

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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NEBRASKA CREP PROVIDES SOME DROUGHT RELIEF

Producers in the Platte and Republican River basins in southwest Nebraska are getting some relief from drought these days, but not the kind Mother Nature provides.

The Platte-Republican Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is providing an alternative, and producers are taking advantage of it. Signups began little more than a year ago for the CREP, and 37,931 acres were enrolled as of June 7. A total of 52,000 acres are actually in the pipeline and poised for conversion to native grasses and other practices, according to Dick Ehrman, liaison between the state's Department of Environmental Quality and Natural Resource Districts.

"I wouldn't be surprised if drought hasn't driven enrollment," Ehrman says. "Stream flows are in a real low condition," he says. The drought is in its seventh year.

The Republic River basin is especially hard-hit, and producers there have taken advantage of the CREP to a greater degree than their counterparts along the Platte. The Platte basin is mostly flat, fertile ground, while the Republican is more sloping. Land values are higher along the Platte, and that has served to limit enrollment.

Nebraska is also under a court order to reduce water utilization in the Republican

River basin.

The Platte-Republican CREP, announced in March 2005, is among a new wave of CREPs that target reduced water consumption among their goals. Reducing water consumption is also a goal of CREPs in Colorado and Idaho.

The Platte-Republican CREP offers producers a new tool. "It's probably a good piece of the puzzle," says Ehrman. "Probably no one program is going to solve all the problems out there." The

Continued on next page

JOHANNIS TO KEYNOTE CREP FORUM

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johannis will provide the keynote address when conservationists from across the country gather for the 2006 National CREP Forum Aug. 14-17 in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Johannis will speak at a luncheon Aug. 15. Earlier in the day, Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman will make an opening address and welcome participants.

Also scheduled to speak will be Farm Service Agency Associate Administrator for Programs Glen Keppy. His presentation at a dinner meeting Aug. 15 will highlight a

celebration of 20 years of the Conservation Reserve Program.

"CREP: Creative Solutions, Multiple Benefits, Many Partners," will gather partners from across the nation at The Cornhusker hotel.

A working agenda, registration forms and other information are posted at <http://www.agr.state.ne.us/crep/crep.htm>.

Conference registration questions can be directed to Bobbie Kriz-Wickham at the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, 800-831-0550 or 402-471-2341.

An FSA display traveling around the country this year highlights the 20th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program.



"The Platte-Republican CREP, announced in March 2005, is among a new wave of CREPs that target reduced water consumption among their goals. Reducing water consumption is also a goal of CREPs in Colorado and Idaho."

Environmental Quality Incentives Program has also been available to producers, with a state option to permanently retire irrigated acres. EQIP provides the option to continue farming non-irrigated acres, so it is popular with some producers. CREP is popular in local communities because its acres stay on local tax rolls during the 10- to 15-year retirement period.

The CREP easements provide producers with options in the face of the prolonged drought, says FSA Program Specialist Greg Reisdorf in the Nebraska State FSA Office. "Part of the deal under CREP is that the producer maintains the water rights for the period of the CRP contract," he says. "When it comes out, he has the right to irrigate again. Hopefully, there'll be water for irrigating by then." In the meantime, CRP payments are based on irrigated land rental rates.

Reisdorf expects more enrollments this fall if dry conditions continue.

NRDs have big role in sign-ups

Natural resource districts play an important role in the CREP partnership. "They're really on the front line for signing people up and getting practices implemented," Ehrman says.

The CREP picked up steam after some early growing pains, says Dan Smith, district manager in the Middle Republican NRD in Curtis. In addition to signing up, certifying acres and helping install practices, districts are active in outreach.

Water issues in states like Nebraska can be controversial. Part of the outreach effort is aimed at gaining acceptance. "We've gone out and made sure that parties other than the producers understand, if not agree with, why the CREP is important." There are other tools for dealing with water quantity issues, such as purchasing water and permanently retiring acres, "but that takes a lot of money," Smith says. "We were lucky with this program to latch onto federal funds."

The expected combined federal and state obligation is approximately \$158 million, with \$122 million coming from FSA and \$36 million from Nebraska. That does not include any costs that may be borne by producers. The state's share of funding for the CREP includes in-kind services, such as water conservation, water quality and wildlife enhancement activities within the CREP area. The state also provides cost-share payments to qualifying participants and funding for monitoring and evaluation projects.

