



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Farm  
Service  
Agency

Ohio State FSA Office  
Room 540, Federal Building  
200 North High Street  
Columbus, OH 43215-2495

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## CRP Practice Cover Maintenance

April 1, 2008

Dear CRP Participant:

While the memories of this past winter are still fresh in our minds, the thoughts of climbing on to the tractor seat and doing field work is much more pleasant. Soon warmer temperatures will announce the beginning of the 2008 growing season. This is perhaps a good time to remind you, as a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) participant, of the importance of properly maintaining your CRP practice cover, especially grass cover.

When there is a foot of snow covering the ground, what food sources and cover are available for wildlife such as rabbits, pheasants, quail, and other grassland birds? Properly maintained grass cover provides tremendous benefits for wildlife. How can grassland birds survive during winter months if grass is maintained at a 4-6 inch height? Grassland birds depend on seeds and bugs as a food source, especially seeds in the winter.

Much of Ohio's decline in grassland birds, including game birds, is attributed to loss of good grass habitat because of conversion to cropland or urban development. Not allowing existing grass and forb cover to reach full maturity can be as devastating to wildlife as no grass habitat at all. Yes, CRP benefits more than just wildlife; it also reduces soil erosion and enhances water quality. Properly maintained CRP cover can easily accomplish all three of CRP's purposes.

Over 20 years ago when first introduced, the goal of CRP was to remove highly erodible land from crop production. Back then, conservation tillage was just in its beginning stages. As the popularity of CRP grew, additional benefits were realized, including protection of water resources and wildlife. Beginning with the 2002 Farm Bill, these 3 purposes of CRP were equally valued.

Now, CRP cover must be maintained to provide quality habitat for various species of wildlife. This can be accomplished without compromising erosion control or water quality.

Properly maintained CRP cover is creating a new look on the horizon. The perfect CRP cover is no longer a weed-free monoculture of dense grass. As no till changed the aesthetics of cropland, so too, diversity has changed the aesthetics of the preferred CRP practice cover. No longer is periodic or annual mowing of CRP cover an acceptable practice. In fact, unless performed as a spot-treatment of noxious weeds or invasive species, it is considered a contract violation and could result in some hefty penalties to you. This includes filter strips, of which many of the installation costs were shared by conservation organizations because of their wildlife benefits. Grassed waterways may be mowed to promote even flow of water and prevent channeling.

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To benefit wildlife, we must allow grasses and forbs (good weeds) to reach maturity and produce seeds. So, please don't get in a hurry to get on that tractor to mow your CRP acres. Instead, scout your fields early to determine areas of undesirable species and consult with your NRCS District Conservationist, Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist, ODNR Wildlife Biologist, or OSU Extension Office on best methods of treatment with minimal adverse impacts to existing wildlife. Remember, no disturbance, even spot-spraying, of your established CRP acres is allowed between March 1<sup>st</sup> and July 15<sup>th</sup> (Ohio's nesting and brood rearing season), unless prior approval is given by the Farm Service Agency Office administering your CRP contract(s).

For newly established CRP practices, you will be provided the opportunity to improve the cover for wildlife and receive cost share, beginning in year 4 of the contract. You will be sent notification regarding the requirement to perform a mid-contract management (MCM) activity(s). Participants with re-enrolled grass practices may voluntarily request to begin MCM prior to year 4 of the current contract, especially if it has been in a grass cover for over 10 years. Please contact your FSA Office for more details on mid-contract management and cost shared activities.

Please allow this letter to be a reminder to exercise great caution before disturbing your established CRP practice cover anytime of the year. Do not mow just because you think it makes it look better. Mowing will result in unattractiveness to wildlife. Unnecessary mowing (except to control undesirable species) is a contract violation and can result in expensive penalties, including contract termination. Please remember the purposes of CRP and consider its benefits to wildlife if properly maintained and managed. Conservation of our natural resources includes soil, water, and wildlife - not just oil.

Sincerely,

*Dorothy L. Leslie*

Dorothy L. Leslie  
State Committee Chairperson  
Ohio State Farm Service Agency