LANDOWNERS & THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

Understanding motivations and needs to cultivate participation, retention, and ongoing stewardship

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AS WE GO, THINK ABOUT:

What are the implications of these results for you? What is something you can do to apply these insights in practice?

What are the implications of these results for others? What is something that can be done at other levels or by other practitioners to apply these insights in practice?

What do you still need to know about landowners and the Conservation Reserve Program?
THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

- Incentivizes conversion of cropland to grassland
- Covers 22.3 million acres
- Distributes almost $2 billion annually
- Enhances wildlife habitat
- Improves water quality
- Sequesters carbon
- Increases soil productivity

Contracts on almost 12.5 million acres of land enrolled in CRP across the country are due to expire between 2019 and 2022.

The durability of CRP's conservation benefits depends upon how enrolled fields are managed once their contracts expire.
Addressing social phenomena requires approaches informed by social science.

**OUR STUDY**

Mixed-methods social science

- 27 interviews
- 3.5 months of participant observation
- 3 focus groups
- 700 mail survey responses
**OUR STUDY**

Landowner decision-making in voluntary incentive programs

**WHY DO LANDOWNERS PARTICIPATE IN CRP?**

- Adopt with incentive
- Not adopt with incentive

**DO LANDOWNERS WANT TO RE-ENROLL IN CRP?**

- Continue enrollment (retention)
- End enrollment (dropout)

**WHAT HAPPENS TO FIELDS THAT ARE NOT RE-ENROLLED?**

- Continue practice (persistence)
- End practice (reversion)

**WHAT PREDICTS GRASSLAND PERSISTENCE AFTER CRP?**

WHY DO LANDOWNERS PARTICIPATE IN CRP?

PREVENTING SOIL EROSION
IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH
MAXIMIZING PROFITS
IMPROVING WILDLIFE HABITAT

WERE EACH IMPORTANT MOTIVATIONS to ENROLL for OVER 75% of LANDOWNERS with CURRENT CRP FIELDS
WHY DO LANDOWNERS PARTICIPATE IN CRP?

- Preventing Soil Erosion
- Improving Soil Health
- Maximizing Profits
- Improving Wildlife Habitat

on their own fields and across the regional landscape

“Well, I don’t have neighbors calling and saying, you know, ‘you are blowing away,’ so, you know, it [CRP] stabilizes the ground there.”
WHY DO LANDOWNERS PARTICIPATE IN CRP?

CRP payments serve a variety of functions:

- **PREVENTING SOIL EROSION**
- **IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH**
- **MAXIMIZING PROFITS**
- **IMPROVING WILDLIFE HABITAT**

“Back in the 80s when we put this in, we were starving to death out here... It wasn’t put in by the landowner’s opinion to conserve anything, it was to survive.”

“So my idea was to put some of this into CRP, free me up some cash and some time and rent some more ground to farm, so that’s why I put mine into it.”

“I’m hoping CRP and the grass program gives us a chance to keep [our land] in the family many more generations.”

“the Conservation Retirement Program”
WHY DO LANDOWNERS PARTICIPATE IN CRP?

"When it [CRP] first started, if you had weeds growing in it [the field], you had to get rid of them, but now they want weeds grown in for wildlife.”
Do landowners want to re-enroll in CRP?

83% of landowners with current CRP fields are likely to try to re-enroll.

54% of landowners with expired CRP fields unsuccessfully tried to re-enroll.
DO LANDOWNERS WANT TO RE-ENROLL IN CRP?

**WHY?**

"The land here never should’ve been broke out from grass to begin with, so I plan on it staying in CRP as long as the program lives."

**WHY NOT?**

**TOP CONSIDERATIONS** for LANDOWNERS WHO CHOSE NOT to RE-ENROLL

- **58%** Lower profit potential
- **42%** Restrictions on haying and grazing
- **30%** CRP rules difficult or nonsensical
WHAT HAPPENS TO FIELDS THAT ARE NOT RE-ENROLLED?

**LIKELY POST-CRP LAND USE** on the MAJORITY of CURRENT CRP FIELDS

- Keep in grass: 55%
- Revert to crops: 45%
- Enroll in another program: 39%
- Sell: 12%

**REPORTED POST-CRP LAND USE** on the MAJORITY of EXPIRED CRP FIELDS

- Sold: 28%
- Reverted to crops: 5%
- Enrolled in another conservation program: 5%
- Kept in grass: 62%

“If it’s not productive, that owner is going to sell it, and the next owner is going to make it productive or they’re going to sell it. It’s not going to sit there and not...have some sort of a return.”
WHAT HAPPENS TO FIELDS THAT ARE NOT RE-ENROLLED?

EXPIRED CRP FIELDS STILL in GRASS
by YEAR OF CONTRACT EXPIRATION

- 2011: 67%
- 2012: 52%
- 2013: 62%
- 2014: 74%
- 2015: 85%
- 2016: 82%
- 2017: 97%
WHAT PREDICTS GRASSLAND PERSISTENCE AFTER CRP?

LANDOWNERS LIKELY to PERSIST with GRASSLAND CONSERVATION HAD:

- Positive *experiences* with the program
- Trust in CRP personnel
- Environmental *attitudes* about agriculture
- Motivation to improve forage quality, grazing land, and wildlife habitat
- A desire to keep their field *as-is* after CRP and perceived ease of doing so
- Neighbors who kept their field in grass after CRP

“*I watched that [land] blow too many years. We’re not gonna plow it up.*”

LANDOWNERS WHO PERSISTED with GRASSLAND CONSERVATION on EXPIRED CRP FIELDS HAD:

- Available *resources* (cattle, water, equipment)
- Motivation to prevent soil erosion
WHAT PREDICTS GRASSLAND PERSISTENCE AFTER CRP?

LANDOWNERS WHO **REVERTED THEIR EXPIRED CRP FIELD to CROPS** HAD:

- Business-oriented **attitudes** about agriculture
- **Motivation** to maximize profit

“The fact of the matter is that money talks. We would prefer to leave it in grass, but if you are asking us to take, let’s say, $50,000 a year hit or something, we will probably shred it and plow it up.”
NEXT STEPS

- Meetings with practitioners in 5 study states
- Follow-up focus groups with landowners

QUESTIONS?
This study was conducted by researchers at Virginia Tech, with logistical assistance from Bird Conservancy of the Rockies and Playa Lakes Joint Venture. Funding was provided by USDA Farm Service Agency through a USGS Cooperative Research Unit Research Work Order.

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STUDY REPORT

PRIVATE LANDS STAFF FORUM
March 24-25, 2020 in Kansas City, Missouri

Aim: Provide a high-quality environment for training and mentoring, exchange of ideas, and developing a community of practice that enhances the ability of private lands staff to effectively deliver Farm Bill and other conservation programs.

Costs:
Hotel, breakfast, dinner
Registration: $100 includes lunches and evening socials
*25 Travel Scholarships are available*

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