Four natural resource districts and four irrigation districts in the area formed the Republican River Education Coalition to share information, ideas, concerns and problems. The group has used Water for the West grant funds to hold educational meetings with producers, bankers and other interest groups. "We're not trying to win converts, but we're trying to make sure people understand what is going on," Smith says.

Enrollments along the Platte are somewhat below target, primarily because payments aren't high enough to compete with rental rates. There may be some effort to transfer some of the Platte acres to the more popular Republican basin, he says.

The Platte-Republican CREP is the state's second. The Central Basins Project CREP, signed in 2002, covers all or portions of 37 central and eastern Nebraska counties. So far, in its first two years, producers have signed just shy of 2,000 contracts protecting 23,867 acres. That \$209 million program has a 100,000-acre goal.

The Central Basins CREP was the first in the nation to target pivot irrigation corners for wildlife cover, Reisdorf says, noting, "We were also the first to develop a water conservation CREP."

For more information on the Platte-Republican CREP, contact Dick Ehrman at dehrman@nrdnet.org, or call 402-471-2219.

METRO PARTNER BOOSTS CREP IN OREGON

Landowners in the Tualatin watershed within Washington County, Oregon, are receiving enhanced financial incentives through CREP, thanks to a unique urban-rural partnership.

In December 2004, the state and USDA completed a revised Oregon CREP agreement that broadened stream eligibility, included new practices already available through the continuous Conservation Reserve Program, added state financial commitments, and involved a new partner, Clean Water Services, in funding CREP in the watershed.

More landowners are now eligible for the CREP across Oregon.

The Tualatin CREP includes special funding provisions for the Tualatin watershed in Washington County, thanks to the partnership with Clean Water Services. The county is one of three making up the greater Portland metropolitan area. It has a population of more than 445,342. The state and its federal and local partners have been promoting these changes to the program and have seen strong enrollment in many regions that were not previously eligible.

Clean Water Services is the public utility that manages municipal wastewater for the metropolitan area. It was facing considerable expenses meeting new temperature requirements in the Tualatin watershed. Instead of installing expensive cooling equipment to meet the temperature requirements, CWS is putting additional funds into CREP in the Tualatin and also entered into an agreement with the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District to provide technical assistance.

Bruce Cordon with Clean Water Services led an advisory group of agencies and landowners to develop the enhancements to CREP in the Tualatin watershed. "It has been a joy to work on this project, and the farming community has been an excellent resource," Cordon says. John

McDonald, board member of the Tualatin SWCD and member of the advisory group, added, "Federal, state and local agencies, Clean Water Services, and landowners all stepped out of the box to make this happen."

CREP is already highly popular in several regions of Oregon. In other regions, such as the Tualatin, the program has historically been less popular. One reason is that financial incentives were not enough to convince landowners with high-value crops to participate. However, with the new funding from Clean Water Services, several landowners have signed up in the local USDA office, including Ralph Duyck.

"I support conservation, water quality and wildlife habitat," Duyck said during a tour of his riparian buffer plantings. "If you put a few bucks with it, I'm ready to go!"

(This article was originally printed in the state of Oregon's 2005 CREP Report.)

PANEL ADVISES NEW DIRECTION FOR CEAP

ANKENY, IOWA - A Blue Ribbon Panel of experts recently released a report that offers direction for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to ensure the nation's conservation programs are efficient and effective outlets for the taxpayer's money, according to the Soil and Water Conservation Society.

The panel has been analyzing a USDA project, at the request of USDA, since 2004 to offer an external policy-level review. The project, the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), is a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices used by private landowners participating in selected U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs.

The panel - organized by the SWCS - believes CEAP creates a window of opportunity for a strategic approach to

EIGHT YEARS OF BUFFERNOTES

By **BILL BERRY**
BufferNotes Editor

BufferNotes newsletter begins its eighth consecutive year of publication with this issue.

A lot has happened in the years since our first issue proclaimed the "Time is Right for Buffers." World events, the political landscape at home, Farm Bill programs, conservation agency leadership, you name it. Heck, my two daughters even went off to college and graduated in that time. Well, almost.

