

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program - Colorado Republican River

Overview

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a federal-state cooperative conservation program that addresses targeted agricultural-related environmental concerns. CREP participants voluntarily enroll in 14- to 15-year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts with the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA). Participants receive financial incentives to remove cropland and marginal pastureland from agricultural production. Converting enrolled land to native grasses, trees and other applicable vegetation improves soil retention and water, air and wildlife habitat quality. CRP and CREP are authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended.

The Colorado Republican River CREP targets the enrollment of 35,000 acres in the Republican River Basin to reduce irrigation water use and contaminants. The CREP agreement is a partnership between farmers, ranchers, FSA, the State of Colorado and the Republican River Water Conservation District (RRWCD) Water Activity Enterprise. In addition to CREP and non-federal payments, the RRWCD will offer an incentive payment to permanently retire irrigation water use for CREP-enrolled irrigated cropland.

Benefits

Enrolling up to 35,000 acres of eligible cropland will reduce irrigation water consumption by 5 percent. The CREP will decrease agricultural chemicals and sediments entering the Republican River Basin and Ogallala Aquifer. Reducing water use and contaminants will conserve water, energy and 374,000 tons of soil annually. The CREP will improve wildlife habitat for declining fish species and other wildlife through plantings of native grasses, riparian buffers and other permanent covers.

Goals

The goals of the Colorado Republican River CREP are to:

- Enroll 35,000 acres of land into the CREP to establish native grasses, riparian buffers and wildlife habitat and to restore wetlands;
- Reduce by 5 percent Republican River and Ogallala Aquifer irrigation water used for agricultural purposes;
- Achieve 30,000 to 35,000 acre-foot annual groundwater savings through the retirement of landowners' permanent water rights;

- Reduce 374,000 tons of soil erosion annually;
- Reduce 2,900 tons of fertilizer and pesticide application annually;
- Restore and enhance at least 30 miles of riparian habitat and 500 acres of degraded wetlands;
- Ensure adequate stream flow that will accommodate targeted fish species, including the stonecat, suckermouth minnow, brassy minnow and plains minnow;
- Enroll up to 1,000 acres of riparian buffers and wetlands to restore stream and wetland hydraulic and geomorphic characteristics to meet the habitat needs of targeted fish species;
- Reduce by 5 percent from 2004 levels the number of groundwater wells containing nitrogen levels above Environmental Protection Agency standards;
- Reduce 2.1 million kilowatt hours of electricity use by decreasing groundwater pumping; and
- Help farmers and ranchers address wildlife issues and meet state and local water quantity and quality requirements.

Eligibility Requirements

Landowners can offer eligible cropland and marginal pastureland in all or portions of the northeast Colorado counties of Kit Carson, Logan, Phillips, Sedgwick and Yuma.

To be eligible, irrigated cropland must:

- Have been irrigated at no less than ½-acre-foot per acre for 4 out of the 6 years from 1996-2001;
- Have been irrigated with at least ½-acre-foot per acre for the planting of an irrigated annual crop within 24 months prior to offer submission;
- Be physically and legally capable of being irrigated in a normal manner at the time of the offer, or also eligible if enrolled in the 2006 Republican River Water Conservation District Water Activity Enterprise One Year Lease Program.

Additionally, all irrigated cropland associated with one or more wells or surface water sources offered for CREP must be combined as a manageable unit to facilitate water rights/use management. Enrollments that would require a prorated reduction of irrigated water rights are ineligible.

Producers must meet RRWCD Water Activity Enterprise requirements and submit a "Colorado Republican River Water Conservation

District Water Activity Enterprise Agreement." This agreement certifies that the producer will permanently cease applying irrigation water on all irrigated cropland accepted into CREP. For all irrigated CREP-enrolled cropland, producers must secure either a "Request to Cancel a Well Permit for Groundwater Irrigation," contract or an "Application to Reduce Permitted Acres and Authorized Annual Appropriation for Surface Water Irrigation" contract through the Colorado Ground Water Commission.

Participants can apply no more than ½-acre-foot of irrigation water to enrolled irrigated land during the first 12 months of a CREP contract, but only if/when necessary to establish the approved vegetative conservation cover. Otherwise, no irrigation water may be applied to the land at any time during the term of the CREP contract except as further agreed to by FSA.

To be eligible, non-irrigated (dryland) cropland must be a center-pivot corner enrolled with the adjacent irrigated center-pivot cropland area. No more than 5,000 acres of eligible non-irrigated cropland corners may be enrolled.

Additionally, cropland must meet cropping history criteria and be physically and legally capable of being cropped in a normal manner. Marginal pastureland along streams, watercourses and certain upland areas is also eligible for enrollment.

A producer who has acreage under an existing CRP contract or an approved offer with a contract pending is ineligible for CREP on that acreage until that contract expires. Other requirements may also apply. Interested producers should contact their local FSA office for specific information regarding their eligibility for CREP.

Sign-up and Contract Duration

The CREP sign-up began June 12, 2006, and will continue until enrollment goals are attained, or there is no longer statutory authority for CRP, whichever comes first. Enrolled land remains under contract for 14- to 15- years as specified in the contract.

