

New Conservation Reserve Program¹

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This publication summarizes legislative, regulatory, and administrative language associated with the CRP. This summary is for education and information purposes only. Specific interpretations, decisions and approvals within the CRP can only be made by your Farm Service Agency representative.

Enhanced CRP!

The productivity of land is the foundation of personal, social and ecological wealth. Protecting land productivity is important to us all. The USDA-Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is one program currently being enhanced to provide even more opportunities for agricultural producers and landowners to better conserve and improve their natural resources.

Voluntary 10-year Program

The CRP is a voluntary program offering annual rental payments over a 10-year period, as well as cost-share assistance, to producers establishing specific types of plant cover on marginal farmland. The CRP encourages producers to plant grass and trees on areas prone to erosion in order to improve soil, water, and wildlife resources. The USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA) is responsible for contract development and pay-

ments. If you have questions about signing-up your land, please contact your local FSA representative. The USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) can assist you with checking field and soil productivity and erodibility.

New Contracts

For both first-time participants in the CRP and for current or old CRP contract holders, the new enhanced CRP offers some valuable opportunities. When current CRP contracts expire, they cannot be extended. Landowners who want to begin in the CRP (or continue after current contract expiration) must prepare a new offer for participation. All acreage offered for inclusion in the CRP, whether new areas or areas from past CRP contracts, will compete together. Each producer will sign a new CRP contract for all acres accepted.

Conservation Plans

When current CRP contracts expire, producers are not required to enroll their land in the new CRP or any other government program. However, all lands that meet the highly-erodible land definition developed by the USDA will require a conservation plan to retain eligibility for most USDA farm programs.

¹1997. The University of Georgia, Cooperative Extension Service Extension, Forest Resources Unit. FOR. 97-003.

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Cropping History

To be eligible for the new CRP, land must have been considered annually planted to an agricultural commodity in any two years between the 1992 and 1996 crop years. In addition, all land must have an erodibility index greater than or equal to 8. The landowner or controlling land manager must have been working the cropland for at least one year prior to sign-up.

What Acres?

All or part of a past CRP contract can be rebid or offered into the new CRP. If a producer has more than one CRP contract expiring in 1997, any part, all, or none of the acres can be re-enrolled in the CRP. Additional acres can be offered for inclusion as long as all acres meet eligibility criteria.

Options and Opportunities

Because CRP eligibility requirements continue to change, some old CRP lands may not qualify for new CRP contracts. Clearly, a landowner or controlling land manager could decide to rebid any/all/no acreage for economic or other reasons. Consider the options available for land use. Between CRP contracts is a time to reconsider new opportunities and uses for all the natural resources you own and how each fits into your short- and long-term planning. Careful planning is more critical now because of recent changes in federal agricultural policies and price supports which will have permanent, long-term implications for producer income and general management.

Bids

To include acres in the new CRP, producers must submit a bid. This bid is the amount of money per acre per year a producer is willing to accept for allowing acres to go into the CRP. In order to arrive at a sound bid, the potential program participant must confer with the local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office to determine what is the local maximum annual rental payment.

This maximum annual rental payment is determined by soil productivity, prevailing local cash equivalent rental rates for cropland, and maintenance costs for conservation uses on CRP land. The maximum bid was locally determined and approved at the state and national level. The maximum annual bid acceptance price for your county will be available to you before you bid. You can bid at any level you want.

After consultation, a producer can then formulate a bid. The producer's bid, and soil and cropping information, must be submitted for review and acceptance. If the bid exceeds the USDA's maximum per acre annual rental rate for that particular cropland, the bid is rejected. If the bid is less than or equal to the maximum annual rental rate, each offer is then examined for the amounts and types of environmental benefits present.

Benefits to the Environment

Environmental benefits are determined by examining factors for each area that include: soil erosion, water quality, general and specific wildlife habitat features, special conservation priority areas, permanent wildlife habitat, and conservation compliance. Those bids with the greatest environmental benefits per bid level will be considered for acceptance. The environmental benefits will be used to prioritize land areas valuable for inclusion into the CRP.

Continuous Sign-Up

There are two types of sign-ups, or two periods when you can enter land into the CRP. The first type of sign-up is for specific types of land with unique environmental values. This type of sign-up is continuous — just walk in and sign-up any-time. Continuous sign-up is only for acres to be placed in filter strips, riparian buffers, grassed waterways, shallow water areas for wildlife, wellhead protection areas (using Environmental Protection Agency guidelines), or other specially designated uses.

Periodic Sign-Up

The second sign-up type is a general sign-up period that lasts for only a short period and then is ended. These general sign-ups, or periodic sign-ups, allow for all other acres to be submitted for review. These sign-ups usually last approximately one-month and have been, in the past, once or twice a year. All the acres you would like considered for the CRP should be submitted during a general (periodic) sign-up. Even if you have submitted land before and were turned down, please resubmit eligible land again. Eligibility requirements and competitive bid levels may have changed in your local area. You may also want to change your bid.

Wetland Values

Lands qualifying for the new CRP need a minimum erodibility index (EI) of 8 except for cropped wetlands and specially designated conservation area activities. When cropped wetlands are presented for enrollment, restoring wetland functions is not a prerequisite to entering the program. But, there is an financial “incentive” available in addition to the normal cost-share payments, if a producer elects to restore the

wetland. Because of the environmental benefits evaluation used in the bid process, restoration of a wetland would increase the competitiveness of a bid.

Land Use Responsibilities

Remember that as current CRP contracts expire, producers must still follow approved conservation plans, comply with wetland, endangered species and other local, state, and federal environmental laws, and respect any conservation easement on the property. Some CRP acres were specifically designated for term or permanent easements in contracts. For acres subject only to a CRP contract, all CRP obligations cease when the contract expires. For acres also governed by an easement of 15 years or longer duration, use of the acres will continue to be restricted under the terms of the easement. If producers wish to return their less-fragile CRP land to row-crop producing status as contracts expire, the USDA will provide information and technical assistance necessary to ensure that the land is treated in a sound and productive sustainable manner. Following conservation plans and other information will help protect soil productivity by preventing excessive erosion, protecting water quality, and accumulating soil and surface organic matter, all of which enhance soil moisture-retaining ability.

GET INVOLVED!

The new CRP can be a great way to conserve and protect your valuable and productive natural resources into the 21st century while generating an annual income. Take a closer look at the future with the new Conservation Reserve Program.