

# BUFFERNOTES



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### BUFFER NOTES

is written by the **National Association of Conservation Districts** in cooperation with the **Farm Service Agency**

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## CRP LEGACY BENEFITS ALL, YOST TELLS NACD

CRP is "the sharpest tool in USDA's conservation tool box," Farm Service Agency Associate Administrator for Programs Mike Yost told more than 1,000 attendees at the recent NACD annual meeting in Houston.

Addressing a plenary session of the 60th annual meeting, Yost noted that CRP will mark its 20th anniversary this year. He highlighted some program accomplishments, including:

- 450 million tons of soil erosion is prevented each year.
- 2 million acres of wetlands have been protected or restored.
- 34 Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs have been established across the nation. These federal-state partnerships "are one of our best tools," he said. CREPs are protecting resources as diverse as New York City's water supply and the Florida Everglades, he added.

"Every American is reaping the rewards of this program," he said. The program works only with the cooperation of America's farmers and ranchers, and partners like conservation districts, FSA and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, he said.



Mike Yost

As the program has grown in size and complexity, technical assistance needs have also grown, said Yost. "Workload demand will be critical," he said, adding that a plan for providing technical assistance will provide roles for federal, state and nongovernmental partners, with conservation districts included in that mix.

On a personal level, Yost noted that his father and son in Minnesota both have CRP lands. The theme of this year's NACD annual meeting, *Living a Legacy, Leaving a Legacy*, is "also a perfect fit for CRP," he said.

Also at NACD's annual meeting, FSA Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs John Johnson provided the association's Board of Directors with an update on CRP. Bob Stephenson, FSA

director of the Conservation and Environmental Programs Division, was on hand to brief the Agriculture Lands Resources Committee on new CRP developments.

The committee learned that among FSA's tasks in the coming calendar year is compliance checks on all CRP lands offered contract re-enrollments or extensions.

During the annual meeting, it was announced that contract holders for CRP lands eligible for re-enrollments and/or extensions would be notified of their options by letter. A new CRP signup was also announced. (See a related story in this newsletter.)

In related news, FSA's booth at the annual meeting offered information about new computer-based services to support the increasing numbers of producers who rely on computers for their operations. FSA staff explained how integrating GIS technology into service centers and making access available to producers will enable timely program delivery, reduce customer burdens and allow for delivery of quality products and services. FSA's eGov was also featured at the booth. FSA's eGov provides producers the option to access records and sign up for key programs without leaving home. For more information on the service, visit FSA's Web site at [www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/).

**"Every American is reaping the rewards of this program."**

**-- Mike Yost on CRP**



## ENROLLMENT ACTIVITY AND NEWS

The following information is excerpted from FSA's January 2005 CRP Monthly Summary. "Enrollment and Activity and News" is a regular feature in BufferNotes.

- Since Earth Day, April 22, 2004, contracts on 111,984 acres of wetland practices (including adjacent upland buffers) have been approved. As of January 2006, wetland practice contracts (including general and continuous sign-up) total 1.98 million acres.

- Initiatives as of January: upland bird habitat buffers (CP33), 76,411 acres; bottomland hardwood trees (CP31), 21,994 acres; non-flood plain and playa wetlands (CP23a), 15,029 acres; flood-plain wetlands (CP23), 82,339 acres.

- Continuous sign-up No. 30 is projected to reach 388,000 acres, 50 percent ahead of fiscal year 2004 continuous sign-up No. 28 (258,000 acres), and 15 percent below fiscal year 2003's sign-up (445,000 acres).

- As of January 2006, 3,238,007 acres were enrolled nationwide in CCRP and CREP. Average rental rate nationally was \$95.85. There were more than 305,000 contracts.

The full December 2005 CRP Monthly Summary can be viewed at [www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp\\_statistics.htm](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp_statistics.htm).

## CRP SIGN-UP, RE-ENROLLMENTS ANNOUNCED

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced Jan. 31 that USDA would begin notifying certain agricultural producers with CRP contracts expiring in 2007 that they may extend or re-enroll their contracts.

"Approximately 16 million acres subject to CRP contracts expire in 2007," said Johanns. "Fulfilling President Bush's directive to allow eligible farmers and ranchers to re-enroll or extend their CRP contracts helps ensure that the quality of soil, water, air and wildlife benefits of CRP continue across the nation for years to come."

