 Conservation buffers are a simple step you can take to stay profitable and protect your most valuable asset—your land. Buffers can also be a tool to demonstrate your commitment to conservation.

**WHAT IS A BUFFER?**

Conservation buffers are best described as strips or other areas of land in permanent vegetation that help control pollutants and manage other environmental concerns. Other strips, riparian buffers (predominantly trees and shrubs) to water courses, field borders, grassed waterways, field windbreaks, and contour grass strips are all examples of conservation buffers. Buffers can be especially helpful if you are maintaining a productive, profitable, and responsible farming or ranching system.

**BUFFERS NEEDED?**

There are many types of buffers. Each may have different names in different parts of the country, their conservation purposes are similar. These differences do not change the common buffer types eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up or which can be installed under the integrated pest management (IPM) incentive.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**CONSERVATION BUFFERS WORK ECONOMICALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY?**

Conservation buffers work economically because they are generally less expensive to install than practices that require extensive engineering and costly construction methods. Buffers also tend to be more economical to maintain than many other practices. And now there are new and higher financial incentives under the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up (see box, below) that make use of certain buffer strips even more attractive economically than ever before.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**FILTER STRIPS**

Strips of grass seeded to trap sediments, fertilizers, pesticides, and other pollutants before they reach streams and lakes.

**RIPARIAN BUFFERS**

Plantings of trees, shrubs, and grasses that catch pollutants in both surface runoff and ground water before those pollutants reach a waterbody, such as a stream or lake. Riparian buffers also improve fish and wildlife habitat.

**SHELTERBELTS/FIELD WINDBREAKS**

A row or rows of trees or shrubs used to reduce wind erosion, protect young crops, and control blowing snow. These practices also provide excellent protection for wildlife, livestock, homes, and farm buildings. Field windbreaks are similar to shelterbelts, but are located along field borders or within the field. In some areas field windbreaks may be called hedgerow plantings.

**LIVING SNOW FENCES**

Narrow bands of perennial vegetative cover planted on the contour in a crop field and downstream from the fields with strips of crops. If designed and maintained properly, contour strips can reduce soil erosion, minimize transport of sediment and other waterborne contaminants, and provide wildlife habitat.

**CROSS-WIND TRAP STRIPS**

Rows of perennial vegetative cover planted in varying widths perpendicular to the prevailing wind direction. These strips can effectively control wind erosion on crop fields subject to high average annual wind speeds.

**SALT-TOLERANT VEGETATION TO REDUCE SALINITY**

Special areas planted to vegetative cover capable of growing in salty soil and reducing saline seepage.
Buffers protect your land and visually demonstrate your commitment to conservation.

CONTINUOUS CRP SIGN-UP

The continuous CRP sign-up makes it easy for you to install conservation buffers on your farm or ranch. The program allows you to enroll your eligible land in the CRP at any time without having to submit a competitive offer. If you have land covered by an existing CRP contract, you don’t have to make an “all-or-nothing” choice about bringing the land out of CRP. You can decide whether you want to establish buffers on land determined suitable and to enroll that land in the program. The remaining land can be returned to crop production.

The staff at your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district office can help you identify the buffer practices available under the continuous CRP sign-up that are suitable for your land. Then, you can submit an offer to your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Your offer will be accepted automatically if it meets certain eligibility requirements.

To be eligible, you must have owned the land for a year. Crayfish land is eligible if it was planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity in two of the last five crop years and is physically and legally capable of being cropped. Your land does not have to be highly suitable to qualify for the program.

Marginal pasture land that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer is also eligible. Marginal pasture land includes any land along permanent or seasonal streams and around other permanent water bodies, including wetlands, that are previously used to grow crops.

It’s that simple. Your local USDA Service Center staff will know what specific wetland and financial assistance is available to help you install and maintain conservation buffers, including assistance from state and local programs.

ELIGIBLE BUFFER PRACTICES

Not all buffer practices are eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up. Those that are include:

- Riparian Buffers
- Filter Strips
- Grassed Waterways
- Shrubbelts
- Field Windbreaks
- Living Stream Banks
- Contour Grass Strips

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES FOR BUFFERS

Now and higher financial incentives under the continuous CRP sign-up make conservation buffers economically attractive in most areas of the country. There is a sign-up incentive payment of $150 to $150 per acre for selected practices and the 50 percent incentive for certain practice installations, along with adjusted rental rates for marginal pasture land and higher annual maintenance payments per acre for certain practices. While buffer rates are now possible as well. There also is a 20 percent incentive, which is added to your annual CRP rental rate, for field windbreaks, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffer. A 10 percent incentive is added to your annual CRP rental rate for land within designated grassed windbreak protection areas. Of course, CRP rental rates are based on a soil’s relative productivity and the average dryland cash rental for comparable land in your vicinity.

In addition to the annual CRP rental rates and other incentives, USDA pays up to 50 percent of the cost of establishing a permanent cover on buffers. Among the activities eligible for cost-sharing are site preparation, temporary cover until permanent cover is established, grading or shaping, road and access improvements, and placement of supplemental vegetation, erosion, livestock crossings, and development of supplemental water supplies outside a riparian buffer.

A cover under the continuous CRP sign-up is 10 to 15 units in length, depending on the buffer type and your preference. You receive your annual rental payment each October 1 each year. The sign-up incentive payment, practice incentive payment, and cost-share payments are made once your contract is approved or within 90 days after you have completed installation of the approved buffers.

OTHER PROGRAMS CAN HELP

If the continuous CRP sign-up does not work for you, there are other USDA programs that can help you install conservation buffers. They include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) — This program provides technical, financial, and educational assistance to agricultural producers to install conservation practices on marginal agricultural land.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) — This is a voluntary program for landowners who want to develop and improve fish and wildlife habitat on private land. It provides both technical assistance and cost-sharing for practice installation.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) — This voluntary program helps landowners purchase, restore, and enhance wetlands on private property. It provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.

Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) — Teamed with the Forest Stewardship Program, SIP provides cost-sharing for improved management of private forest land through multiple practices, including planting, tree planting, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, riparian restoration, soil erosion control, and forest improvements.

There are 34 state and local governments and private organizations that provide financial assistance for buffer installations, particularly buffer that control soil erosion, improve water-quality, and enhance fish and wildlife habitat.

Your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office can provide more details regarding rental payments, cost-sharing options, and other buffer assistance programs available in your area. You can speak with agricultural consultants and representatives of agricultural firms to find out more about conservation buffers and what they use on their farms or ranches.

AN INITIATIVE FOR ALL OF AGRICULTURE

USDA’s National Conservation Buffer Initiative is an effort to encourage farmers, ranchers, and other landowners to use conservation buffers more extensively for a variety of conservation purposes. NRCS plays a major role in the initiative, along with FSA and the Forest Service; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; and other conservation agencies, conservation districts, and numerous other public- and private-sector partners.

Conservation buffers are not only profitable but effective from an environmental management point of view and have a role in the initiative, along with FSA and the Forest Service; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; and other conservation agencies, conservation districts, and numerous other public- and private-sector partners.

Because these groups knew the importance of sound conservation practices — for individual landowners and the entire economy — they have pledged their support by joining USDA’s National Conservation Buffer Team.

Now, it’s your turn to make a personal commitment to conservation. Contact your local USDA Service Center for more information about conservation buffers and then use it in your timing or marketing operations.