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# National Resources Inventory

*Resources of Washington Series*

## CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM IN WASHINGTON 1982 - 1997

**(Revised December 2000)**

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has become the most successful single program to tackle soil erosion problems on non-irrigated cropland in Washington. The results of CRP are dramatic. This program is well accepted by agricultural producers has many positive environmental benefits.

The most visible benefits of CRP are tremendous annual savings in soil erosion, greatly increased wildlife habitat and cleaner surface water. Not as easily recognized benefits are reductions in pesticide and nitrate applications and other fertilizers. Additional benefits include the delay and reduced intensity of spring runoff water, savings of diesel fuel and increased groundwater infiltration rates.

CRP has had a positive effect on the environment in many counties in eastern Washington. From the original general cropland retirement concept to the targeted environmental benefits concept of more recent years, CRP has had a visible and powerful impact on the landscape and resources of Washington. Over 1,000,000 acres of land in eastern Washington are protected from the erosive forces of wind and water. Wildlife habitat has increased substantially, perennial streams carry cleaner water and farm operators no longer have to coax crops from marginal fields.

The purpose of CRP is to cost-effectively assist farm operators and owners in conserving and improving soil, water and wildlife resources. This is achieved by converting highly erodible and other environmentally sensitive lands that have produced crops to a long-term resource-conserving cover. Initially producers were required to seed native or introduced perennial grasses to meet their contract obligations. Later enrollments allowed for the planting of trees and shrubs, usually in combination with native forbs and grasses.

Since the beginning of CRP in 1985, there have been notable changes in program eligibility. The most noteworthy change was the requirement that each field had to be designated as having highly erodible land (HEL). A HEL determination is calculated on each field based on soils, slope and rainfall zone. Specific environmental benefit requirements were attached to the eligibility process. A competitive ranking process was initiated. The process allows producers to submit dollar bid offers determining annual rental payment amounts they were willing to receive to retire their cropland from production. The farm operators bid is evaluated on a competitive basis where the producers know the maximum bid. Bids selected are those where the greatest environmental benefits are generated for each federal dollar expended. Successful bidders are required to share the cost of the establishment of the selected conservation cover.

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## Estimated Annual Erosion on Land Enrolled in CRP
### By Year

| YEAR | WIND EROSION In Tons/Year | WATER EROSION In Tons/Year | TOTAL EROSION In Tons/Year |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1982 * | 1,583,300 | 1,799,500 | 3,382,800 |
| 1987 | 872,700 | 1,101,600 | 1,974,300 |
| 1992 | 224,500 | 501,000 | 725,500 |
| 1997 | 6,400 | 567,700 | 574,100 |

* The 1982 numbers represent Washington erosion rates before enrollment in CRP.

Annual erosion has been greatly reduced on lands enrolled on CRP. The establishment of perennial plant cover had an immediate and dramatic impact in wind erosion. Wind erosion has been reduced by nearly 1.6 million tons on an annual basis. Erosion by water has diminished by over two-thirds or 1.2 million tons on an annual basis. These erosion control results are remarkable. The farm operators and conservation professionals who planned and implemented CRP have done an outstanding job. The combined savings from wind and water erosion amounts to greater than 2.8 million tons on an annual basis. This is an erosion reduction of over 80% on 1.1 million acres.

## Estimated Annual Erosion Rates on Land Enrolled in CRP
### By Year

| Year | Tons/Acre/Year |
|---|---|
| 1982 * | 7.4 |
| 1987 | 4.3 |
| 1992 | 0.71 |
| 1997 | 0.56 |

* The 1982 numbers represent Washington erosion rates before enrollment in CRP.

Cropland acres enrolled in CRP have shown a dramatic decrease in average erosion rates. Many of the cropland soils have an erosion tolerance level of 5 tons/acre/year for sustainability. Most of the rest had a 2 tons/acre/year tolerance level. Virtually all acres are adequately protected from erosion by wind and water. Results on improving soil quality are noteworthy. Increased soil organic matter, increases in soil organisms and improved soil structure are some of the soil health indicators that are evident. CRP fields planted with perennial grasses have higher photosynthesis rates than the small grain-summer fallow fields that they replaced. This increased rate of photosynthesis helps to store organic carbon in the soil and counteracts the build up of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. Carbon is stored in both soil and plants and is part of the solution to global warming.

## Estimated Acres of CRP Enrolled in Washington by County
### By Year

| | 1987 Acres | 1992 Acres | 1997 Acres |
|---|---|---|---|
| ADAMS | 51,700 | 217,200 | 199,300 |
| ASOTIN | 0 | 20,200 | 19,600 |
| BENTON | 0 | 27,100 | 79,000 |
| COLUMBIA | 800 | 22,200 | 36,300 |
| DOUGLAS | 163,200 | 172,900 | 150,800 |
| FERRY | 1,500 | 1,500 | 1,500 |
| FRANKLIN | 22,000 | 100,500 | 93,200 |
| GARFIELD | 2,100 | 19,000 | 25,500 |
| GRANT | 20,100 | 50,500 | 37,600 |
| KITTITAS | 600 | 600 | 600 |
| KLICKITAT | 33,900 | 57,300 | 57,300 |
| LINCOLN | 99,800 | 116,200 | 104,500 |
| OKANOGAN | 7,500 | 10,600 | 0 |
| SPOKANE | 9,000 | 26,100 | 47,300 |
| STEVENS | 0 | 1,000 | 1,000 |
| WALLA WALLA | 23,200 | 80,300 | 61,000 |
| WHITMAN | 7,100 | 44,900 | 54,500 |
| YAKIMA | 12,800 | 47,800 | 47,800 |
| TOTAL | 455,300 | 1,015,900 | 1,016,800 |

Counties responded quite differently the first few years of CRP. Counties with low to very low average yields of wheat embraced CRP immediately. Those counties where traditional yields of wheat were greater responded more slowly. The net result was that some of the least erosive cropland was enrolled early in the program. Enrollment of the most erosive cropland was delayed because of annual national acreage limitations. This unexpected result is changing as older ten year contracts expire and new contracts with more restrictive eligibility requirements take their place. It is expected that long-term funding for CRP will continue and specific environmental benefits will be targeted as the need arises.