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Farmers Urged to Talk Over Options for Expiring CRP Ground

Holton, Kansas—Speakers at the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) informational meetings held in Holton and Seneca Kansas in early March agreed on one thing: farmers with expiring CRP ground need to talk over their options with FSA and County Conservation District offices before they make decisions. “We want to talk to you” was the message from FSA speakers, county conservation district staff, fish and wildlife specialists, and watershed representatives.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program designed to reduce erosion, protect water quality, and benefit wildlife. Through CRP, the landowner is compensated with a payment for establishing an approved cover on the land instead of farming it. But contracts for large chunks of CRP land across the state are expiring soon. That means landowners have some big decisions to make—decisions that will impact farm profitability, soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

FSA personnel are concerned that producers may break out CRP ground before the contracts expire, which leaves them open to fines. Conservation district representatives want producers to understand all their options for reenrollment and for proper management practices if taken out of CRP.

The Meadowlark Extension District, Delaware WRAPS, Jackson and Nemaha County Conservation Districts, USDA FSA and NRCS, Kansas Rural Center, Pheasants Forever, and Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks organized the informational meetings. “We wanted to address producer questions as they relate to expiring or potentially expiring CRP contracts,” stated David Hallauer, Meadowlark Extension District spokesman.

At the Holton meeting, David McAfee, Jackson County Director of FSA, said there are currently 555 contracts for CRP in Jackson County—totaling 18,500 acres. Over the next two years, contracts for more than 8,000 of those acres will expire. “We’re going to have to make some decisions pretty soon,” he said. “Farmers and landowners need to explore options available as CRP contracts expire.”

McAfee said there will be no notice sent to farmers or landowners in regard to their contracts expiring and that they need to take the initiative to inquire with FSA. “Don’t tear up brome or CRP without talking to the FSA office,” he stressed, explaining that fines can occur if a field is broken out or planted before the contract expires.

Reenrolling expiring acreages in CRP is a possibility. McAfee expects a signup in June of this year totaling 3 million acres nationwide. He said those acres will be rated based on an erodibility index with the highest eroding land being ranked the highest for re-enrollment in CRP.

Bruce Yonke, Jackson County NRCS District Conservationist, said, "We want to talk to you before your CRP expires." He said a buffer coordinator is available to discuss environmental practices that may work even if the farmer or landowner wishes to not renew their CRP contract. "I would encourage you to look at other programs."

CRP practices for continuous signup include CP 21-Filter Strips; CP 22-Riparian Buffer; CP 33-Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds; CP 38E SAFE-State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement. Yonke said a person should consider soil conservation plans, and then determine if these practices are applicable to each farm. "A filter strip is ideal if it is along a hedge row," he said.

Field Coordinator for the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project, Ed Reznicek, said allowing land to come out of CRP is a set back for water quality. Grassland, he stated, retains and stores water, filtering run-off. "Don't forget the investment of time and money in establishing a good stand of grass. Take it out, and that investment goes away," he said. "In most cases, the right thing to do is leave it in grass."

Reznicek discussed the options available for keeping expiring CRP in grass including re-enrolling in CRP; using native grass for hay production; grazing, and other uses such as lease hunting.

Marlene Bosworth, Delaware Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) Coordinator, explained some of the cost-share programs the Delaware WRAPS offers. She said the focus of the WRAPS project includes environmentally friendly and income-producing options such as CRP.

According to Bosworth, programs like CRP provide a "reliable, stable source of income." She said it is important to think about farm income. "We want to keep family farms profitable," she said. Typically, she said, the areas enrolled in CRP are the least productive areas on the farm. "If the land is enrolled in CRP, you don't have to worry about yields."

Randy Whiteaker, District Biologist with Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, discussed income opportunities through wildlife lease programs such as walk-in hunting areas (WIHA) and/or fishing areas; special hunts on private lands. "Some people look at CRP from a wildlife angle," he said.

"If you have CRP coming out and are planning to crop it, don't go back to farming fence-row to fence-row," Whiteaker said. "Leave borders or corners for wildlife, or contoured buffer strips," he said. He also encouraged producers to "take advantage of continuous sign-up programs" like those Yonke mentioned.

"The bottom-line is: if you have CRP coming out, take the time to come in and talk to FSA," Whiteaker said. "Don't break all that grass out—there are things to do that fit your situation."

David Hallauer of Meadowlark Extension District said CRP has benefits including an economic component; both water quality and wildlife benefits, and an intrinsic benefit. "It is impossible to put a dollar figure on protecting highly erodible land," he said.

According to Hallauer, there are pros and cons to converting former CRP to cropland that each landowner should consider. "The answers don't tend to be one size fits all," he said.

He said he wanted landowners and operators attending the meeting to know "that there are numerous options and a number of considerations within each option that will need to be evaluated as a decision is made."

In order to answer additional questions, a resource notebook was made available from the sponsoring organizations at the meetings. The notebook contained CRP considerations; CRP Benefits & Options; as well as other publications geared toward managing CRP and its conversion to grazing or cropland. The Meadowlark Extension District is making these resource notebooks available at the Jackson, Nemaha and Jefferson County Conservation District and Extension offices. Or you can also find information on their website at www.meadowlark.ksu.edu and click on Crops and Soils menu.