

OPTIONS FOR CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM LAND





Helping People Help the Land



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CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE

If CRP is broken out, it will be required to meet certain conservation compliance rules for landowners to qualify for USDA programs and benefits. A conservation compliance plan, written by the local NRCS field office, could require that a certain percentage of the field be planted to high residue crops each year or that windstrips be planted at certain intervals. Before actually breaking out former CRP land, landowners should check with their local NRCS field office to find out what a compliance plan would entail.

By the end of 2009, Conservation Reserve Program contracts on more than 1 million acres in Texas will expire. High grain and hay prices will have some landowners considering their production options.

The first consideration should be given to the expense of conversion and the possible economic returns on the land in question. Most land was enrolled in CRP because it is difficult to farm or highly erodible. Landowners must consider the issues that made CRP an attractive option 10 or 20 years ago when planning future land use. It is quite possible that keeping the farm in grass could yield even more economic return when all factors are accounted for, and provide the additional benefit of diversification of a farming operation.



PASTURE OR HAY LAND

The decision to utilize former CRP as hay land will require a smaller capital investment up-front than converting it back to cropland. Hay production may be possible immediately and have little up-front investment. Cost-share programs may also be available to help offset some of the costs necessary to utilize former CRP as pasture. Since it was formerly cropland, fences and livestock watering facilities may need to be installed to facilitate grazing. A grazing management plan should be developed to determine how many head of livestock can be grazed without damaging the existing grass stand. The general rule for grazing management is “take half, leave half.” There are several publications available at your local NRCS field office that outline management of former CRP grass in a haying or grazing system.

GRASS PRODUCTION

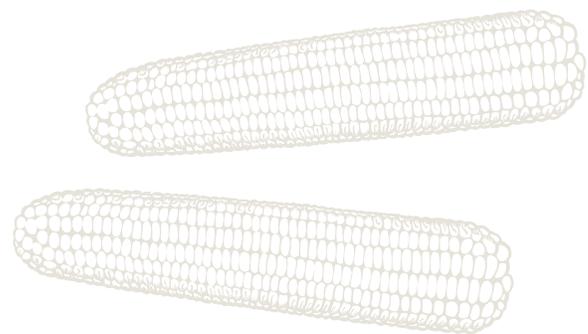
Landowners should realize the grass established under CRP will not be as vigorous as it potentially could be unless it is managed. If that is the case, removal of the decadent top growth will be necessary to improve moisture and light infiltration, stimulate new growth and improve forage quality. This can be accomplished through shredding, haying, high-density short-duration grazing, or prescribed burning. The local NRCS field office can assist landowners with determining which of these options is best for their particular field. Once the standing residue is removed, care should be taken to avoid damaging the existing grass while it is recovering.





CROP PRODUCTION

If landowners desire to return the land to crop production, they should look long and hard at the cost of breaking out CRP land and know how those costs can be recouped in a reasonable time frame with their planned cropping system. Breaking out CRP land can be a time- and labor-consuming process, which will probably involve both tillage and herbicide use. Given the cost of fuel and chemicals in today's market, this can be an expensive undertaking. The amount of tillage and the number and amount of herbicide applications required to kill the existing grass cover and get the land into condition for planting crops will vary based on the species of grass. As a general rule, introduced grass species such as weeping lovegrass or an Old World bluestem will be more difficult and costly to remove. If a producer must make significant capital investments to enable the planting and harvesting of grains, the economic return necessary from converting CRP land is higher and more difficult to sustain.



LAND POTENTIAL

Once a landowner has decided to break out former CRP land, and has determined that they can meet the requirements of a conservation compliance plan, they should think about the needs of the field they plan to farm. Landowners should consider the strategy “farm the best and leave the rest.” Portions of the field with the least potential for economic returns, such as highly erodible, steep or odd-shaped areas, could be left in grass. Acreage around playa lakes or other surface water areas should also be left in grass whenever possible. This would allow the landowner to concentrate on the best areas for crop production, while protecting these sensitive areas and providing valuable wildlife habitat.

