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After the Conservation Reserve Program:
Land Management with Wildlife in Mind

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The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), established in 1985 to improve marginal land, has provided cover and habitat for many species of wildlife. When a contract for this program expires, land managers are faced with management decisions that affect wildlife and their habitat, property tax and land values, and other important long- and short-term income producing opportunities.

Under Texas property tax law, land with a current agricultural appraisal can maintain that status if it is managed for wildlife. More details are available at http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/land/private/agricultural_land/. Landowners can obtain technical assistance from private consultants and from state and federal resource agencies, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

The real estate value of rural land with good wildlife habitat is increasing as urban dwellers look for opportunities for outdoor activities. Landowners who want to expand the financial potential of their property through day, seasonal or year-long leasing can open their land to two basic types of clientele—hunters and wildlife observers. Some hunters need no assistance, while some may need a guide or other kinds of help. The land can be leased to an individual hunter or group of hunters, to an outfitter or to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's public hunting program. Or the landowner may decide to operate the hunting enterprise him- or herself. Wildlife watchers may require more time, effort and amenities year-round than do hunters. A combination of the two kinds of operations can be the best choice.

Ranching and wildlife management go hand-in-hand since wildlife is one of the resources produced by ranching. The 2008 Farm Bill provides an added economic opportunity by prioritizing enrollment of expiring CRP into the working lands Grassland Reserve Program. Good rangeland management is good wildlife management, although adjustments will be necessary for optimizing production of wildlife and livestock. Landowners can focus primarily on livestock or primarily on wildlife, or livestock and wildlife equally, depending on which option best fits their objectives.

Wildlife Primary **Both** **Livestock Primary**

Owners who want to put their land back into crop production should compare the economics of doing so with the income potential associated with keeping the land in its CRP state, with some modifications aimed at enhancing wildlife production. Most land enrolled in the program was highly erodible or difficult to farm. Returning such land to crop production requires meeting conservation compliance rules to qualify for U.S. Department of Agriculture commodity or conservation programs. Landowners who choose crop production should consider the strategy, "farm the best and leave the rest." Land with the least potential for profitable farming, such as highly erodible land and odd corners, should be left for wildlife.

If some or all of the former CRP land is to go back to crop production, several government agency-sponsored conservation practices can benefit wildlife and diversify income.

Protect areas around streams and other water sources through the use of Continuous CRP that provides financial incentives to protect prime wildlife habitat. Wind and buffer strips of native grasses can also benefit wildlife. For example, according to Conservation Practice 23A, former wetlands not in a flood plain, as around playas in croplands, can be seeded to provide habitat for pheasants and waterfowl and reduce sedimentation. Efforts to restore playas may qualify for payments under the Wetland Reserve Program. Another conservation practice, CP29, applies to marginal pastureland used as a wildlife habitat buffer. Some counties also offer CP38 State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement for improving wildlife habitat.

Check with a Farm Service Agency office to find out if your county qualifies.

All of these practices give landowners financial incentives to maintain nesting, brood rearing, travel corridors and winter cover that is often lacking in intensively farmed areas. They benefit quail, lesser prairie chickens, pheasants, deer and other wildlife that, in turn, also may provide an economic return to the farmer or rancher.

Because CRP land was formerly cropped, adequate fencing and water sources are often lacking. Landowners who want to run a combination grazing/wildlife operation should check with the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office about the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, which offers cost-share funding for cross-fencing, watering, controlling brush, managing grazing and prescribed burning. Carefully consider wildlife needs when managing brush.

Landowners who want to provide habitat for rare or declining species should check on cost-share funding for these practices. The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Landowner Incentive Program all provide this assistance.

If the land is for sale, maintaining wildlife habitat can pay off significantly because many land buyers find wildlife and recreation opportunities valuable.

The following management practices can help enhance and conserve wildlife habitat.

If the current vegetative cover is left unmodified or ungrazed, expect that brush encroachment may become a problem. White-tailed deer prefer about 40 percent to 70 percent brush canopy cover; mule deer, 25 percent to 35 percent; quail and lesser prairie chickens, up to 25 percent; and pronghorns virtually none. To satisfy the needs of more than one species compromise will be required. Although a single species of grass is common in many CRP fields, this kind of cover is less productive and less useful to wildlife than several species, and tends to reduce the number and kinds of wildlife that the land can support.

