



# Options for Expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Land

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The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was designed to place qualified cropland into cover to minimize runoff and erosion for 10 or 15 year contract periods. This Farm Service Agency (FSA) program also provides habitat for many wildlife species. Further, this popular program provides landowners with a steady income flow on marginal cropland. At some point, every landowner with expiring CRP acreage faces a decision about what to do with their land. This Fact Sheet is intended to describe some options to consider. It is important to carefully evaluate each of the proposed options and consider long-term impacts of each.

## Reenrollment in CRP

The first thing to consider with expiring CRP acreage is whether you qualify to reenroll in CRP through a general signup. Additionally, you may qualify for the continuous signup CRP to enable you to implement certain high priority conservation practices such as riparian buffers and contour grass strips. Check with your local FSA office for eligibility information.

## Grazing

Utilizing your CRP land for cattle grazing is another option. There will likely be some infrastructure costs associated with making the land suitable for grazing such as fencing and water developments. Fortunately, you may qualify for several federal and state programs to defray the costs. These programs are described below under cost share. If you do not currently own cattle, you may wish to lease your land to someone who does. Contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office in your county to discuss a grazing plan and to determine the appropriate stocking rates.

## Haying

Similar to grazing, some CRP land is ideal for hay production, assuming that it is not too eroded. Haying rights can also be leased to other producers. If your CRP land is in

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native grass, you should only plan on cutting hay once per growing season. Also consider alternating between grazing and haying periodically, and incorporating fire and rest into the rotation. By alternating the management of the site, plant composition and production will be maintained long-term. For non-native grass monocultures such as old world bluestem and weeping lovegrass timing and frequency of haying will vary with precipitation, fertility, and site. Consult with NRCS for management guidelines.

## Lease Hunting

One of the primary considerations for many land managers is a diversified income. CRP land offers many opportunities as these areas often abound with wildlife. Pheasant in particular can be numerous on CRP fields. Quail, dove, prairie-chickens, turkey, and white-tailed deer are other species compatible with CRP. If you are lucky enough to have a playa lake within your CRP field, then waterfowl also can be hunted. Lease rates for the Southern Great Plains usually range from \$5 to \$20 per acre for lease hunting. Often, lease hunting is compatible with other agriculture interests such as grazing and limited farming. If you have an interest in lease hunting and want an example of a legal lease agreement, visit [nrem.okstate.edu/extension](http://nrem.okstate.edu/extension) and view NREM-5032, "Lease Hunting."

## Conversion to Native Grass

Much of the original CRP plantings in Oklahoma were seeded to exotic grass monocultures such as Old World bluestem and weeping lovegrass. While this may work for grazing and haying, it is of minimal use for wildlife species. Thus, for landowners who wish to diversify their use and income potential on their expired CRP land, converting to a native mix of grasses may be desirable. If this is something you are considering, there are government programs that can assist. These programs are listed below under cost share.

## Cost Share Programs

### WHIP

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is administered by the NRCS and is designed to provide habitat for wildlife species. Landowners who qualify receive technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost share on approved



**In the absence of management, CRP fields become invaded by woody plants such as eastern redcedar, osage orange, etc. Eventually this site will become woodland with limited agriculture and wildlife use that will cost substantially to correct.**

practices. Landowner labor can count as the 25 percent match. Practices such as prescribed fire, strip disking, fencing, water improvements, and conversion to a native plant mix are examples of activities used in the WHIP program. Contact your local NRCS office for more details.

### **EQIP**

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is also administered by the NRCS. This program provides both technical and financial assistance (up to 75 percent) for eligible practices promoting conservation practices on agricultural lands. Practices eligible vary between states and regions but address issues such as soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife. Additionally, within EQIP there are specific state initiatives targeting critical conservation issues such as the lesser prairie-chicken.

### **Partners for Fish and Wildlife**

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This program provides both technical and financial assistance for qualified practices for wildlife. The partners program primarily targets wildlife species that are in peril. An example in the Southern Great Plains is the lesser prairie-chicken. To see if you qualify for this program contact the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service at 918-581-7458.

### **Conservation Easements**

A conservation easement is either selling or donating some rights to your land to another party. Examples of easements include: the right to develop a property or the right to convert grass to crops. Often, landowners do not wish to exercise these rights, so forfeiting them may be of minimal concern. Federal programs such as the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) pay landowners to give up the right to develop or convert grass to crops for some period of time, but landowners are free to use the land for grazing or recreation during that time period. Contact the FSA to learn more about the GRP



**An old world bluestem CRP field that lacks diversity of plants and wildlife. Landowners who wish to diversify their management options should consider conversion to native grass fields. There are many government programs available to assist with the conversion.**

program. Private organizations such as The Nature Conservancy also periodically purchase or accept conservation easements. Landowners sometimes donate an easement to private groups in order to lower their tax base. Thus, even if there is not a payment for an easement, it may be cost effective.

### **Conversion to Farming**

Some landowners may decide they wish to convert their expired CRP land back to crops. Before you make this decision, there are several considerations. First, remember that to qualify for CRP originally, your land was classified as marginal for crop production and may be on highly erodible land. Thus, do not expect high production from this land and significant steps should be in place to minimize erosion. Your local NRCS office can assist you in establishing terraces, buffers, and other practices to minimize erosion. Conservation



**A CRP field recently converted to a native mix. This field will provide wildlife, soil, and water benefits while being grazed by livestock.**

tillage or no-till farming should be considered. Field buffers in particular should be considered. Not only do they minimize soil loss from the field, but they provide wildlife habitat that will add to the value of your land. Additionally, they will greatly increase the amount you can receive for lease hunting (particularly for pheasant) on that land. If you do decide to convert back to crops, you should contact your FSA office regarding the Countercyclical Payments for certain eligible commodity crops. Another program that FSA manages is the Direct Payment which is paid regardless of whether the land is actually converted for cultivation as long as you qualify and



**A native grass field buffer between a soybean and corn field. By taking a few acres out of production, the wildlife and economic potential of this site has been greatly expanded (Photo courtesy of Jason Sykes, Pheasants Forever).**

are signed up for the program. These programs are intended to provide risk management because farm income is more stable when commodity markets are low.

## **Management**

There are several factors to consider for maintenance of grass fields. First, is woody plant encroachment. Grasslands and prairies were historically maintained by fire. In the absence of fire, or some other periodic disturbance, trees such as eastern redcedar will eventually invade the area. As these increase in number and size, the cost to remove them increases dramatically. At a minimum, you should burn your grassland once every seven years to remove redcedar. Alternatively, mechanical control can be used, although the costs are generally greater than for a prescribed fire, which normally costs \$7 to \$20 per acre. Besides juniper, there are nonnative invasive plants that warrant control. Check with your local NRCS office to identify any problem plants and get technical advice on control methods.

There are many agencies and groups ready to help you with technical assistance and in some cases can provide money to defray costs of management. Consider having a qualified manager assist you with creating a management plan for your property. Additionally, you may qualify for a conservation easement purchase. Regardless, carefully weigh the long-term costs and benefits of your actions rather than the short-term gains. This will ensure that your land remains healthy and productive for future generations.

## The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

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- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
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- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
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- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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