

# 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 AT 20: NATIONWIDE BENEFITS

The Conservation Reserve Program turns 20 this year, and the Farm Service Agency has made available a variety of tools to help conservation partners celebrate the anniversary. FSA's CRP 20 Home Page is <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/crp20/index.asp>.

At that site, FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter kicks off the celebration with a column that documents CRP's contributions. "CRP is a testament to the value America's farmers and ranchers place on land stewardship. By preserving our nation's resources, CRP encompasses even more," she says.

"The rewards of farmland conservation extend well beyond farms and into our daily lives. We all depend on fresh air, clean water and an

**Kansas CRP landowner Doyle Derrick stands out in his walnut trees. Derrick's story is one of dozens on an FSA Web site promoting the 20th anniversary of CRP. He has a total of 217.6 acres enrolled on seven contracts under the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP).**



abundant, safe food supply. CRP and the related federal/state partnerships of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program help ensure protection of our basic and vital natural resources."

BufferNotes joins in the celebration this month with a

guest column from National Association of Conservation Districts Chief Executive Officer Krysta Harden. See her comments on page 2. BufferNotes will use the 20th anniversary theme throughout the year as we cover the nation's premier private lands conservation program.

Materials on the CRP 20 home page include state-by-state success stories reflecting the varied benefits of CRP. Geographically diverse, the stories cover a wide cross-section of farming operations and CRP practices and initiatives.

### Other CRP 20 tools also offered

Also available as a pdf is a CRP 20th anniversary tri-fold brochure, providing information on CRP, its initiatives and benefits. The brochure is print-ready and can be repro-

## CRP 20 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Here's a partial list of benefits achieved over 20 years of CRP:

- 450 million tons of erosion reduced per year
- 2 million acres of wetland and adjacent buffers restored
- 48 million metric tons of carbon dioxide reduced
- 170,000 stream miles protected
- Water supplies protected for dozens of metropolitan areas, including New York City
- \$1 billion in state funding invested to implement CREP
- Additional 2.3 million ducks per year produced on CRP lands in the Prairie Pothole Region
- Nearly 750,000 northern bobwhite quail produced annually on CRP lands
- 34 CREP partnerships in 27 states

**"CRP is a testament to the value America's farmers and ranchers place on land stewardship. By preserving our nation's resources, CRP encompasses even more." -- FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter**

duced and used by partners across the country.

Also available:

- A photo gallery featuring CRP practices and people around the country.

- A publications link where special CRP 20 publications will be placed.

- A news and events link.

- Links to information on CRP, CREP, the CRP Planting for the Future conference, the White House Conference on



## ENROLLMENT ACTIVITY AND NEWS

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

General sign-up No. 33 announced for March 27, 2006 - April 14, 2006. Accepted contracts will begin October 1, 2006 (FY 2007).

Continuous sign-up No. 30 is projected to reach 390,000 acres, 50 percent ahead of FY 2004 continuous sign-up No. 28 (258,000 acres), and 15 percent below FY 2003's sign-up (445,000 acres).

Since Earth Day, April 22, 2004, contracts on 118,160 acres of wetland practices (including adjacent upland buffers) have been approved. As of February 2006, wetland practice contracts (including general and continuous sign-up) total 1.99 million acres.

**The full February 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).**

Cooperative Conservation and Local Service Center locator information.

**More information on CRP and its related programs can be found in the BufferNotes archive of past issues at: [www.nacdnet.org/buffers](http://www.nacdnet.org/buffers).**

## CRP TA PILOT FOCUSES ON 10 STATES

Managing technical assistance on more than 28 million CRP acres scheduled to expire in the next few years will be a daunting task. FSA hopes that a pilot project now under way in 19 states will help.

FSA staffs are beefing up on CRP conservation plans in training sessions operated Validus, an Iowa-based environmental services firm, says Lynne Winemiller, FSA program analyst.