FSA county offices have begun notifying CRP participants by mail with expiring contracts in 2007 if they are eligible for re-enrollments or two- to five-year extensions. Participants eligible for re-enrollment will be offered a 10- or 15-year contract provided there are restored wetlands on the original land enrolled in the contract. Fifteen-year contracts expiring Sept. 30, 2007, are not eligible for extension.

### EBI is key to contract future

FSA used the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) to determine eligibility for CRP re-enrollments or extensions. Additional credit was considered for contracts within national CRP conservation priority areas. The EBI addresses expected benefits to water quality, erosion, enduring benefits, air quality and wildlife habitat.

FSA ranked individual contracts into one of five tiers based on the environmental benefits of the original EBI score. Eligible participants ranking in the first tier (i.e., between 81-100 percent) of the EBI will be afforded the opportunity to re-enroll their land in new contracts. Farmers and ranchers with wetlands in this top tier ranking are eligi-

ble for a 15-year contract.

Eligible participants ranking in the second tier (i.e. between 61-80 percent) may extend their CRP contracts for five years. Eligible participants ranking within the third tier (i.e. between 41-60 percent) may extend their CRP contracts by four years. Eligible participants ranking in the fourth tier (i.e. between 21-40 percent) may receive three-year extensions. Eligible participants ranking in the bottom tier may extend their contracts by two years.

Before approving a re-enrollment contract or an extended contract, FSA will review the contract to ensure that the required cover is maintained and there is compliance with other contract provisions. In addition, to be eligible, participants must be able to show that they meet eligibility requirements for the new enrollment period. In the case of re-enrollments, updated rental rates will apply.

### General sign-up to begin March 27

USDA also announced that a general CRP sign-up will be held this spring. Farmers and ranchers will be able to make offers for CRP's competitive general sign-up from March 27, 2006, through April 14, 2006, at their local FSA offices. Offers for general sign-up will be evaluated based on five environmental factors (wildlife, water, soil, air and enduring benefits) and cost.

CRP is a voluntary program that helps farmers, ranchers and other agricultural producers protect their environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolling in CRP plant long-term, resource-conserving covers, with Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) providing rental payments, cost-share and technical assistance.

*More information on CRP developments can be reviewed in the July, November and December 2005 issues of BufferNotes at <http://nacdnet.org/buffers/archive.htm>. Contact your*

*local FSA office or visit the FSA Web site at: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp.htm>.*

## WASHINGTON RESEARCH FOCUSES ON BUFFER INCOME

A lot of attention has been placed on value of riparian forest buffers in protecting agricultural water courses. Researchers in Washington State found that partial harvest of a buffer can also provide economic value. The researchers also noted that profitability of buffers can be an inducement to participation in voluntary conservation programs. Their findings were reported in the July/August 2005 issue of the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation.

Carolyn J. Henri, an economist at Washington State University in Stanwood, California, and Jon D. Johnson, an associate professor at Washington State University in Puyallup, Washington, investigated the income potential of a hybrid poplar riparian buffer on a western Washington blueberry farm. They inventoried trees in the buffer, developed several management scenarios for the trees and evaluated the economic potential of each scenario. The issue of whether a harvested buffer could adequately maintain its environmental function was beyond the scope of the research, they reported in the Journal.

"Results show that a positive net present value can be achieved in the buffer by harvesting 50 percent of the timber volume and selling half as veneer logs," they reported. Net present value was slightly negative when one third of the harvestable timber was sold. Harvest and sale of only pulpwood was not profitable, they added.

Achieving a positive net return depended greatly on harvest volume, they reported, adding, "How much timber volume can be removed from a buffer without jeopardizing its water protection function is currently unknown in western

# NACD TA REPORT OFFERS THREE AREAS OF ACTION

The National Association of Conservation Districts Agricultural Lands Resources (ALR) Committee recently completed its report to the Farm Service Agency (FSA) on "The Future of Technical Assistance for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)."

NACD President Bill Wilson handed the final document to John Johnson, FSA deputy administrator for Farm Programs, at the recent NACD Annual Meeting in Houston. The report offers three key recommendations.

