

Conservation Reserve Program Continue To Be Attractive Option For Many Landowners

New Signup Expected This Summer



SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Contracts covering almost four million acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will expire this year, but USDA officials expect strong interest in a new signup, likely to take place this June. Program enrollment will approach the new, lower 32-million-acre ceiling set by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill, according to USDA pro-

jections.

USDA officials foresee 2.9 million acres being eligible in the expected June signup, with another half-million acres likely to be enrolled this year in the continuous CRP program which covers environmentally sensitive land suitable for practices such as riparian, wildlife habitat or wetland buffers; filter strips; wetland restoration; grass waterways; or shelterbelts.

USDA Farm Service Agency Administrator Jonathan Coppess says some of the land under contracts set to expire this year could be enrolled in continuous CRP signup, other acreage will remain in a conservation cover, and some acreage may return to agricultural production. USDA says that of the 3.783 million acres covered by general CRP contracts which expired Oct. 1, 1.045 million were extended for another three or five years while 2.738 million acres came out of CRP.

Now in its 25th year, the CRP has 31 million acres enrolled in the voluntary program, making it the largest public-private partnership for conservation and wildlife habitat in the U.S. The total comes despite contracts expiring on 6.5 million acres over the last three years. In response to higher commodity prices over the last three years, many landowners decided to take advantage of cropping opportunities on those expired acres.

Looking ahead, another 15.4 million acres are set to expire by October 2012. But with softer commodity price projections on the horizon, this land retirement program is likely to remain widely popular with many landowners, conservationists and hunters. Here's why:

- For the current fiscal year, USDA expects to pay out some \$1.7 billion in CRP rental payments to some 424,000 farms and ranches across the country. Many of these landowners are retired and can collect steady, reliable payments with little maintenance costs.

- CRP has restored more than two million acres of wetlands and two million acres of riparian buffers.

- CRP annual reductions include sediment down by 221 million tons, nitrogen down 615 million pounds, and phosphorus down 123 million pounds.

- As the nation's largest carbon sequestration program on private lands, CRP reduced greenhouse gas emissions by an estimated 56 million metric tons in 2008

More targeting?

Dave Nomsen, vice president of government affairs for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, says his groups want USDA to maintain "a balance between the larger, whole-tract enrollments and the smaller, targeted programs, like CRP SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement). Their members are urging USDA to consider a new general signup to reallocate acres to

some of the very successful programs such as SAFE and similarly targeted programs, which are currently oversubscribed.

Nomsen says programs like SAFE offer "a recipe for clean water, for protecting soil, helping wildlife, and it's a recipe for a healthy farm." Due to current federal budget pressures, he warns that to protect CRP's future, the farm sector needs "to continue to showcase how effective the CRP program has been."

Testimony from USDA Farm Service Agency Administrator Jonathan Coppess before the House Agriculture Committee in October, 2009:

- "The last time that USDA had a general sign-up was in 2006. We start Fiscal Year 2010 with 31 million acres in the CRP – about 2.6 million fewer acres than a year ago. With declining commodity prices for wheat, corn, soybeans and other crops since the highs of 2007 and 2008, interest in CRP enrollment is again accelerating."

- "Looking forward, contracts for about 15.3 million acres currently enrolled in CRP are scheduled to expire between Fiscal Years 2010 and 2012."

- "The President's budget for Fiscal Year 2010 assumes that general sign-ups will be conducted in Fiscal Years 2010–2012. The combination of general sign-ups and ongoing continuous sign-ups are expected to maintain CRP enrollment at, or near, 32 million acres through 2012."

- "Various continuous sign-up opportunities exist under the CRP, including the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program, new conservation initiatives, and various Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) projects. These practices generally target smaller parcels of some of the most environmentally fragile land."

- "However, acres in these continuous sign-up practices, added together with general sign-up acres, must total to no more than 32 million acres at any point in time." Δ

Vilsack delivered that news last weekend during the Pheasants Forever annual meeting. He announced that USDA has approved an additional 300,000 acres for conservation projects under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These additional areas include 150,000 acres for the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) Initiative; 50,000 acres for the Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative; and 100,000 acres for the Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds Initiative.

"Increasing acreage caps to meet the demand for these critical programs will help us do more for wildlife on the same number of acres," said Vilsack. "This is part of our efforts to target conservation to give the American taxpayer more bang for the buck in terms of improved water and air quality, reduced erosion, and benefits to the climate."

Secretary Vilsack also confirmed that USDA would conduct a general CRP signup later this year, with program details and the specific signup start date to be announced upon completion of an Environmental Impact Statement. Δ

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