States involved are Idaho,

Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Washington. Training has already begun in some states.

Training focuses on the basics of a conservation plan, what goes into the plan and what staff should know as it reviews and certifies plans. "We want to bring our FSA employees up to point where we can look at conservation plan, whether from NRCS or private technical service providers, and to see if it's up to par as to what we need," Winemiller says.

Familiarity with conservation plans will help FSA as it seeks assistance in providing technical assistance in the coming years, Winemiller says. The Natural Resources Conservation Service will continue to play a role in that area, but NRCS staff is stretched thin providing assistance on an array of conservation programs. Other options

include private technical service providers, conservation districts, states and nongovernmental groups.

Another goal of pilot state training will be to help states clearly understand how to deploy a technical assistance program once it is rolled out later this year. "We're in the process right now of deciding how to administer technical assistance programs," Winemiller says.

USDA announced last year a plan for CRP re-enrollments and contract extensions. Conservation plans will be required only for those lands that qualify for re-enrollment. Under the plan, a five-tier system will be used based on the Environmental Benefits Index. Producers whose lands place in the top 20 percent based on the EBI will be eligible for re-enrollment.

*For more details on the re-enrollment and extension plan, see the October 2005 issue of BufferNotes newsletter.*

## LET'S DEVELOP CRP VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Twenty years ago when the Conservation Reserve Program was first established, I was staffer working for a member of Congress from my home state of Georgia. While our interests in the 1985 Farm Bill were mainly focused on commodity policies and rural development, we were also intrigued by the prospects of a new program paying landowners to retire land.

### GUEST COLUMN

Also, during those times, there was a lot of discussion regarding how CRP could be used to control production. While the true believers in conservation were very committed to the importance of CRP as a means of protecting our most valuable lands, others envisioned the potential of CRP as a set-aside program. The effectiveness of the program in the early years was a mixed bag.

As more landowners realized the benefits of CRP and began to understand its value, the program matured and grew in popularity. However, it also began to be blamed for every closed business in rural America and every farm sale. Unjustly so, the program received a less than positive reputation in some circles and was often called the retirement program for farmers in the Midwest and Great Plains.

We all learned a lot during those early years of the program, and lessons resulted in improvements and a more dynamic program. The implementation of continuous sign-ups, CREPs and other special initiatives has vastly improved the effectiveness of the program.

Landowners, conservationists and the American taxpayers are now beneficiaries of a more meaningful and targeted program that helps better manage our lands for soil erosion, wildlife habitat and water quality.

As we celebrate 20 years of history and accomplishments, we must also look ahead. Currently arguments often are focused too much on what is the "right" number of acres for a successful CRP program. I fear we are missing the key questions that will insure success in the next 20 years of the program.

We must ask what changes are needed in the program to meet the evolving demands and concerns of landowners and operators as well as serve as a good investment for taxpayers.

And, if the program lives up to its ambitious mission, can the delivery system match these demands?

I believe for the CPR program to remain one of the cornerstones in agriculture conservation, supporters of the program must answer these tough questions with definitive and visionary answers. Farmers, ranchers and conservationists need to work together to make certain we do have good answers for the future of the program, understanding it, too, has to stand up to the public scrutiny and the test of time.



**Krysta Harden**  
NACD Chief  
Executive  
Officer

ter in the BufferNotes archive at [www.nacdnet.org/buffers](http://www.nacdnet.org/buffers).

## CRP ACTIONS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE THREATS

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced this month that agricultural producers in six Oklahoma counties and 27 north Texas counties currently being impacted by wildfires can remove dry grass on and move cattle to CRP acreage without facing charges for grazing value or the baled value of removed forage.

"The wildfires in Texas and Oklahoma have burned more than one million acres, devastating many rural communities, as well as our farmers and ranchers," said Johanns.

USDA will assist producers who need to immediately relocate livestock from burned pastures by opening CRP acreage to them. The action will also have an added benefit of helping to lower the risks of additional wildfires.

