

BUFFERNOTES



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BUFFER NOTES

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

Send story ideas and other buffer news to:

Bill Berry, Editor
"BufferNotes"
1973 Strongs Avenue
Stevens Point, WI 54481
715-341-9119
billnick@charter.net

Send change of address to:

"BufferNotes"
1973 Strongs Avenue
Stevens Point, WI 54481



LANDOWNERS HAVE CRP OPTIONS

With the bulk of Conservation Reserve Program acres set to expire in the next few years, landowners have decisions to make. Between 2007 and 2010, 400,000 contracts covering 28 million acres are scheduled to expire.

Landowners may choose to re-enroll or extend their contracts under a plan announced by the Farm Service Agency this fall. (See BufferNotes, September-October 2005.) This approach relies on the Environmental Benefits Index to help producers and FSA to determine eligibility for re-enrollment or extensions.

Landowners may also want to consider other options, and some states have made information available to help guide their decisions.

The "Post-CRP Management Options and Issues Information Series" in Minnesota is one example. It was actually made available several years ago by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, says Barbara Weisman, senior planner in the Agricultural Resources Management and Development Division.

It remains an excellent tool for CRP landowners pondering the future. The series is available for review at <http://www.mda.state.mn.us/crp/default.htm>.

Key subject areas include "Evaluating the Condition of



Contour strips and crops make for a picturesque scene in an Iowa field. See a story on Page 2.

Your CRP Land," "Keeping the Land in Grass," "Producing Renewable Energy" and "Leasing the Land." Each title in the series provides an overview of a particular topic, discusses related issues distinctive to CRP land and points readers to additional resources for further information. Many of the land management options covered in the series present an alternative to returning the land to row crops. This could be especially important for highly erodible CRP lands that aren't re-enrolled or extended.

While the information is targeted to Minnesota landowners, it may have value for those in other parts of the

country, Weisman says. Options for Minnesota landowners include enrolling some lands in the state's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program II.

"The series has been very popular," she says. The state hopes to cooperate with the FSA to provide additional information, Weisman adds.

Minnesota has more than 1.4 million acres in general CRP. Contracts on the bulk of those acres will expire in the next few years.

Elsewhere, Iowa State University's Continuing Education and Communication Services makes available the publication, "Life After CRP:

"FSA and NRCS are applying \$1 million of the CEAP funding to develop a national framework to monitor and estimate the wildlife impacts of CRP in terms that have real meaning to the public. CEAP research efforts reflect a shared philosophy of cooperation and teamwork that will help FSA and NRCS set CRP goals and measure progress toward meeting these goals." (See story, page 4)

Decisions, Decisions,” at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/CRP1.pdf>. It, too, was prepared several years ago but offers valuable information for landowners.

Contact **Barbara Weisman** at barbara.weisman@state.mn.us.

STATE BOOSTS IOWA OPTIONS FOR CONSERVATION

Iowa producers have lots of conservation options from CRP and other Farm Bill programs.

Even so, there's sometimes a need to complement those programs with other tools.

The Iowa Buffer Initiative, a partnering program adminis-



ENROLLMENT ACTIVITY AND NEWS

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

- As of October, 66,186 acres of upland bird habitat buffers (CP33) have been enrolled, including 18,153 acres in Illinois and 12,522 in Kansas.

- Through October, fiscal year 2005 continuous sign-up No. 30 is 46 percent ahead of 2004 continuous sign-up No. 28 and 11 percent behind 2003's sign-up. Currently, sign-up 30 projection is 380,000 acres.

- USDA's policy for general contracts expiring in 2007 through 2010 can be viewed at www.fsa.usda.gov/pas.

tered by the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Division of Soil Conservation, has done just that. Earlier this year it began to provide a new \$200-per-acre signing incentive for landowners and operators who want to install contour buffer strips and filter strips but who want the option of haying and grazing those strips without penalty. Payments are contingent upon the landowner/operator agreeing to maintain the practice for five years.

The new incentive is in addition to others offered under the initiative, says Jim Gillespie, field services bureau chief in the Division of Soil Conservation. The buffer initiative already offers a state \$100-per-acre incentive for regular CCRP practices and for certain other practices that don't qualify for CCRP.