One thing that hasn't changed is the fact that a lot of hard-working conservationists roll up their sleeves every day and do something good for the land and water. They are farmers and ranchers and conservation staff of local, state and national offices. By working together to protect these precious resources, they are helping all Americans reap multiple environmental and economic benefits. In a sense, they are also safeguarding our national security by protecting vital lands.

BufferNotes was the brainchild of Max Schnepf and Bill Horvath. Schnepf was coordinator of the National Conservation Buffer Initiative, which had a goal of establishing 2 million miles of buffers in the U.S. Horvath was policy analyst for the National Association of Conservation Districts. Both have since retired from those positions, but their imprints remain on this project. They recruited me to edit, write and compile BufferNotes, and it has been an honor and tremendous learning experience to be personally involved with each issue.

The original mission of BufferNotes was to promote conservation buffers and related practices offered in the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. Much has changed since July 1999, when there were seven CREPs. Today there are 36. Our first issue announced also that FSA reclassified marginal pastureland for CCRP. That opened the program to much broader eligibility.

Increased flexibility and program enhancements have occurred in all of CRP over the years. BufferNotes' mission has broadened to now cover all aspects of CRP. Needless to say, there's been a bit of activity in recent years.

CRP is 20 years old this year, and FSA is marking that anniversary with a series of events, including a tribute during this year's CREP Forum Aug. 14-17 in Lincoln, Nebraska. Millions of CRP acres are in or will be in transition in the next few years - to contract re-enrollment or extension, or to other uses. CRP occupies about 10 percent of the farmland in the U.S., so this is a big deal.

There are many opinions about CRP, but few will dispute that it has helped get a handle on this nation's erosion problems, enhanced wildlife habitat and improved water quality. Today, we see the program being used to address an array of important regional and state-specific resource concerns through CREP, the federal-state-local partnership. Among noteworthy new developments, recent CREP agreements in Idaho, Colorado and Nebraska include reduced water consumption among their

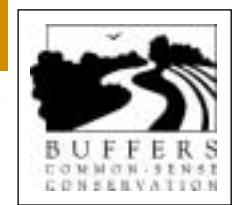
goals. Water quantity is obviously a major concern in the West. Irrigated lands in states east of the Mississippi River also face water quantity issue in certain areas, especially as demand grows from both agriculture and municipalities.

Yes, CRP has changed a lot. In the process, perhaps not always by intent, but certainly by result, it has protected 36-million-plus acres from conversion to other uses at a time when land use changes have proceeded with remarkable speed across the nation, often to the detriment of our working lands base.

At various times, either or both the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency have been partners in publication of BufferNotes, along with NACD. FSA and NACD are the major partner these days, but we continue to gladly highlight activities of all the partners involved in this historic private lands conservation program. That's another thing about CRP. That list of partners continues to grow.

So off goes BufferNotes into year eight. We'll continue to share success stories, report on new research and keep abreast of breaking news. The coming months include a potential new Farm Bill, more news about CRP contract evolution and, most likely, more new CREPs.

As always, BufferNotes welcomes story ideas, suggestions and general comments about how we're doing. Feel free to contact us at billnick@charter.net, or 715-341-9119.



conservation. The panel concluded, however, that USDA must change CEAP's direction and emphasis and outlines a blueprint for that new direction in the report titled, "Conservation Effects Assessment Project: A Final Report."

Four key points stand out in the panel's recommendations. First, using computer models to report how government programs are performing cannot - and must not - substitute for on-the-ground monitoring. "The Blue Ribbon Panel recommends Congress mandate one percent of all conservation program funding to support on-the-ground monitoring of the benefits those programs are producing," says Craig Cox, executive director for the

Soil and Water Conservation Society.

The second take home message of the report is Congress should update and reauthorize the Soil and Water Conservation Act of 1977. Cox says, "The panel thinks the updated Act should authorize sufficient appropriations and provide the authority for multi-agency and stakeholder collaborative effort needed to assess and evaluate effectively conservation programs as producing the environmental benefits taxpayers expect."

Third, USDA must focus CEAP on a handful of critical and explicitly stated environmental goals that are expected to drive conservation efforts over the coming decades and look more to regional, rather

than national-level assessments and reporting.