Unusually dry conditions, along with high winds, dry grass and brush, caused the extreme fire conditions.

CRP participants in the Oklahoma and Texas counties can voluntarily remove excess dry grass cover on CRP-enrolled land, which will help to reduce fire potential.

On a case-by-case basis, FSA county offices will grant authority for CRP participants to remove the dry grass.

FSA officials will work with local public safety officials to comply with local fire regulations. Producers can bale CRP grass to create firebreaks and

reduce potential fire threats. Controlled burns are subject to local oversight and regulation. Any cover removed must be destroyed or donated to local livestock producers whose rangeland or pastureland has been destroyed by the wildfires.

In addition, many livestock producers in the affected counties have lost a large portion of rangeland, pastureland and fences. On a case-by-case basis, FSA county offices will grant permission for CRP participants in these counties to move cattle to CRP land for the next 60 days.

FSA will also provide cost-share assistance for producers whose CRP land was burned by the wildfires. The cost-share will be used to reseed damaged fields that would not regenerate without reseeding.

*More information on the*

*CRP Texas wildfire assistance is available at local Texas FSA offices and online at: <http://disaster.fsa.usda.gov/fsa.asp>*

## MONTANA FOCUSES ON BMPs FOR RIPARIAN AREAS

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer has directed members of his cabinet to work with stakeholders from around the state to develop Best Management Practices (BMPs) for riparian areas.

"Development along rivers and streams that destroys protective riparian areas is possibly the single most urgent ecosystem threat facing Montana today. Not only do these waterways and riparian

## WISCONSIN RESEARCH ASKS: 'WHEN, WHERE FOR BUFFERS?'

Conservation buffers aren't needed everywhere to achieve water quality goals, and where they are, they should be designed with careful attention to upland contributing areas and other considerations, says a report of the Wisconsin Buffer Initiative (WBI).

The group was asked in 2002 in response to a new state law on nonpoint pollution to come up with the scientific underpinnings of a statewide program to mandate buffer standards. Any mandates would have to be approved by a future state Legislature.

University, agency, environmental, agricultural and natural resources representatives on the WBI reviewed scientific literature and recommended an adaptive management approach to design and locate buffers in the state. The University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture and Life Sciences followed with research to determine buffer effectiveness under various state conditions. The resulting report was delivered to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Among its recommendations:

- Improving stream quality, protecting and restoring aquatic biological communities and sustaining lake water quality are criteria for establishing and maintaining a list of WBI-prioritized watersheds.
- WBI watersheds receive special consideration for any new state funding based on a tiered approach and tied to fiscal considerations. "It is also recommended that

conservation agencies and organizations in Wisconsin coordinate existing programs to address high-ranked WBI watersheds," the report says.

- WBI watersheds targeted for remediation are informed by a letter from the DNR to the appropriate land conservation committee (known in other states as conservation district boards). The committees will review the information and other data to determine which agricultural fields should receive priority treatment based on greatest water quality benefit in the watershed.

- When working with landowners in a vulnerable area within a WBI-funded watershed, committees should formulate a plan based on a conservation systems approach. These measures would be designed to reduce the impact of concentrated flow and runoff of nutrients and sediments.

- If a buffer is necessary, it "will be engineered based on elevation contours so as to specifically address the upland contributing area." The report's executive summary notes: "In this approach, sections of buffer that receive runoff from larger drainage areas are wider than sections with small



Wisconsin Buffer Initiative participants visit research sites in Iowa to collect information in 2003. (BufferNotes photo)

drainage areas. Allowing for contributing area more effectively removes soil and nutrients from runoff than constant width buffers, and it reduces the amount of land taken out of production."

- USDA NRCS buffer standards should be updated to incorporate the knowledge gained through the research conducted by WBI and of Wisconsin Discovery Farms. "In particular, the NRCS standards should recognize contributing drainage area, in-field soil erosion rates and variations in buffer designs and landscape considerations."