The new incentive reflects the partnership's recognition of the need to target land that might not otherwise qualify for CCRP, Gillespie says. "When the program started, we thought it was important to pick up those extra practices. We saw that they fit into the landscape," Gillespie says. In the latest case, a local program was the catalyst for the statewide incentive.

The Division of Soil Conservation has helped to fund the North Thompson River Water Quality Project in Adair County. As the Adair County Soil and Water Conservation District looked for ways to introduce conservation practices, it identified the need for the contour strip incentive.

"As we got into discussing it, the more we talked about it, the more we said, 'You know, this is something that ought to be considered statewide,'" Gillespie says. It is now, although the practice fits best in areas of the state where producers farm and raise livestock on hilly terrain.

Taking the next step in Adair County

No-till farming is big in Adair County, says District Conservationist Kevin Kuhns. "If you want the next step in soil conservation, contours can

make big gains," he says. But current CRP rental rates don't match up with cash rental rates, and some farmers need to raise hay.

The idea with the new incentive is to introduce what might become permanent practices, says Kuhns. "When we work with a producer on, say 200 acres, we will have five-year maintenance, but we'll also have a plan in there. After five years, we'll move the strip up or down and reseed. Or if the strips fit in the hill where we like it, we'll kill the strip, no-till for one year and then reseed it."

Phil Patterson, project coordinator for the North Thompson Creek Watershed Project, says the project's goal is to control deposition of sediment and nutrients in the 111,600-acre watershed and sub-watersheds. In addition to contour buffers and filter strips, the project includes water and sediment control basins, water-holding structures, grade stabilization structures, waterways and terraces.

"We have several grass waterway projects going, and one of the ways we're ranking these waterways to get funding is we're also implementing contour buffers with them," says Patterson. "There's a cost-benefit ratio for ranking, and it gets down to the most sediment stops for the least amount of dollars."

Conservation compliance is another benefit

Producers who adopt the practices may enjoy benefits down the road, too, says Gillespie. "It may be beneficial for future Conservation Security Program payments."

He also hopes for long-term benefits. "We become creatures of habit. Once a producer utilizes the system and sees the benefits, we're hoping they will adopt it long-term." At the minimum, it may encourage more producers to farm on the contour, which itself would be a conservation gain, Gillespie says.

Iowa's buffer initiative brings together the strengths of a number of cooperating agencies and organizations to market and assist landowners

with options available through CCRP. The initiative provides up to \$1.5 million per year to boost conservation on agricultural lands. Incentives offered in the program have been credited with boosting CCRP signups by 28 percent in Iowa, the state with the most CCRP acreage in the nation.

The program has enabled soil and water conservation districts to employ additional staff to inform landowners about the benefits of the CCRP. Districts also received funding to purchase the equipment necessary to apply the practices.

For more information on the Iowa Buffer Initiative, go to www.agriculture.state.ia.us/Bufferinitiative.htm, or contact Jim Gillespie at jim.gillespie@idals.state.ia.us.

REACHING OUT, TEXAS STYLE

It's a long road, but 'Riparian Notes' promotes practices

NRCS wildlife biologist Steve Nelle works in some big country. Based in San Angelo, Texas, his territory in NRCS Zone 2 is 400 miles across. That's a lot of miles, and it can take another couple of hours off the main road to reach the front doors of some of the sprawling ranches owned by his cooperators.

These days, a lot of those ranchers are interested in riparian buffer and wildlife exclusion projects under CCRP. The practices have really taken off in Texas, and they're reaping rewards for the environment and for his cooperators.

Nelle covers a lot of miles right from his office. He has taken advantage of his writing and networking skills to create "Riparian Notes," an occasional publication that seeks to educate about the water quality and wildlife benefits of protecting riparian areas that wind through ranches.

The electronic publication goes to 100 NRCS offices, landowners and partner agencies. It can be found on several partner Web sites, including the Texas Wildlife Association's at www.texas-wildlife.org.

