

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program - Pennsylvania Ohio River Basin

Overview

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a federal-state natural resource conservation program that addresses state and nationally significant agricultural related environmental problems. Under CREP, program participants receive financial incentives from USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to voluntarily enroll fragile farmlands in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in contracts of 10- to 15-years.

Participants remove suitable cropland and marginal pastureland from agricultural production and convert the land to buffer practices with native grasses, forbs, shrubs, trees, wetlands and other covers. CRP is authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended.

FSA and the state of Pennsylvania partnered in April 2000 to originally fund a \$210 million CREP that included 20 counties in the lower Susquehanna and Potomac River basins. That project was expanded in August 2003 to include an additional 100,000 acres and an additional \$200 million for 23 northern tier counties to improve the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay.

CREP has been highly successful in Pennsylvania. There are currently 4,315 contracts covering 77,256 acres. Approximately 125,000 acres have been offered for enrollment in the original 20 counties. With the announcement of the Pennsylvania Ohio River Basin CREP, which spans much of the western half of Pennsylvania, and the original project, which covered much of the eastern half of the state, CREP now covers the state's two major watersheds.

The Pennsylvania CREP is designed to help farmers and ranchers reduce nutrient and sediment loading of the Ohio, Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, and the streams and tributaries in these watersheds. The program will improve western Pennsylvania's surface water quality, groundwater quality and wildlife habitat. The Pennsylvania CREP will also contribute toward decreasing the Gulf of

Mexico's hypoxia zone through nutrient load reduction.

Eligible Areas

Producers can offer eligible cropland and marginal pastureland in Pennsylvania's Ohio River drainage basin, which consists of 16 counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Fayette, Forest, Greene, Lawrence, Mercer, Venango, Warren, Washington and Westmoreland. Interested producers should contact their county FSA office for specific information regarding their eligibility for CREP.

Goals

The goals of the Pennsylvania Ohio River Basin CREP are to:

- Enroll 65,000 acres of eligible western Pennsylvania farmland into CREP to help restore and protect wetlands, highly erodible land and riparian areas;
- Annually reduce edge-of-stream loading of 12,000 metric tons of sediment, 458 metric tons of nitrogen and 10 metric tons of phosphorous into the Ohio River watershed and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico;
- Restore 10,000 acres of riparian areas and in-stream and wetland wildlife habitat by providing herbaceous and woody cover along streams, stabilizing streambanks and floodplains, reducing water temperature, increasing time to runoff and facilitating groundwater recharge; and
- Restore up to 55,000 acres of highly erodible land to protect water quality and create wildlife habitat -- particularly grassland habitat for song and ground-nesting birds -- by planting native warm-season grasses and/or cool-season grasses, creating field borders and protecting intact habitats.

Approved Conservation Practices

To better serve program goals, the following CRP conservation practices are included in the Pennsylvania Ohio River Basin CREP:

For acreage enrolled to protect or retire highly erodible land and/or protect/restore wildlife habitat:

- CP1 - Permanent Introduced Grasses and Legumes;
- CP2 - Permanent Native Grasses;
- CP4D - Permanent Wildlife Habitat, Non-easement;
- CP10 - Vegetative Cover, Grass, Already Established; and
- CP12 - Wildlife Food Plot.

For acreage enrolled to protect or restore riparian wildlife habitat, wetland habitat, stream habitat and water quality:

- CP 8A – Grasswaterway Non-easement;
- CP9 - Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife;
- CP15A - Permanent Vegetative Cover (Contour Grass Strips), Non-easement;
- CP21 - Filter Strips (Grass Strips);
- CP22 - Riparian Buffers (Trees Planted Next to Streams);
- CP23 - Wetland Restoration;
- CP25 - Rare and Declining Habitat Restoration;
- CP29 - Marginal Pastureland Wildlife Habitat Buffer; and
- CP30 - Marginal Pastureland Wetland Buffer.

Sign-up and Eligibility Requirements

Sign-up for the Pennsylvania CREP began Apr. 19, 2004, and continues until enrollment goals are attained, and as long as there is statutory authority for CRP. Certain cropland must meet CRP cropping history criteria and be physically and legally capable of being cropped in a normal manner. Certain marginal pastureland is also eligible for enrollment provided it is suitable for use as a buffer practice. Persons who have acreage under an existing CRP contract or an approved offer with a contract pending are ineligible for CREP on that acreage until that contract expires. Other requirements will also apply. Contract terms will be set out in the CRP contract and regulations.

Payments

Subject to contract terms and certain limitations, Pennsylvania CREP participants will be eligible for the following types of USDA payments:

- **Signing Incentive Payment:** A one-time payment consistent with Handbook 2-CRP for land enrolled under approved conservation practices. This payment is made after the contract has been signed and approved.
- **Practice Incentive Payment:** A one-time payment equal to about 40 percent of the eligible cost for enrollment under approved conservation practices.
- **Cost-share Assistance:** Cost-share of up to 50 percent for the installation of approved conservation practices.
- **Annual Rental Payment:** An annual payment for the life of the contract. The payment consists of three components:
 1. **Base Soil Rental Rate (SRR),** which is determined by calculating the normal weighted average soil rental rate for the three predominant soil types using the current posted applicable local CRP soil rental rates.
 2. **Annual Maintenance Payment** in an amount consistent with applicable CRP procedures.
 3. **Incentive Payment** for:
 - Cropland enrolled to “protect or retire highly erodible land and/or protect/restore wildlife habitat” under conservation practices CP1, CP2, CP4D, CP10, CP12 and CP25. The incentive payments for these practices are Erodibility-Index (EI) based as follows:
 - 0.75 times the applicable SRR for land with an EI between 8 and 12;
 - 1.5 times the SRR for land with an EI greater than 20 to 25;
 - 1.75 times the SRR for land with an EI greater than 20 to 25;
 - 2.0 times the SRR for land with an EI greater than 25 to 30; and
 - 2.25 times the SRR for land with an EI greater than 30.
 - 4. Cropland or marginal pastureland enrolled to “protect/restore riparian wildlife habitat, wetland habitat, stream habitat and water quality” under conservation practices CP8A, CP9, CP15A, CP21, CP22, CP23,

CP29 and CP30. The payments are 1.5 times the applicable base rental rate.

In addition, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will:

- Provide cost-share assistance of up to 50 percent to install approved conservation practices;
- Provide in-kind services directly related to the implementation of agricultural best management practices through the county conservation districts and other non-government organizations;
- Pay costs associated with Pennsylvania Game Commission efforts to develop animal and bird habitats to enhance the impact of the lands retired through CREP; and
- Pay costs associated with providing other technical assistance, as necessary, through appropriate Commonwealth agencies, including County Conservation Districts, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture field staff, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Ducks Unlimited, Inc., and other organizations providing technical assistance.

Program Cost

The total cost over a 15-year period is estimated at \$146 million, with USDA contributing \$99 million and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania funding \$47 million. The \$146 million does not include any practice costs that may be incurred by participants.

Enrollment in Other Programs

CREP is another option under CRP that farmers and ranchers may select to enhance their land; applicants may still enroll eligible land in the regular general CRP or other CRP sign-ups when CREP is initiated. However, CREP may provide additional benefits not available through the general and/or continuous sign-up. For instance, per acre CREP payments are usually at a higher effective rate.

Haying and Grazing

Haying and grazing are not permitted during the contract period unless USDA allows them for emergency or managed haying and grazing purposes, if applicable, under normal CRP rules.

For More Information

More information on the Pennsylvania Ohio River Basin CREP is available from county FSA offices and on FSA’s Web site at www.fsa.usda.gov/crp.

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