*A pdf of the report in pdf can be reviewed at: [www.dr.s.wisc.edu/wbi](http://www.dr.s.wisc.edu/wbi). For more information, contact Pete Nowak, professor, Department of Rural Sociology, UW-Madison, [pnowak@wisc.edu](mailto:pnowak@wisc.edu).*

areas provide fish and wildlife habitat, they also provide jobs and recreation,” Schweitzer said in a March 8 letter. “I am asking each of you to assist in development and distribution of these voluntary BMPs, because maintenance of the integrity of streams and rivers is crucial to the quality and quantity of water available to Montanans for domestic, agricultural, industrial and recreational use.”

Schweitzer asked state agency directors to appoint a representative from their respective agencies to work with the Governor’s office, streamside area managers and other interested stakeholders to:

- Gather existing BMP information from various sources and compile it into a list of practices that should be commonly used across Montana;
- Contact interested stakeholders throughout the state to make sure they are aware of the effort and have an opportunity to comment on proposed BMPs;
- Finalize the proposed BMPs and make them available to all riparian area managers, builders, architects and engineers through use of state, local, and federal, recreational and professional groups and clubs, and other logical contact points;

- Make sure that the federal agencies, conservation districts and stakeholder groups are informed and involved.

## PLAYA GROUP SEEKS OPINIONS ON RESOURCES

Farmers and ranchers across the southern High Plains are being asked to participate in a mailed survey asking for their opinions about the Ogallala Aquifer, wetlands, and other natural resources in the region.

The questionnaire - entitled the “High Plains Landowner Survey” - is being conducted by the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV), a non-profit partnership of wildlife and agriculture agencies, corporations and conservation groups and landowners dedicated to conserving wildlife habitat in the Ogallala Aquifer region. The survey aims to assess agricultural producers’ experience with and willingness to conduct natural resource conservation. The data collected will help resource managers create future and modify existing conservation programs to better serve producers’ needs.

The survey covers 21 questions and takes about 15 minutes to complete. The survey can also be completed online

at: [www.playasurvey.com](http://www.playasurvey.com). In return for completing the survey, the PLJV will send participants a free 30-minute DVD or VHS copy of the newly-released film, “Playas - Reflections of Life on the Plains,” which explores the ecological and economic values of playa wetlands, which are the primary source of recharge for the Ogallala Aquifer.

## SWCS SEEKS PAPERS, PRESENTATIONS FOR WORKSHOP

The Soil and Water Conservation Society seeks abstracts of oral papers and poster papers for presentation at a workshop on the environmental effectiveness of conservation practices on agricultural land.

The workshop will be held October 11-13, 2006, at the Westin Crown Center Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri.

The deadline for abstract submissions is June 1, 2006. Submit abstracts via this web link: [www.swcs.org/en/swcs\\_international\\_conferences/managing\\_agricultural\\_landscapes](http://www.swcs.org/en/swcs_international_conferences/managing_agricultural_landscapes).

The primary objective of the workshop is to bring together individuals in the technical and scientific communities who are working to quantify

the environmental benefits of conservation practices on agricultural land at landscape and/or watershed scales.

The workshop is part of ongoing activities organized by the Society in support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s CEAP (Conservation Effects Assessment Project) initiative.

## TURKEY FEDERATION, FSA SIGN MOU

FSA and the Wild Turkey Federation have signed a memorandum of understanding pledging to work together to conserve natural resources. FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter and National Wild Turkey Federation President Jere D. Peak signed the MOU at the NWTF 30th Anniversary Convention, in Nashville, Tenn.

“We have worked together for years; this simply formalizes those efforts, and helps us promote the work we do together,” said Lasseter. “Our conservation programs do make a difference. This year is the 20th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program rollout. The program has saved 450 million tons of soil from erosion, helped clean up water and improved air quality, as well improved wildlife habitat.”

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