

Converting CRP Land To Grain Crop Production Requires Planning

BLUE SPRINGS, MO.

American farmers have retired millions of acres of cropland through the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). However, increased grain prices and other factors have prompted many farmers to put idle acres back into service.

"Converting CRP land to grain crop production can present challenges not normally seen in a typical continuous grain production system," said Travis Harper, University of Missouri Extension agronomy specialist. "Planning should begin at least a year before the grain crop is to be planted to provide ample time for farmers to recognize and deal with potential issues that may affect grain crop production."

Erosion control was a key goal of CRP when the program began in 1986, and much of the land enrolled in CRP is prone to erosion.

"When this land is idle under the CRP, very little soil erosion takes place," Harper said. "If this land is tilled and brought back into production, it is likely to experience high erosion rates once again."

Farmers should consider managing this land under a no-till management system, he said. If that is not feasible, then it is important to leave waterways and field borders undisturbed. These undisturbed buffer zones will help limit erosion from the rest of the field.

"The most difficult part of converting CRP land to grain crop production may well be vegetation management," Harper said.

When managed as CRP land, a field is left largely undisturbed for 10 to 15 years, allowing a thick layer of plant residue to develop. This layer may increase soil moisture, lower soil temperature, harbor diseases and interfere with planting. In addition, the majority of plant species in CRP land are perennials, which will try to grow back even after a field has been planted with a grain crop.

Perennial grass and broadleaf weeds in dormant fields provide an attractive home for prairie voles, also known as field mice. If a field is converted from CRP to corn production, prairie voles may feed on newly planted seed or small seedlings that have germinated. To force the vole colonies out of the field, one must remove cover and food before planting the first crop.

For no-till fields, vegetation and pests can be controlled through some combination of mowing, burning and herbicide application.

An MU Extension guide, "Converting CRP Fields to Grain Crop Production" (G1651), is available online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/ag-guides/agengin/g01651.htm> . Δ