OLD PICKUP TRUCKS AND RIPARIAN AREAS

By **STEVE NELLE**
NRCS Wildlife Biologist

SAN ANGELO, Texas -- You may be surprised to find out that old pickup trucks and riparian areas actually share much in common. I began discovering this truth after acquiring a 1950 Dodge pickup. Please don't ask for a logical explanation about why this truck was needed. Maybe it was the fact that it is a stout, no frills vehicle; a link to a more simple era. No plastic, no power steering, no power brakes, no power windows, no AC, no computer, no radio. Maybe it was a pragmatic notion that old trucks increase in value each year, while newer trucks decrease in value. Maybe it was the challenge of taking an old broken truck that no one else wanted and seeing its potential.

Unfortunately, the truck had to be towed to the house since it was completely non-functional at the time of purchase. The first job was to become familiar with all the parts and components and assess the

condition of each. Hours and hours were spent crawling underneath or with head buried under the hood, looking carefully, trying to take note of everything. The list of things that needed replacement or repair was long: radiator hoses, fan belt, clogged fuel line, busted brake line, brake cylinders, master cylinder, brake shoes, bad wiring, bad muffler, bad tires, leaky fuel pump, and the list could go on and on. It all seemed a bit overwhelming; but there are priorities when doing such work. It can't all be fixed at one time.

After getting a new 6 volt battery and rebuilding the carburetor and rigging up an auxiliary fuel system, the old flat head engine started right up. It was amazing that the old thing sounded as good as it did after so many years of neglect and non use.

It was equally amazing to discover all of the things that were still in working order, including the starter, generator, water pump, oil pump, distributor, headlights, gauges, wipers, and even the heater.

This gave new hope that this truck could actually be restored to a basic level of function without spending a small fortune.

So how does this relate to creeks and riparian areas? Like the old truck, some creeks are ugly, neglected and non-functional. The list of riparian problems and limitations sometimes seems monumental: down-cutting, channel widening, poor access to floodplain, poor sinuosity, poor width / depth ratio, lack of stabilizing grasses and sedges, poor recruitment of riparian woody plants, over-grazing, mowing, human trampling, etc. Where does one start in trying to restore a broken creek? It can't all be fixed at one time.

Like the amateur truck mechanic, the riparian mechanic will first need to become familiar with the basic parts and operation of creeks. A keen sense of observation is needed to learn the parts and dynamics and how the parts work together and how the systems are interrelated.

In some cases, merely changing one or two little things is all that is needed to start an amazing recovery process. A change in grazing or mowing, for example, will lead to an improvement in vegetation, which will in turn help stabilize banks, slow floodwaters, drop sediment, build floodplains and improve sinuosity. As the natural processes are allowed to occur, creek restoration begins to take place.

The difference of course, is that a creek is much more than a machine. Creeks consist of living components and natural ecologic, hydrologic and geologic processes that work together in an amazing way to restore themselves. Human intervention is often needed to tweak and adjust the processes, but major long term inputs of labor, capital and energy are usually not required.

Like old trucks, creeks are special in the eyes of those who understand and appreciate such things. And both will continue to increase in value as time goes on.

"I mainly want to expose people to riparian concepts. People don't always have time to read much, so I try to keep them to one page. I try to condense principles into something they might read," he said. Sometimes that means straightforward subjects, like recent Riparian Notes titled "The Right Kinds of Riparian Plants," and "Gaining Ground through Good Land Stewardship." Now and then, he goes in a different direction. "Old Pickup Trucks and Riparian Areas," was another recent issue. It compared beat-up riparian areas to old pickup trucks. (See accompanying article by that title.)

Practices make sense to longtime ranchers

Riparian buffers have really caught on in Texas. The state had nearly 27,000 acres at the end of October 2005. Zone 2,

across the Edwards Plateau and Trans Pecos in western and west central Texas, had almost 19,000 acres.

Ranchers have long known that riparian areas need protection, but CCRP and its livestock exclusion incentives for pasturelands have provided the right fit, Nelle said.

"It surprised us that the interest came from traditional rancher-farmers more than weekend farmers and absentee guys," Nelle said. "It was the only program up to this time where rancher could enroll and get payments for doing good conservation," he said. "A lot of these guys wanted to fence their creeks off for years, but the investment for all that fence was prohibitive." CCRP provides 90 percent reimbursement and \$7- to \$10-per-acre maintenance. Together with other payments and incentives, it adds up for Texas cooperators.

