

## Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP)

### Reducing Mowing to Benefit Wildlife – Fact Sheet



Early fall cover following rotational mowing



Winter and early spring cover following rotational mowing

### PA CREP

The Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP) is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that started in 2000. In addition to the standard objective of reducing soil erosion on cropland, PA CREP has two additional primary objectives: improving water quality and improving wildlife habitat. The wildlife habitat objective is targeted specifically to grassland habitats for declining grassland dependent wildlife. This fact sheet addresses managing mowing to achieve this wildlife habitat objective.

### Mowing & Wildlife Habitat

Targeted wildlife depends on grassland habitat for both nesting and rearing their young. The nesting and brood-rearing season for grassland birds ranges from the beginning of April through July across Pennsylvania. Nest destruction from haying and mowing during these months is the primary reason for the 75 - 80% decline of many grassland bird populations in Pennsylvania over the past forty years.

Mowing is not required in PA CREP. Mowing is only necessary to help establish the desired vegetation or to help control the invasion of trees and shrubs. When mowing to help control the invasion of trees and shrubs, delaying mowing and then only mowing a portion of a field in any given year will benefit wildlife.

### Establishment vs. Maintenance

For most land enrolled in PA CREP there are two distinct management periods. The first management period is during the establishment of a new seeding or planting (Establishment Period). The second management period begins once the new vegetation is established (Maintenance Period). In some situations the desired vegetation is already established in grass fields being enrolled in PA CREP. These existing grass fields require only maintenance management for the entire life of the PA CREP contract. Recent contracts include cost-shared Mid-Contract Management activities and will usually not need any mowing in addition to the Mid-Contract Management activities. PA CREP Participants with older contracts have the option of adding Mid-Contract Management activities.

The information in this fact sheet (over) is divided into mowing during the Establishment Period, where applicable, and mowing during the Maintenance Period. During the **Establishment Period** there are **NO RESTRICTIONS** on timing or frequency of mowing, but there are restrictions on mowing height. During the **Maintenance Period** there are **MOWING RESTRICTIONS** on all three: timing, frequency, and height. Contact your local USDA Service Center for more information. Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel can help you understand the mowing restrictions and help you determine if mowing is necessary at all during your PA CREP contract.

## HEL Fields & Buffers

There are two major distinctions between the types of land enrolled in PA CREP: Highly Erodible Land and buffers. Highly Erodible Land (HEL) fields are fields which include areas of very sloping land. HEL fields must also have recent cropping history. Most buffers are adjacent to streams, lakes, or ponds. These are referred to as *riparian* buffers. The PA CREP program has specific Conservation Practices (CP) for HEL fields and specific Conservation Practices for buffers.

### Conservation Practice

#### **HEL Fields:**

CP1 – Introduced Grasses and Legumes

CP2 – Native Grasses

CP4D – Wildlife Habitat

CP10 – Grass Already Established

#### **Buffers:**

CP8A – Grassed Waterway

CP15A – Contour Grass Strip

CP21 – Filter Strip

CP22 – Riparian Buffer

CP29 – Wildlife Habitat Buffer

CP30 – Wetland Buffer

## Mowing Restrictions & Recommendations

Mowing restrictions and recommendations are presented by the type of permanent vegetation being established or already present, either grasses or trees & shrubs, and the type of Conservation Practice being installed -- either within HEL Fields or Buffers.

### GRASSES

#### **HEL Fields:**

CP1, CP2 & CP4D – Establishing Introduced or Native **Cool-Season** grasses. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: These grasses normally become established in just one or two growing seasons. It is usually recommended to mow these areas every three to four weeks during the growing season, and mowing close to the ground does not damage these grasses. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup> \*. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-Contract Management activities or other recommendations.

CP2 & CP4D – Establishing Native **Warm-Season** Grasses. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: It often takes two to three growing seasons for these grasses to become established. It is usually recommended to mow these areas every three to four weeks during the growing season; however, mowing closer than **eight inches** to the ground will damage these grasses. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup> \*. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-Contract Management activities or other recommendations.

CP 10 – Grasses Already Established. There is **NO ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD** for mowing, only the MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup> \*. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-Contract Management activities or other recommendations.

#### **Buffers:**

CP8A – Establishing a Grassed Waterway. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS**

CP15A – Establishing a Contour Grass Strip. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS**

CP21 – Establishing a *riparian* (Grass) Filter Strip. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS** for strips 30 ft. wide or narrower.

### TREES & SHRUBS

#### **HEL Fields:**

CP4D – Establishing Trees & Shrubs within grass fields. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: Mowing (and herbicide application) is recommended both early and late in the growing season for two or three years after planting. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

#### **Buffers:**

CP22 – Establishing a Riparian (Forest) Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: Mowing (and herbicide application) is recommended both early and late in the growing season for three or four years after planting. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

CP29 – Establishing a *riparian* Wildlife Habitat Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT & MAINTENANCE PERIODS: **NO MOWING** is allowed on up to the first fifty feet enrolled, measured from the water side of the buffer.

CP30 – Establishing a *riparian* Wetland Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT & MAINTENANCE PERIODS: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

\* The Farm Service Agency (FSA) may approve **spot** mowing before July 31<sup>st</sup>, one year at a time, **only for state listed noxious weeds**. The mowing restriction in early PA CREP contracts ends July 15<sup>th</sup> (please refer to your PA CREP Conservation Plan).