

# EXPIRING CONTRACT OPTIONS FOR **CRP**

## CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

Since its beginnings in 1985, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has helped voluntary farmers and ranchers improve water quality, prevent soil erosion and reduce the loss of wildlife habitat on private lands. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers the program; and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) provides enrolled landowners with science-based technical advice and specifications on how to implement CRP conservation practices.

Here's how CRP works: In exchange for a yearly rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to take environmentally-sensitive land out of agricultural production and plant species that will improve the overall health and quality of the land. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP typically last between 10 to 15 years.

Many of these contracts have been renewed for additional 10 year periods since their initial enrollment; however, this year's CRP signup (#49) resulted in a significant number of acres not being accepted into contracts. Therefore, many landowners with expiring CRP contracts must decide how they want to move forward with managing the land post-CRP. USDA offers a variety of opportunities and resources to help landowners maximize their post-CRP potential for themselves, their families, and their land.

## LANDOWNERS WITH EXPIRING CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP) CONTRACTS FACE A VARIETY OF ALTERNATIVES FOR MANAGING THE LAND.

If you choose not to re-enroll in CRP, or your bid to re-enroll is not accepted, your options will vary from returning the land to crop production, grazing, managing it for wildlife, or a combination of uses. If you wish to return your land to CRP, you may make modifications to improve your chances of getting the land accepted back into the program.

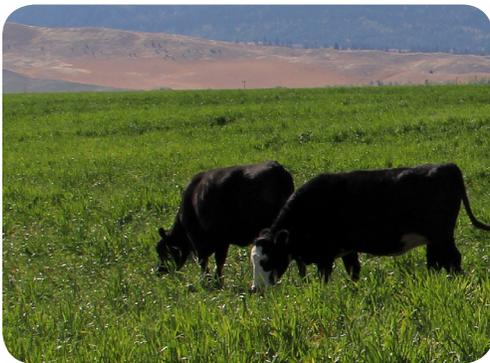
These information sheets review some of your options and considerations. Keep in mind that these options are not all-inclusive but focus on the most likely alternatives. You may even choose to separate the acreage and adopt more than one alternative.

Your choice will depend on your circumstances, expectations and goals. It's important to consider several factors, including soil productivity and limitations, management and past yields, commodity prices, conversion and renovation costs and other required investments.

Whatever you decide, resources are available to help you achieve your objectives. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), your local conservation district, and extension office can provide science-based advice and recommendations.

## TIMELINE

CRP contracts begin and expire based on the federal government's fiscal year, which runs from October 1 through September 30. If your CRP contract is set to expire, you may begin to make changes on your land as early as 90 days before the close-out date, as long as you get the appropriate approvals from the Farm Service Agency (FSA). If you'd like guidance or recommendations from NRCS about your post-CRP land management plans, contact your local NRCS office as soon as possible before your CRP expiration date.



## PREPARED IN COOPERATION WITH

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- USDA Farm Service Agency
- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

## EVALUATING YOUR POST-CRP OPTIONS

### Converting to Cropland

The first step is to decide whether or not land will be farmed again. This is a good opportunity to leave areas like steep slopes, wind blows, shallow or low producing areas, and critical waterways in protective cover. You may also want to consider other conservation options for reducing soil erosion and protecting clean water. You can explore creative conservation practices using some of the grasses that are already established through your CRP contract to support or replace more traditional practices.

Keep in mind that converting from CRP grass cover back to cropland involves important decisions about pre-tillage management—decisions such as how to properly prepare the seedbeds, manage for weeds, and apply the appropriate soil nutrients. As you make the initial transition, these factors will likely be significantly different from normal crop rotation needs.

You also need to think about the economic impacts. It's very likely that cropland cost factors have changed over the last 10 years while your land was in the CRP contract. Research and evaluate the costs of production, crop prices, lease arrangements, and any potential government program benefits and requirements. You may also need to evaluate your machinery to ensure it meets your current needs.

### Grazing

Grazing is another alternative use on many CRP acres. But to get the best use of the forage available to you, be sure to start your planning and management well before your contract expires. For example, determining your grass species and climatic zone can help you calculate how much forage will be available. Areas left in grass for erosion control, or because they are not practical to farm, can usually be safely grazed with proper management. If you increase livestock numbers to use forage from CRP land, you may need to add additional hay and summer pasture at other times of the year. You may also need to install fences or livestock watering facilities.

It's also important to evaluate the economic factors, such as costs to build or upgrade facilities, livestock costs and potential returns, tax and property values, and pasture rents. Often times landowners choose a combination of cropland and grazing on their expired CRP acres. In summer fallow areas, much of what is left in grass will only be grazed in alternate years because it is fenced with cropland.



Scan code with your smartphone to access this content online.

Requires use of QR reader app.

## Managing for Wildlife

The benefits of CRP go beyond the contract holder and their land. The CRP land in perennial grass provides food and cover for a variety of wildlife species, often in areas where it was limited before CRP. You can further enhance these wildlife values by installing water developments and planting shrubs, trees, or food crop plots. Some wildlife habitat can be maintained in farmed areas by leaving borders in grass and by leaving riparian buffer zones for cover and to trap sediments. Windbreaks can provide food, cover and erosion protection.

## Reduce Erosion

You can dramatically reduce soil erosion and water run-off when you keep the land in a perennial grass cover. You may want to consider keeping parts of your CRP acres in grassland for erosion control. This will keep less sediment from entering air and from running off into roads, rivers and streams. That means you can keep more water in your soil to support plant growth and to feed springs and streams—instead of losing it to run-off. Reducing run-off also helps fish and other aquatic creatures by providing cleaner habitat and potentially increased or extended streamflows. Reducing soil erosion and run-off also helps to keep roads cleared of mud and soil.

## Other Options

In some cases, you may be able to gain an alternative source of income from your CRP acres instead of farming—while still retaining the wildlife and watershed benefits of grass cover. Properly grazed grass land can be managed to improve watershed health. Some kind of fee for recreation such as hunting is also an alternative. Local, state or federal governments may be willing to pay for conservation easements to keep critical areas in grass cover. There's also a potential for re-bidding acres not accepted during the CRP 49 signup in future signups. Think about alternative uses and talk with your local USDA office and county government to see what options are relevant to you.



USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.