If the desire is to maximize usefulness to wildlife:

- Maintain the right brush density through one or more of the following options:

Prescribed burning. Options for burning include using patchwork burns, which form a mosaic pattern that encourages grazing and favors production of food plants preferred by upland birds such as quail; burning in fall and early winter to favor winter forbs for a wildlife food source; and burning in late winter to favor grasses. Information on these practices is available from prescribed burn associations at http://www.ranches.org/tppba.htm (Panhandle) and http://www.ranchmanagement.org/eppba/index.html (Edwards Plateau). Always comply with local laws and regulations.

Mechanical clearing. A variety of tools and methods are available for mechanical brush removal. Contact a county Extension agent for information on brush sculpting, or selective removal of brush to benefit wildlife. Regrowth mesquite can be half-cut to provide cover for quail. See http://teamquail.tamu.edu/videos.htm for a demonstration.

Chemical treatment. Chemical brush management can be accomplished with individual plant treatment or broadcast application. Consider a variable rate pattern using a criss-cross scheme, skipping every other swath and using half the usual recommended application rate. Use GPS /GIS technology for planning and application, and avoid using on beneficial forbs and browse plants when possible.

Grazing management. Grazing intensity can affect brush encroachment. Limit consumption of forage to 25 percent of annual production and leave adequate grass cover to reduce success of brush seedling establishment.

- Disking in the fall or winter in strips and around the edges of fields and brush mottes can increase forb production. If lacking, trees and shrubs can be planted in strategic locations across a field to provide cover and food for wildlife, except in prairie restoration. Use best farming practices, including supplemental watering for the first 2 or 3 years and weed control. Plant locally adapted seedling packets from the Texas Forest Service or commercial suppliers.

- Plant more than one variety of grass to provide food and cover for wildlife. Native grasses are better suited to local conditions than are exotics, and are beneficial to native species of wildlife found in grasslands. Include some grasses that bear seeds attractive to birds, and some that provide good nesting and overhead cover.
- Graze livestock in a rotational system at a light to moderate stocking rate. Graze during the dormant season or in a particular unit at alternating times of year. If continuous grazing is employed pay close attention to stocking density to avoid overgrazing. Use patch burning to distribute grazing and reduce the need for interior fencing. Choose livestock that are least likely to compete with wildlife for resources, and stock at a rate that consumes no more than 25 percent of the annual production.
- Interseed with a variety of perennial grasses and forbs, including legumes.

If the land is returned to cropland production, its value to wildlife will be greatly reduced. However, waste grain and cover may be available to pheasants, for example, if the fields are planted to crops such as corn, milo or wheat, and favorable field operations are employed. Quail also benefit from waste grain if nearby cover is maintained.

- If suitable habitat on well-managed rangeland is available nearby, cropland may provide food and/or cover for wildlife during the growing season.
- Time field activities to accommodate nesting and brooding.
- Leave edge rows unharvested for winter food and cover.

- After harvest cropland can provide waste grain for wildlife and some cover if stubble is left at least 18 inches high. Delay field operations as long as possible after harvest to keep waste grain on the soil surface and maintain stubble. Use minimum tillage practices where possible.
- Playas on former CRP land can be set aside from farming and managed for the benefit of wildlife and aquifer recharge by controlling grazing with fencing and using wide, grassed, buffer zones planted around their periphery.

Many wildlife species will benefit from these practices, including deer; pronghorns; upland game birds such as quail, turkeys, pheasants and prairie chickens; grassland birds; and migratory game birds such as doves and waterfowl. Managing your land in a way that addresses the habitat needs of wildlife can increase real estate values and can make possible the inclusion of additional wildlife-related enterprises.

Resources

Texas AgriLife Extension Service: Contact a county office or visit http://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu

Texas Forest Service: http://txforestservice.tamu.edu or (979) 458-6606

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us or (512) 389-4800

USDA Farm Service Agency: Contact a local USDA Service Center or visit http://www.fsa.usda.gov

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Contact a local USDA Service Center or visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: http://www.fws.gov/partners/

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