Expanding Conservation Reserve Program Options

RETAINING EXPIRING CRP LANDS IN PERENNIAL VEGETATION

Landowners evaluating options for expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres should consider opportunities to keep sensitive acres in grasslands or perennial vegetation that preserve soil, water and wildlife resources. Many CRP lands border ditches, waterways, streams or rivers that could be eligible for federal, state or local buffer programs that would offer continued protection to these sensitive areas.

For the last 20 years, over 1 million acres in Minnesota have been enrolled in CRP. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program has provided a source of income to landowners with sensitive lands while protecting and preserving soil, water and wildlife resources. Most CRP lands were planted to perennial native grasses and forbs and some land was planted to trees.

Today’s agriculture has changed dramatically since CRP was established in 1985. Commodity and land prices have increased to historic levels. Listed below are several perennial vegetation options for expiring CRP lands. A short description, potential programs, opportunities, contacts and web sites are given for each option.

**Acronyms**

Farm Service Agency (FSA), Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), MN Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), NonGovernmental Organizations (NGO).

**Expiring CRP Perennial Options**

All contracts expire on September 30 of the last year of the contract.

**Continued Conservation Management**

**Enroll in a conservation program:**

General CRP sign-up when available. Continuous CRP (CCRP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), Biomass Conservation Assistance Program (BCAP), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) easements, Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) and RIM-Wetland Reserve Program (RIM-WRP) are also options. Look for programs through local NonGovernmental Organizations and Watershed groups.

Contact: SWCD, DNR, NGO, USFWS, FSA, or NRCS.

**Wetland Mitigation Banking (includes Ag Wetland Banking):**

For expiring CRP that contains restored wetlands, approval and deposit in the State Wetland Bank may be an option to maintain ownership and obtain investment returns. Unlike government programs, payments are not realized until credits are sold, as credit sales are a private transaction between the owner and buyer of credits.

Contact: SWCD, BWSR, Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) Local Governmental Unit. [www.bwsr.state.mn.us](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/)

**Buffers:**

There are programs that fund the continuation or establishment of perennial vegetative buffers. These areas are important to prevent soil erosion and protect water quality. (CRP, EQIP, WHIP)

Contact: SWCD, FSA or NRCS. [www.unl.edu/nac/bufferguidelines/](http://www.unl.edu/nac/bufferguidelines/)

**Wetlands and Water Storage areas:**

If your field has a history of flooding or growing wetland vegetation, wetland restoration or water storage programs may be options. (WRP, RIM-WRP)

Contact: SWCD or NRCS. [www.bwsr.state.mn.us/](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/)

**Grassland Reserve Program (GRP):**

Permanent or 30 year easement on grassland of at least 40 acres. Conservation grazing, haying and seed harvest can be developed in plan. (Targeted sites: Prairie chicken, SW Minnesota and Root River areas)

Contact: SWCD or NRCS.
**Wildlife Habitat:**
The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and other conservation organization programs may offer funds to establish enhance and continue perennial vegetation on expiring CRP lands to benefit/improve fish and wildlife habitat. (WHIP, Conservation organizations)
Contact: SWCD, DNR or NRCS.  [www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/index.html](http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/index.html)

**Eco-system Services:**
Many landowner incentive payment programs are being discussed and created to fund land practices that offer multiple benefits to the environment. These include pollinator plantings, water quality credit trading, nutrient trading, carbon sequestration, and bio-control.

**Recreational Access**

**Recreational Leases and Programs:**
Recreational leases can provide a source of income for the landowner or operator. Management needs vary with the site and with the intensity of wildlife production desired.
Contact: Wildlife, fishing and hunting organizations and clubs in your area, DNR wildlife/fisheries. (Hunting or fishing leases, outdoor recreation, agrotainment, bird watching, trails, cross-country skiing, etc.)

**Walk-In Access (selected Minnesota counties only):**
DNR pays landowners to allow public access for hunting.  [www.dnr.state.mn.us/walkin/index.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/walkin/index.html)

**Fishing Access Easements:**
Fishing and trout easements.
Contact: DNR,  pat.rivers@state.mn.us

**Grass-based Production Agricultural Management**

**Haying for Livestock (without CRP contract):**
Harvesting expired CRP fields for grass hay can be a profitable option. Livestock producers may also want to rent the grassland if you do not have haying equipment.
Contact: Hay baling contractors or livestock producers with haying equipment.  [www.exnet.iastate.edu/Publications/CRP10.pdf](http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Publications/CRP10.pdf)

**Haying for Bio-Energy (without CRP contract):**
Producing native grasses and forbs for bio-energy (biomass, bio-fuels, cellulosic ethanol, and bio-electricity) may be a possible option. Many of these processes which generate bio-energy from grassland feedstocks are still being designed, modified and developed.
Contact: DNR,  mark.lindquist@state.mn.us

**Grazing:**
Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) may also an option. Expired CRP maybe treated as pastured cropland, making it eligible for higher Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) payments than native rangeland. CSP base payments will be lower than CRP payments, but additional income can be realized from haying and grazing.
Contact: SWCD, FSA, NRCS and area livestock producers.

**Local Contacts and Web sites:**
Local Government Units and Partner Agencies:  [www.bwsr.state.mn.us/partners/index.html](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/partners/index.html)
Minnesota Land Economics:  [http://landeconomics.umn.edu](http://landeconomics.umn.edu)
Pheasants Forever:  [www.minnesotapf.org](http://www.minnesotapf.org)
Farm Bill Assistance (FBA) or Farm Bill Biologist:  [www.pheasantsforever.org/page/1/fieldstaff.jsp](http://www.pheasantsforever.org/page/1/fieldstaff.jsp)
Minnesota Department of Agriculture:  [www.mda.state.mn.us/protecting/conservation/crpoptions.aspx](http://www.mda.state.mn.us/protecting/conservation/crpoptions.aspx)
Expiring CRP series (Iowa State University):  [https://store.extension.iastate.edu/](https://store.extension.iastate.edu/) (type "CRP" in the search box)

(Contributions from state and federal agencies, compiled by Gary Wyatt, Extension Educator, wyatt@umn.edu)