Wildlife and fishery habitats identified by local and State partners and Indian Tribes in each State.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for WHIP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

For More Information

If you need more information about WHIP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

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May 2008

At a Glance: Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

Overview

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for private landowners to develop and improve high quality habitat that supports wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal, and local significance. Through WHIP, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance. WHIP agreements generally last from 5 to 10 years.

Legislative Changes

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) extends the authority to the Secretary of Agriculture for carrying out the program during fiscal years 2008 through 2012.

Non-agricultural lands, as well as State, county, or local government-owned lands are now ineligible for WHIP.

Land eligible for WHIP includes:

- Private agricultural land,
- Non-industrial private forest land, and
- Tribal land.

The 2008 Farm Bill authorizes WHIP cost-share payments to be made to landowners to develop other types of wildlife habitat including habitat developed on pivot corners and irregular areas.

The total of WHIP funds available for use in long-term agreements to protect and restore

plant and animal habitat is increased from 15 percent to 25 percent. Such agreements have a term of at least 15 years.

Priority will be given to projects that address issues raised by State, regional, and national conservation initiatives.

WHIP payments made, either directly or indirectly, to a person or legal entity, may not exceed \$50,000 per year.

Funding for WHIP is authorized at \$85,000,000 per fiscal year through 2012.

More Information

For more information and updates about WHIP and other Farm Bill topics, please refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill> or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Web site <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip>.



Fact Sheet

September 2004

Farm Bill 2002

Wetlands Reserve Program

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. The program provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture. WRP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program. Funding for WRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Benefits

WRP participants benefit by:

- Receiving financial and technical assistance in return for restoring, protecting and enhancing wetland functions and values;
- Seeing a reduction in problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas; and
- Having incentives to develop wildlife recreational opportunities on their land.

Wetlands benefit the Nation by providing fish and wildlife habitat; improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reducing flooding; recharging groundwater; protecting biological diversity; as well as providing opportunities for educational, scientific, and recreational activities.

How WRP Works

Landowners and Tribes may file an application for a conservation easement or a cost-share restoration agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to restore and protect wetlands. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land, but retain private ownership.

The program offers three enrollment options:

Permanent Easement. This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payments for this option equal the lowest of three amounts: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the landowner. In addition to paying for the easement, USDA pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetland.

30-Year Easement. Easement payments through this option are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. USDA also pays up to 75 percent of restoration costs.

For both permanent and 30-year easements, USDA pays all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance.

Restoration Cost-Share Agreement. This is an agreement (generally for a minimum of 10 years) to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the cost of the restoration activity. This enrollment option does not place an easement on the property. Other agencies, conservation districts, and private conservation

organizations may provide additional incentive payments as a way to reduce the landowner's share of the costs. Such special partnership efforts are encouraged.

NRCS and its partners, including conservation districts, continue to provide assistance to landowners after completion of restoration activities. This assistance may be in the form of reviewing restoration measures, clarifying technical and administrative aspects of the easement and project management needs, and providing basic biological and engineering advice on how to achieve optimum results for wetland dependent species.

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov Internet site at: www.sc.egov.usda.gov. Enter "Natural Resources Conservation Service" in the Agency field, "Wetlands Reserve Program" in the Program Name field, and "AD-1153" in the Form Number field.

Eligibility

To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 12 months prior to enrolling it in the program, unless the land was inherited, the landowner exercised the landowner's right of redemption after foreclosure, or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

To be eligible for WRP, land must be restorable and be suitable for wildlife benefits. This includes:

- Wetlands farmed under natural conditions;
- Farmed wetlands;
- Prior converted cropland;

- Farmed wetland pasture;
- Farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- Range land, pasture, or production forest land where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored;
- Riparian areas which link protected wetlands;
- Lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values; and
- Previously restored wetlands that need long-term protection.

Ineligible Land. Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985; lands with timber stands established under a Conservation Reserve Program contract; Federal lands; and lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for WRP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

Uses of WRP Land

On acreage subject to a WRP easement, participants control access to the land and may lease the land for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a participant may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock, or harvest wood products. Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

For More Information

If you need more information about WRP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

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**At a Glance:
Wetlands Reserve Program**

May 2008

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring eligible land from agriculture. Over 1.9 million acres are currently enrolled in WRP.

Wetlands provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species; improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reduce flooding; recharge groundwater; protect biological diversity; and provide opportunities for educational, scientific, and limited recreational activities.

The program offers three enrollment options:

1. *Permanent Easement* is a conservation easement in perpetuity. USDA pays 100 percent of the easement value and up to 100 percent of the restoration costs.
2. *30-Year Easement* is an easement that expires after 30 years. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the easement value and up to 75 percent of the restoration costs.
3. *Restoration Cost-Share Agreement* is an agreement to restore or enhance the wetland functions and values without placing an easement on the enrolled acres. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

For both permanent and 30-year easements, USDA pays all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance.

Legislative Changes

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) changes the process for determining the easement value, directing the Secretary of Agriculture to pay the lowest of:

- the fair market value of the land according to the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practices or an area-wide market analysis;
- the geographic area rate cap as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture; or
- the landowner's offer.

Other important legislative changes include:

- The total number of acres that can be enrolled in the program is 3,041,200 – an increase of 766,200 additional acres.
- Payments for easements valued at \$500,000 or more will be made in at least five annual payments.
- For restoration cost-share agreements, annual payments may not exceed \$50,000 per year.
- No easement shall be created on land that has changed ownership during the preceding 7 years.
- Eligible acres are limited to private and Tribal lands.

More Information

For more information and updates about WRP and other Farm Bill topics, please refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill> or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Web site <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp>



Summary of NRCS Conservation Programs

July 2002

Landmark Legislation for Conservation

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) is landmark legislation for conservation funding and for focusing on environmental issues. The conservation provisions will assist farmers and ranchers in meeting environmental challenges on their land. This legislation simplifies existing programs and creates new programs to address high priority environmental and production goals. The 2002 Farm Bill enhances the long-term quality of our environment and conservation of our natural resources. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the following programs authorized or re-authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill.

Conservation of Private Grazing Land Program

The Conservation of Private Grazing Land Program (CPGL) is a voluntary program that helps owners and managers of private grazing land address natural resource concerns while enhancing the economic and social stability of grazing land enterprises and the rural communities that depend on them.

Conservation Security Program

The Conservation Security Program is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance for the conservation, protection, and improvement of soil, water, and related resources on Tribal and private lands. The program provides payments for producers who historically have practiced good stewardship on their agricultural lands and incentives for those who want to do more. The program will be available in fiscal year 2003.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary conservation program that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible National goals. Through EQIP, farmers and ranchers may receive financial and technical help to install or implement structural and management conservation practices on eligible agricultural land.

Farmland Protection Program

The Farmland Protection Program is a voluntary program that helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program provides matching funds to State, Tribal, or local governments and non-governmental organizations with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements or other interests in land.

National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation

The National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation (NNRCF) promotes innovative solutions to natural resource problems and conducts research and educational activities to support conservation on private land. The NNRCF is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation. The foundation builds partnerships among agencies and agricultural, public, and private constituencies interested in promoting voluntary conservation on private lands.

Resource Conservation and Development Program

The Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D) encourages and improves the capability of civic leaders in designated RC&D areas to plan and carry out projects for resource conservation and community development. Program objectives focus on "quality of life" improvements achieved through natural resources conservation and community development. Such activities lead to sustainable communities, prudent land use, and the sound management and conservation of natural resources.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private land in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. The program provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program that encourages creation of high quality wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal, and local significance. Through WHIP, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitat areas on their property.

For More Information

If you need more information about these and other conservation programs, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



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