Approved Conservation Measures

To better serve program goals, FSA has approved the following CRP conservation practices (CP) for the Colorado Republican River CREP:

- CP2 - Establishment of Permanent Native Grasses;

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- CP4D - Permanent Wildlife Habitat, Non-easement;
- CP22 - Riparian Buffer (cropland only);
- CP23 - Wetland Restoration; and
- CP23A - Wetland Restoration, Non-floodplain

Cropland practice enrollment goals are:

- CP22, CP23 and CP23A: up to 1,500 acres total; and
- CP2 and CP4D: up to 33,500 acres total.

FSA Payments

Subject to contract terms and certain limitations, CREP participants will be eligible for the following types of FSA payments:

- Signing Incentive Payment: One-time payment consistent with Handbook 2-CRP for land enrolled in CP22. This payment is made after the contract has been signed and approved.
- Practice Incentive Payment: One-time payment equal to 40 percent of the eligible reimbursable cost to establish CP22.
- Cost-share Assistance: 50 percent eligible reimbursable cost-share to install approved conservation practices.
- Incentive Payment: One-time payment that is 25 percent of the cost to restore the site's hydrology for practices CP23 and CP23A.
- Annual Rental Payment: Annual payment based on the posted county irrigated rental rate for each enrolled irrigated acre covered by a state RRWCD Water Activity Enterprise Agreement. The per-acre maximum irrigated rental rate is the sum of:
 1. The most current weighted-average posted irrigated cropland rental rate per acre for the enrolled land; and
 2. A per-acre maintenance incentive payment consistent with Handbook 2-CP.
- Annual Rental Payment: Annual payment based on dryland cropland rental rates for each enrolled dryland center-pivot corner cropland acre. The per-acre maximum cropland rental rate is the sum of:
 1. The posted per-acre dryland cropland soil rental rate based on the weighted average of the three predominant soils on the eligible dryland acreage offered; and
 2. A per-acre maintenance incentive payment.

State of Colorado and the RRWCD Water Activity Enterprise Payments

Subject to contract terms and certain limitations, the state of Colorado and the Enterprise will provide the following payments and

assistance:

- Direct Payment: Permanent water-rights retirement payment in three equal installments in years 5, 10 and 15. Payments will range from \$100 per acre for irrigated acres four or more miles from the Republican River's south and north forks, to \$600 per acre for any surface irrigated acres.
- Cost-share Payment: Cost-share for eligible reimbursable costs to install specific practices on irrigated acres at the following rates:
 1. 10 percent for CP22.
 2. 30 percent for all practices, except CP22, established less than one mile from the Republican River's south and north forks.
 3. 20 percent for all practices, except CP22, established more than one but less than two miles from the river's south and north forks.
 4. 15 percent for all practices, except CP22, established more than two but less than four miles from the river's south and north forks.
 5. 5 percent for all practices, except CP22, established more than four miles from the river's south and north forks.
- RRWCD Bonus Payment: One-time payment provided within 30 days of the contract's effective date. Payment covers enrolled irrigated acres at the following rates:
 1. \$120 per acre for surface water irrigated acres.
 2. \$35 per acre for groundwater irrigated acres less than one mile from the river's south and north forks.
 3. \$25 per acre for groundwater irrigated acres more than one but less than two miles from the river's south and north forks.
 4. \$15 per acre for groundwater irrigated acres more than two but less than four miles from the river's south and north forks.
 5. \$10 per acre for groundwater irrigated acres more than four miles from the river's south and north forks.
- Annual Rental Payment: Annual payment on enrolled irrigated acres provided within 30 days of the FSA annual rental payment issuance. The payment rates are:
 1. \$50 per acre annually for surface water irrigated acres.
 2. \$25 per acre annually for groundwater irrigated acres less than one mile from the river's south and north forks.
 3. \$15 per acre annually for groundwater irrigated acres more than two but less than two miles from the river's south

and north forks.

4. \$10 per acre annually for groundwater irrigated acres more than two but less than four miles from the river's south and north forks.

- Pay all costs associated with the CREP annual water quality monitoring program.
- Provide technical assistance to help participants develop conservation plans and install riparian buffers.

Cost

The total cost over a 15-year period is estimated at \$66.3 million. FSA will contribute approximately \$52.8 million, or 80 percent, and the state of Colorado will fund approximately \$13.5 million, including \$11.7 million from the RRWCD Water Activity Enterprise. The \$66.3 million does not include any costs that may be assumed by producers.

CRP Enrollment

CREP is another option under CRP that farmers may select to enhance their land. Applicants may still enroll eligible land in the general CRP or continuous sign-up CRP. However, CREP provides additional benefits not available through general and/or continuous sign-up. For instance, CREP payments are at a higher effective rate.

Haying and Grazing

Haying and grazing are not permitted during the CREP contract period unless FSA allows it for emergency or managed haying and grazing purposes, if applicable, under normal CRP rules.

For More Information

More information on the Colorado Republican River CREP is available at local FSA offices and on FSA's Web site at: www.fsa.usda.gov/crp.

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