Finally, the panel recommends building the science base to support environmental management on working lands should be a primary purpose of CEAP. The panel envisions a network of watershed studies that would document the most effective means of producing environmental benefits on agricultural land.

"CEAP is a compelling opportunity to ramp up the effectiveness of our conservation programs," said Cox. The panel applauds USDA for taking on the task and urges USDA to take the recommended actions. "We can't afford to miss this opportunity," said Cox.

The Conservation Effects

Assessment Project (CEAP) began in 2003 as a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices used by private landowners participating in selected U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs. The project consists of three components:

National Assessment: Providing national summary estimates of conservation practice benefits and assessing the potential for USDA conservation programs to meet the nation's environmental and conservation goals. Cropland, wetlands, wildlife and grazing lands will be assessed.
Watershed Assessment Studies: Basic research on conservation practices in

selected watersheds nationwide to provide a framework for evaluating and improving performance of national assessment models.

Bibliographies and Literature Reviews: Current literature on conservation programs. Two literature reviews in progress will document what is known and not known about the environmental benefits of conservation practices and programs for cropland and fish and wildlife.

To view the additional recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel in the full report, go to www.swcs.org.

EMERGENCY CRP HAYING, GRAZING IS EXPANDED

USDA has expanded CRP acreage eligible for emergency haying and grazing for livestock producers in counties approved for haying and grazing in the states of Alabama, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming.

Producers' CRP rental payment will be reduced by only 10 percent instead of the standard 25 percent on CRP lands that are grazed in 2006.

The expansion will allow livestock producers from eli-

gible counties to obtain needed hay or forage. The expanded area radiates 150 miles out from any county approved for emergency haying and grazing in any above-mentioned state. For convenience of CRP participants and the public, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) will post a map of counties approved for emergency haying and grazing with an approximate 150-mile radius to its web site by clicking "Conservation" at www.fsa.usda.gov.

To be approved for emergency haying or grazing, a county must be listed as a level "D3 Drought - Extreme" or greater, or have suffered at least a 40 percent loss of normal moisture and forage for the preceding four-month qualifying period. State FSA committees are reminded they may authorize emergency haying or grazing of CRP in counties currently listed as level D3 drought according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. CRP participants should submit applications with their local USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices upon approval.

In addition to making forage available on CRP land, USDA is operating a range of programs to assist producers affected by drought or other natural disasters.

More information on emergency haying and grazing is available at local FSA offices

and online at: www.fsa.usda.gov, click on Conservation.

18 STATES GET ECP FUNDING

Agriculture Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner has announced that USDA will begin allocating \$11.8 million in Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) funding for 18 states to help producers rehabilitate land damaged by natural disasters.

"Excessive rainfall, flooding, drought and other severe weather conditions have taken a toll on our farm and ranchlands," said Conner. "These Emergency Conservation Program funds will help assist farmers and ranchers to rehabilitate and restore conservation practices on their lands."

ECP gives producers additional resources to remove debris from farmland, restore fences and conservation structures, provide water for livestock in drought situations and grade and shape farmland damaged by a natural disaster. The program is administered by USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) state and county committees. Eligible producers will receive cost-share assistance of up to 75 percent of the cost of the approved practice, as determined by

FSA county committees.

The 18 states will receive the following in ECP funds: Arkansas \$643,000, Arizona \$27,000, California \$255,000, Colorado \$413,000, Georgia \$73,000, Hawaii \$957,000, Illinois \$12,000, Kentucky \$215,000, Missouri \$1,676,300, Nevada \$493,000, New Hampshire \$48,000, New Mexico \$1,092,000, Oklahoma \$532,000, South Dakota \$1,963,000, Tennessee \$2,328,800.

Producers should check with their local FSA offices regarding ECP sign-up periods, which are established by county FSA committees.

More information on ECP and other disaster assistance programs is available at local FSA offices and online at: <http://disaster.fsa.usda.gov>.

USE BUFFERNOTES STORIES

BufferNotes stories are available on the National Association of Conservation Districts Web site, at www.nacdnet.org/buffers. The site includes an archive of past BufferNotes editions. Groups promoting conservation buffers can download information for use in their publications without cost. We ask that BufferNotes be credited if materials are used.

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