

Conservation Buffers



Your CRP contract is expiring. What are some choices for your fields?

As your Conservation Reserve Program contract nears its end, you will be making decisions on what to do next with your land. While much of the CRP land in Wisconsin is productive and likely will go back into crop or hay production, many acres of CRP land are environmentally sensitive and are not recommended for annual crop production. There are areas in most CRP fields that, if maintained and managed as permanent cover, will provide both protection to our rivers, lakes and wetlands while reducing input costs on less productive land.

Consider maintaining or establishing areas of permanent vegetation on these critical parts of the landscape. Known as conservation buffers, these patches of vegetation have the potential to:

- Reduce the amount of sediment reaching a stream by up to 75%
- Reduce nitrogen in surface ground water by up to 50% or more
- Reduce snow removal costs by thousands of dollars per mile of road
- Protect fields from flood damage and flood debris
- Reduce drain and road ditch maintenance costs
- Reduce nutrients and pesticides in runoff water
- Squaring up fields for ease of crop production
- Diversify wildlife habitat opportunities

Consider establishing or keeping your eligible acres of expiring CRP contract cover in one or more of the following buffer practices to protect soil and water quality. The existing vegetation will likely meet the requirements of the practice. In most cases, the buffer practices are already established as a part of a CRP contract. NRCS is ready to assist landowners with the location and management of buffers. CRP fields tend to be rough, due to the activity of burrowing animals. Keeping these areas in a grass buffer may require a leveling operation(s) to smooth the areas for subsequent equipment traffic, field operations, and maintenance. Some buffers may also be re-enrolled in the continuous CRP.

Grassed Waterway

Grassed waterways are natural or constructed channels that direct concentrated runoff to stable outlets without creating a gully, reducing sediment delivery to our water resources. Before converting CRP fields back to crop production, areas that would benefit from a grassed waterway should be located and left to control gullies. Besides controlling erosion, grassed waterways can be harvested for hay. If hayed after the primary nesting season, they can provide nesting habitat. Grassed waterways work best when combined with good residue management and crop rotations reducing water erosion from the field.

Field Borders

A field border is a strip of perennial vegetation at the edge of a cropland field. They provide a firm level

space on which to turn machinery throughout the year. They can reduce wasted crop inputs (fertilizer, herbicides, etc) due to overlapping, especially with crops requiring numerous field operations. Excessive wheel traffic compacts the soil in the headlands resulting in reduced water infiltration and poor root development that can reduce yields. Field borders reduce soil erosion by eliminating the need to plant end rows up and down the hill. Where field edges are affected by salinity, field borders can control the spread of salinity into non-saline soils.

Field borders can also act as a filter strip between a field and road or drainage ditch. Field borders should be at least 16 feet wide, or wide enough to allow equipment to turn on the headlands. Field borders can also be used for forage production. New seeding should be a mixture of grasses that will form a dense sod. In existing grass stands, interseeding of legumes can improve the forage quality.

Filter Strips

Filter strips are areas of permanent vegetation along a stream, drainage ditch, wetland or tile intake used to reduce sediment, pesticides and nutrients in runoff. Established filter strips generally consist of stiff, upright sod-forming grasses such as switchgrass. However, many existing CRP cover types can be effective. Filter strips should be at least 30 feet wide when measured parallel to the runoff flow direction. Wider is better. When managed effectively they trap sediment on the upper edge of the filter strip and within the adjacent field. They increase infiltration, and transform entrapped pollutants to non-toxic compounds.

Filter strips are most effective when combined with residue management, crop rotation and grassed waterways. Nutrients and sediments are kept in the field where they can be used for crop production. When properly designed and installed, filter strips can be used to “smooth” field edges, making the adjacent field easier to farm. When they are

properly managed, they provide nesting, escape and winter cover for wildlife.

Riparian Buffers

Riparian buffer strips can be an area of grass, forbs or trees/shrubs located adjacent to and up gradient from watercourses or water bodies. They are also used to reduce sediment, pesticides and nutrients in runoff and shallow ground water flow. Conservation buffers help stabilize a stream and create shade to reduce or maintain its water temperature. Buffers also offer a setback distance for agricultural chemical use from water sources. They create or improve riparian habitat for wildlife including nesting, escape and winter cover. Buffers also provide connecting corridors that enable wildlife to move safely from one habitat area to another.

Conservation buffers are not the entire answer to protecting soil and water resources. When applied in correct locations and maintained properly they return conservation benefits far in excess of the small foot print of land taken from traditional production. Buffers are most effective when combined with other conservation practices such as conservation crop rotations, residue management, nutrient management and pest management.

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