It summarizes concerns that have been expressed by districts and partners about the expected surge of CRP work. Contracts on 28 million acres are due to expire over the next few years, many of which will likely be re-enrolled. The process will be more involved, due to the increase in program complexity since CRP's inception in 1985. At the same time, technical assistance (TA) workloads for other farm bill conservation programs have grown substantially due to new and

increased authorizations in the 2002 Farm Bill. Overall, TA funding has not matched the financial assistance program growth.

The ALR Committee, led by Chair Luther Waterland of Montana, recommended three areas of action.

1. Improve programmatic estimate of technical assistance needs. The process has evolved over the 20-year life of the program. Recommendations in this area would include obtaining a better measure of actual workload and how it varies geographically. Incorporating natural resource measures and statistics from conservation districts and technical services providers would help in formulating better estimates for the future. A better understanding of the workload for each aspect of the program should also be developed.

2. Adopt a set of principles to optimize environmental benefits. The committee included 10 suggestions, with the overarching goal that there should be a commit-

ment to conservation by all CRP TA providers. The report recommends building on the expansion of technical assistance providers, including the use of nontraditional sources. It calls for ensuring the technical competence and capacity of providers. Another suggestion is to ensure consistency by making sure TA providers use the existing Natural Resources Conservation Service Field Office Technical Guide and



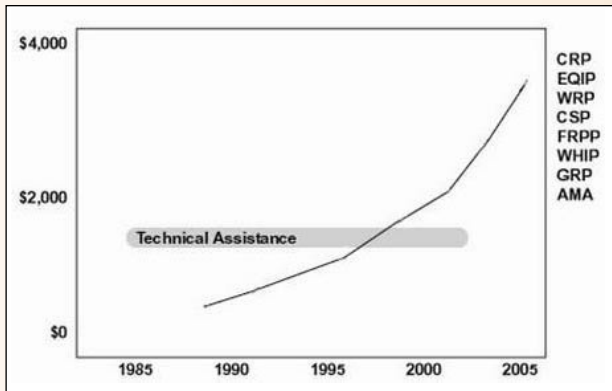
**NACD President Bill Wilson (left) hands over a technical assistance report to FSA Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs John Johnson during the NACD annual meeting in Houston, Texas.**

other established technical protocols. It suggests utilizing a conservation plan as the common tool for program participation and providing for continuity in service (point of contact) to clients.

3. Implement key administrative and legal arrangements. The seven items in this area covered issues such as tort and liability protection, streamlining contract processes, training, consistency and equitability, and flexibility.

NACD will continue to work with FSA to help address CRP technical assistance concerns. The report indicates there are challenges ahead but that they are surmountable if all of the potential participants work toward solutions, keeping both conservation and the customer in mind.

NACD Director of Government Affairs Rich Duesterhaus coordinated preparation of the report. For more information, contact him at rich-duesterhaus@nacdn.org.



**Graphic shows how spending on conservation programs has increased while TA funding hasn't kept pace. Numbers in left column are in millions.**

Washington." They also noted that poplar wood production returns are comparable to lower-end local crops such as hay and green peas.

The buffer they studied is in Skagit County, Washington. The 11.3-acre buffer was established in 1994 on the north side of a slough. It is adjacent to a 25-acre field of blueberries.

In addition to their findings on harvest value, the researchers also noted that "Environmental credits, such as carbon, water quality and habitat credits are potential future sources of income from riparian buffers." They added: "The use of alternative species and extension of the harvest

age are also potential means of enhancing buffer net income on smaller acreages."

The authors noted that the issue of whether voluntary buffers in riparian zones should be actively managed or left as a "no touch" zone is a matter of debate. However, they added, "If riparian buffers could be managed economically, the net cost to both landowners and government agencies of installing and maintaining buffers could be greatly reduced. In addition, the ability to manage the buffer profitably is a critical element to the voluntary adoption of riparian buffers as a widespread farming practice."

## CSP SIGN-UP UNDER WAY

The 2006 Conservation Security Program (CSP) sign-up is under way in 60 watersheds nationwide. The sign-up began Feb. 13 and will conclude March 31.

USDA announced preliminary selection of 110 watersheds for fiscal year 2006 based on the president's budget request. Based on available funding, CSP will be offered in 60 watersheds across all 50 states, the Caribbean and Guam.

