

NEWS

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Questions & Answers

Conservation Reserve Program - Maryland State Enhancement Program

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1. What is the Conservation Reserve Program?

The Conservation Reserve Program, known as the CRP, is the Federal Government's single largest environmental improvement program and one of its most productive and cost-efficient. The CRP encourages land owners and operators to plant permanent areas of grass and trees on land that needs protection from erosion, to act as windbreaks, or in places where vegetation can improve water quality or provide food and habitat for wildlife. Landowners and operators enter into contracts with the USDA lasting between 10 and 15 years. In return, they receive annual rental payments, incentive payments for certain activities, and cost-share assistance to establish the protective vegetation.

2. What is eligible for the Continuous Sign Up Program?

Highly valued environmental practices are eligible such as filter strips, riparian buffers, shelter belts, field windbreaks, and living snow fences, grass waterways, shallow water areas for wildlife, salt-tolerant vegetation, and wellhead protection areas. Since September 1996, land owners and operators can sign up for these high-priority conservation practices at anytime. Prior to that time, land owners had to apply to participate in CRP only during announced sign-up periods.

3. What is the Maryland State Enhancement Program?

The Maryland Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) builds upon the CRP program of devoting sensitive land to environmental uses and the highly-valued environmental practices of the continuous sign-up by further targeting the program to 100,000 acres of eligible land. Only the land contributing to the degradation to the Chesapeake Bay is eligible through enrollment of riparian buffers, wetland restoration, and highly erodible land with an erodibility index greater than 15 within 1000 feet of a stream or other water body. Additionally, USDA and Maryland will provide financial and other incentives to encourage enrollment of these vital lands.

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4. How are these three programs different?

The CRP encourages enrollment of highly erodible and other environmentally sensitive cropland and, in certain case, marginal pasture land. The CRP is highly competitive in nature and all offers to enroll in the program are ranked using an environmental benefits index which measures soil erosion, water quality, wildlife habitat, enduring benefits beyond the contract period, air quality, conservation priority areas, and cost. Opportunities to enroll are announced periodically.

The continuous sign up permits enrollment at anytime because the acceptable conservation practices are highly valued. These practices cover relatively small acreages and are a subset of the broader range of practices available under the CRP. Financial incentives are also provided to encourage enrollment.

The CRP and the continuous sign up are national in scope.

The Maryland Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) differs from the other CRP initiatives in that it coordinates CRP with the goals and funding of the Maryland state government. Second, it is limited to the land within Maryland. Third, compared to the continuous signup practices, only riparian buffers and certain highly erodible land are eligible. Although not available under the continuous signup, wetland restoration is also eligible. Fourth, a higher incentive rate is authorized to encourage the enrollment of land to protect the Chesapeake Bay. Fifth, Maryland will provide resources to supplement the financial incentives for the establishment of conservation practices and the purchase of permanent easements.

5. What is the estimated cost associated with the Maryland State Enhancement Program?

USDA's share will amount to approximately \$150 million for annual rental payments and about \$20 million for cost-share payments during the next 15 years for a total of \$170 million. Maryland will spend approximately \$15 million in cost share payments and another \$10 million in easement purchase payments for a total of \$25 million during the same 15 year period. Total projected outlays over 15 years from both Federal and State sources could total \$195 million.

6. Why was Maryland accepted for this program?

After a rule published in the Federal Register permitted Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program agreements, the Maryland proposal was the first of a number of proposals in which agreement was reached on all issues.

7. Are any other states being selected for this program?

Any state may submit a proposal for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. Only the most environmentally valuable agreements will be selected. USDA intends to issue a Federal Register providing additional information to states.

8. How many acres does Maryland currently have under CRP contracts?

Maryland has 19,057 acres enrolled in CRP as of October 1997.

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