



Conservation Title: Land Retirement Programs

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Introduction

Two of the longer-running programs within the conservation title are land retirement programs, where farmers or ranchers voluntarily enter into a contract to set aside land from agricultural production in return for a payment. The objective of the land retirement programs is to conserve and enhance soil, water quality, and wildlife habitat and restore other environmental resources. The two programs mentioned here are the Conservation Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program. A short summary of both programs and the changes that will occur as a result of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) are summarized for each program in the following paragraphs.

Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enables farmers or ranchers (*producers* through the rest of this fact sheet) of eligible highly erodible cropland, marginal pastureland, converted wetland and/or converted wildlife habitat, to enter into a 10-15 year contract in return for annual rental payments to retire their land. The purpose of the land retirement is to conserve and improve soil, water quality and wildlife resources and to address issues raised by state, regional and national conservation initiatives.

Changes to the CRP:

- Maximum acreage enrollment will decrease to 32 million acres during calendar years 2010- 2012.
- Alfalfa grown as part of a rotation practice will be considered an agricultural commodity in determining land eligibility.
- The farmed wetland and buffer acreage pilot program is reauthorized from 2008-2012.
 - Adds constructed wetland (adjacent to a row crop) designed to receive agricultural drainage, wetland formerly used for commercial pond-raised aquaculture, and cropped prairie wetland as eligible wetlands.
 - Increases producers' acreage enrollment to 40 contiguous acres of wetland or 20 acres of flooded farmland.
- Harvesting, grazing or using forages commercially on CRP land is still not allowed, except it may be permitted at a reduced rental payment when kept consistent with conservation of soil, water quality and wildlife habitat.
 - Adds routine or prescribed grazing to control invasive species under appropriate vegetative management and stocking rates.
 - Adds installation of wind turbines in consideration of the location, size of the land and amount of wildlife habitat.
- Contract evaluation criteria will now include local preference (a producer is local if they are a resident of the county, or a contiguous county, of enrolled land).
- The National Agricultural Statistics Service shall conduct an annual survey of dryland and irrigated cash rental rates for cropland and pastureland with the results made public and used as the basis for determining future soil rental rates for CRP.
- Total annual rental payment limits will remain at \$50,000 per year per producer.
- Adds cost share payments for thinning existing stands of trees used as windbreaks, shelterbelts and wildlife corridors with funding of \$100 million during fiscal years 2009-2012.



- CRP contracts may be modified to ease the transition of land from a retired producer to a beginning or socially disadvantaged producer to return some or all of the land into production.
 - Enables the beginning or socially disadvantaged producer to make conservation and land improvements or begin the organic certification process one year before the date of contract termination.
 - The retired producer will receive payments two years after date of termination of contract as long as they are not a family member of the beginning or socially disadvantaged producer.
 - Provides \$25 million for fiscal years 2009-2012 to facilitate these land transitions.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) assists owners in restoring, protecting, or enhancing wetlands on eligible private land through permanent easements, 30-year easements, restoration cost-share agreements, or a combination of these options.

Changes to the WRP:

- Maximum acreage enrollment cap increased to 3,041,200 acres through 2012.
- Land must have been owned for 7 years (previously required only 12 months).
- Compensation is determined upon the lowest of: the fair market value (using the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practices or an area-wide market analysis survey), a geographical cap, or the offer made by the landowner.
- Easements valued at \$500,000 or less will receive easement payments in a lump sum payment or in up to 30 annual payments.
- Easements valued in excess of \$500,000 will receive at least 5, and no more than 30, annual payments, except in some instances a lump sum payment can occur.
- Payments for restoration cost-share agreements are limited to \$50,000 per year per person or legal entity.
- Creates a Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program and Reserved Rights Pilot Program through September 30, 2012.
 - Maximum acreage enrolled in program will be 746,200 acres over five years.
 - A landowner may reserve grazing rights if it is compatible with the land, consistent with long-term wetland protection and enhancement goals, and complies with a conservation plan.
- Evaluation criteria include conservation benefits, cost-effectiveness, and if the landowner is willing to contribute financially to the cost of the easement to leverage Federal funds.
- Other criteria include the purposes of the easement that are likely to be achieved, the productivity of the land, and the on-farm and off-farm environmental threats if the land is left in agricultural production.

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