The sign-up will only include those producers who do not

have an existing CSP contract. To be eligible for CSP, most of a producer's agricultural operation must fall within the boundaries of a selected watershed. Applications which meet CSP's minimum requirements as set forth in the amendment to the Interim Final Rule published in the Federal Register March 25, 2005, will be placed in enrollment categories. Categories will be funded in alphabetical order until funds are exhausted. The CSP amendment to the Interim Final Rule is available for viewing at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>.

Certain conservation buffers are among practices that boost a producer's qualifications for

CSP. They include filter strips, terraces and grassed waterways.

Producers begin the application process by filling out a self-assessment to determine if they meet the basic qualifications for CSP. Self-assessment workbooks are available in hard copy at USDA Service Centers within the watersheds, and electronically at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>.

2006 marks the third CSP sign-up. The privately-owned land currently enrolled in CSP covers nearly 11 million acres in the 220 eligible watersheds in all 50 states and the Caribbean area.

CSP is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. Payments are made using three tiers of conservation contracts. CSP will be available any year on a rotational basis in as many watersheds as funding allows.

*Additional information about CSP is available at [www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp).*

## **BUFFER BRIEFS**

### **BufferNotes offers email notification**

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formats. Send an email to [BufferNotes-request@nacdnet.org](mailto:BufferNotes-request@nacdnet.org), and we will add you to our email list and send you a monthly email summary and link to the complete online version of BufferNotes. Due to a technical problem, some email addresses added to our subscription list in the past year may have been lost. If you subscribed during any time in 2005, please renew the subscription by emailing the above address. Mailing addresses for hard copies of the newsletter were not affected. Those addresses were updated for distribution of the December 2005 newsletter. They will be updated again for the March issue.

### **Great Lakes Basin grants deadline nears**

The Great Lakes Commission is accepting grant applications for demonstration, program development and information/education projects that improve water quality through soil erosion and sediment control. The application deadline is March 15, 2006. Visit the Great Lakes Basin Program Web site at [www.glc.org/basin](http://www.glc.org/basin) to view the RFP and the online application submittal process. Call the Great Lakes Commission at 734-971-9135 for more information. In 2005, the program funded 128 active projects.

### **Share your partnership success stories**

There's nothing like a good success story, and sharing it nationwide makes it even better. BufferNotes currently reaches about 9,100 conservation partners across the nation in a monthly newsletter and thousands more on the web. Our newsletter mailing list includes about 3,000 conservation districts, virtually all local USDA service centers, state and national partners and policymakers, media and non-governmental agencies. We are always in search of partnership success stories. The goal is to provide practical information for conservationists who want to enhance their own CRP, CCRP and CREP activities. We are also interested in how programs such as these are blended with other local, state and national programs to accomplish conservation goals. Contact: Bill Berry, Editor, BufferNotes, 1973 Strongs Avenue, Stevens Point, WI 54481, 715-341-9119, [billnick@charter.net](mailto:billnick@charter.net).

### **Agroforestry Notes topic is visual simulation**

The January issue of Agroforestry Notes, published by the National Agroforestry Center, is entirely devoted to visual simulation as a tool for installing riparian buffers,

windbreaks and other practices. As a conservation tool, visual simulation uses image-editing computer software to present illustrations of how systems would appear at various stages of development or with different species compositions or arrangements. Agroforestry Notes is on the Web at <http://www.unl.edu/nac/pubs.html#periodicals>.

### **NCASI bulletin focuses on riparian management**

The National Council for Air and Stream Improvement has recently released Technical Bulletin No. 908, Riparian Zone Forest Management and Protection of Biodiversity: A Problem Analysis. The bulletin highlights recent scientific developments and expert perspectives on riparian management and effects on biodiversity in the Pacific Northwest. It explores the political and scientific aspects surrounding riparian management in the region, focusing on the effectiveness of best management practices in conserving specific aspects of diversity, such as impacts of disturbance on imperiled or sensitive species. The report was produced by a multidisciplinary team led by Dr. Larry Irwin, manager of NCASI's Western Wildlife Program, and Dr. Daniel Sarr of the National Park Service. The report can be viewed at <http://www.ncasi.org/>.

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