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PRESERVING THE BENEFITS OF THE
CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP)

by

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Well, 1996 is here. When beginning the CRP program ten years ago we wondered what would happen when the contracts expired. That time is upon us. Some contracts, due to expiration dates or early outs, are already back into hay production, grazing, and crop production with some in non-agricultural use.

As we embark into whole farm planning and examining other areas besides just erosion, we need to consider the benefits the soil has gained during the CRP contract, and one benefit is soil quality improvement.

Soil quality is affected by the use of a plow or deep tillage with the destruction to macro pores which partition and regulate water flow and storage and the destruction of organic matter. When soil structure is continuously manipulated with tillage, it is all but destroyed. Results of no structure is high runoff, less water holding capacity, less organic matter, poor water movement through the soil profile, and other factors that affect the soil's ability to produce agricultural crops.

The most commonly heard complaint on no-till is poor yields the first year. This is the result of many years of abuse to soil structure by tillage. There is also the time to learn the new management techniques involved in no-till. Research has shown it takes three-five years to see the benefits of conservation tillage on soil quality. With rotations of high residue crops and the use of cover crops with low residue crop practices such as no-till, it will improve soil quality by the following:

1. Surface organic matter increases over time. The organic matter which develops into the surface mulch becomes increasingly biologically active, which contributes to the organic matter content of the soil profile.
2. Earthworm holes and decaying roots develop many pores throughout the soil profile. When left undisturbed by lack of tillage, the surface mulch and pores improve water infiltration as well as air, water, and root development within the soil profile.

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3. With all of the above improvements, water runoff is reduced, which reduces soil erosion which protects organic matter and other soil components in order to sustain the productive capacity of the soil.

All of the benefits from no-till or forms of conservation tillage have been achieved with ten years of CRP. We as an agency can take advantage of this time to promote the soil quality benefits of CRP and to market soil conservation practices such as no-till, other forms of conservation tillage, and pasture and hayland management practices that will preserve those benefits.