CROSS-WIND TRAP STRIPS

A viable cropping system on former CRP land could include leaving some strips of established grass and cropping between the strips. These “cross-wind trap strips” can be a valuable tool for reducing wind and water erosion, reducing sedimentation, and providing food and cover for wildlife. These strips should be between fifteen and thirty feet wide, and be spaced between 100 and 300 feet apart. The width and spacing of the strips will be based on the existing grass species and the properties of the soils in the field, so landowners should contact the local NRCS office for more specific information. As a rule of thumb, in sandier soils and in cropping systems with low-residue crops such as cotton, the windstrips will need to be more closely spaced to provide adequate erosion protection. Existing grass could also be left as field borders around the edges of the field. Field borders provide turning areas for farm equipment, reduce erosion and sedimentation, and can provide needed wildlife habitat.





TERRACES

Another very important place to leave grass in a former CRP field is on existing terraces. Leaving terraces in grass will reduce maintenance requirements on terraces by protecting them from erosion. The grassed terraces will also act as cross wind trap strips, reducing erosion from the cropped portions and providing food and cover for wildlife. Landowners should inspect terraces or other erosion control structures to make sure that they are in good working condition, and make any necessary repairs before destroying the existing grass cover. Again, gullies or other areas of concentrated water flow should be left in permanent vegetation to stabilize the area and prevent further erosion.



CONTOUR BUFFER STRIPS

Contour buffer strips are narrow strips of permanent, herbaceous vegetated cover established across the slope and alternated down the slope with parallel, wider cropped strips. These buffer strips are an important management tool that may be used with or without terraces. In addition, contour buffer strips can provide protection from erosion, increase water quality, and improve wildlife habitat.



CROP ROTATION

When former CRP is returned to crop production, an important consideration is crop rotation. When crops are rotated, pressure from pests like weeds, insects and diseases are reduced. Soil tilth, carbon sequestration and organic matter are positively impacted by crop rotation, and diversification in the cropping system is a valuable tool for risk management in any farming enterprise. When low residue crops such as cotton or peanuts are grown, it is especially important to incorporate high residue crops into the rotation. High residue crops such as grain sorghum, wheat and corn help to decrease wind and water erosion through the residues left after harvest. The waste grain associated with many high residue crops is a valuable food resource for wildlife. These residues should be left on the soil surface for as long as possible after harvest, especially through the critical erosion period (generally through April on the High Plains). There are several good crop rotations that work well for dryland fields, including wheat-fallow-sorghum, wheat-fallow-cotton, and sorghum-cotton.





RESIDUE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Consideration should be given to the residue management system planned for the field. Equipment, pesticides and crops are more technologically advanced than they were 10 or 20 years ago, so moving to a no-till or even a reduced-till system would be easier than it was when the field went into CRP. Implementation of an adequate residue management system will reduce wind and water erosion, increase soil organic matter and carbon sequestration, and increase the water-holding capacity of the soil. Implements used in a good residue management system include no-till drills and planters with fluted coulters to cut through the residue on the surface, undercutting implements like sweeps and blade plows that leave surface residues mostly undisturbed and sprayers which allow for pest management without tillage. It may be necessary to plan a fallow period after destruction of the existing grass and before putting the field back into production to allow the soil to build up enough moisture to sustain a growing crop. Leaving stubble from harvest until planting time for the next crop in the rotation decreases erosion and provides wildlife habitat.

SOIL FERTILITY

Before planting a crop on former CRP land, landowners should begin a good soil testing program on the field to assess current fertility needs and set a baseline for future nutrient additions. After destroying the existing grass cover, the residue left by that grass can tie up available nitrogen in the soil. Additional nitrogen may be needed to enhance the breakdown of the grass residues and replace the unavailable nitrogen in the soil. If soil phosphorus levels are low, phosphorus fertilizer should be incorporated to provide the maximum benefit with the least environmental risk.





TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

There are many important factors to consider when deciding what to do with former CRP lands. The local NRCS field office staff has the technical knowledge and expertise to advise you on the myriad of different options for each particular field. Please visit your local NRCS office BEFORE putting a plow in the ground.

For more information, visit the NRCS Texas Web site at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov.



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