In fact, cooperators don't mind having to build fences well beyond the protected riparian areas to avoid wash-outs. They don't get paid for parts of the fenced-out areas, but the dollars and cents still add up.

Wildlife benefits are plentiful. Ranchers often lease hunting rights on the land. Turkey, deer and other game species flourish in the riparian areas. "Out here without hunting leases and the wildlife income, some would not make it," Nelle said.

"I try to work as much as I can to integrate wildlife management and water conservation into a plan. If you get a properly vegetated riparian area running through a pasture, it stores a lot of water and gives that water back after runoff recedes," he says. "You can keep more water in that watershed and make some of those intermittent dry creeks

more perennial. You get aquifer recharge out of that, plus you're keeping chemicals out of the water."

Riparian Service Team was a big help

Nelle credits the work of the National Riparian Service Team for helping to raise awareness about riparian protection and restoration in the West. The team is a partnership of the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, the USDA Forest Service and NRCS.

"They're really active and have helped us very much. On their own nickel, they came to Texas five or six times for workshops," he said. (See BufferNotes April 2003 at <http://www.nacdnet.org/buffers/03Apr/riparian.htm> for more on the team.)

Contact Steve Nelle at steve.nelle@tx.usda.gov.

CRP RESEARCH FOCUSES ON CRITICAL BIRD POPULATIONS

USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service are providing \$367,000 in funding for research to examine the effects of CRP on duck, northern bobwhite quail and pheasant populations.

"With a current enrollment of almost 35 million acres, CRP is restoring, protecting and enhancing wildlife habitat nationally," said Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns. "By documenting the increases in wildlife populations through this research, we will be able to quantify CRP accomplishments and improve the program's accountability." Johanns made the announcement in keynote remarks at the National Agriculture Day Luncheon at the National Press Club.

The grant by FSA and NRCS will be awarded to three institutions that will

carry out the wildlife research projects. The agencies awarded \$150,000 to the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of Montana to estimate increased duck populations, \$138,000 to Mississippi State University to estimate increased northern bobwhite quail populations and \$79,000 to West, Inc., to estimate increased pheasant populations. Each project will also examine CRP's impact on songbird populations.

These projects will help provide USDA with insight into increasing the environmental benefits of CRP and are in line with the President's Management Initiative to measure performance, improve service to the American public and better explain how conservation protects our nation's natural resources. Ducks, quail and pheasants are critical

wildlife species that embody our national heritage. Increases in their populations reflect enhanced wildlife protection offered by programs like CRP.

The research is part of a five-year USDA Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) to quantify the environmental gains of USDA conservation programs on agricultural land. CEAP is designed to assure that USDA applies consistent, scientifically rigorous performance measures when documenting the conservation benefits achieved.

Estimating impacts in meaningful terms

FSA and NRCS are applying \$1 million of the CEAP funding to develop a national framework to monitor and estimate the wildlife impacts of CRP in terms that have real meaning to the public. CEAP research efforts reflect a shared philosophy of cooperation and teamwork that will help FSA and NRCS set CRP goals and measure progress toward meeting these goals.

As part of the CRP CEAP project, in 2003 FSA and NRCS teamed with the United States Geological Survey and Department of Energy to identify and estimate the environ-

mental functions gained from restoring croplands to wetlands. FSA is also supporting research conducted by Oklahoma State University that evaluates the effect of CRP haying and grazing on vegetative vigor, grassland ecosystems and the economics of grassland management systems.

In addition, FSA is helping Iowa State University perform research to identify and estimate the amount of cropland suitable for wetland restoration in order to better filter nutrient runoff from cropland.

This research will provide a background to address problems associated with hypoxia, a loss of oxygen occurring in certain bodies of water.

Other potential subject areas for research include estimating CRP's role in increasing other wildlife populations and furthering CRP's benefits using Geographic Information System/Global Positioning System technologies to influence selection criteria.

More information on CRP is available at local FSA offices and online at:
<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp.htm>.

Further information on CEAP is available online at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/nri/ceap/>.

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