

The Conservation Reserve Program—Where Are We Heading?

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The future of the Conservation Program (CRP) remains one of grave concern and speculation by natural resource managers, land owners and operators, and politicians. The Society for Range Management is taking a major role in attempting to influence the eventual outcome of this major land-use change. At a recent meeting of the Grazing Lands Forum, attended by some 50 representatives from various conservation groups, actions were identified for consideration by other member organizations (Grazing Lands Forum 1988). As chairman of the SRM CRP Committee, I was given the assignment of providing a synopsis of research, evaluation, and monitoring needs for the program. My comments were a summary of input from this committee, individuals, and SRM sections. More than 80 issues were identified by the various organizations and, subsequently, condensed into 6 major categories. My response and comments address only the already mentioned major areas of concern which require some immediate attention and remedial action if we are to realize the foremost objective of retaining these lands in permanent vegetative cover.

The following two basic questions were asked and responded to as indicated.

What do we need to know about CRP's Impacts?

The basic reasons for the creation of the CRP were: (1) taking highly erosive cropland out of production and developing a permanent perennial vegetation; (2) decreasing farm commodity surpluses; (3) generating a stable income for participants in the program; and (4) enhancing other natural resources including soil, water, air quality, and wildlife (Goetz 1987).

Research

It is clear that some data collection is needed in the very near future to determine the status of these lands in relation to their future potential. We must know: how well are native species mixtures becoming established, and what types of plant successional stages are occurring? This determination will require long-period observations coupled with different grazing levels and intensities, fertilization to either enhance or retard dominance of a particular species, and the use of fire or mowing. These approaches alone or in combination(s) will provide insights into the ability to manipulate or direct the vegetation development to reflect changes in the operator's desired final product. An assessment of erosion rates under the various treatments and nutrient status of the soil and its physical characteristics should be included.

Studies are needed to evaluate the impact of different

vegetation types on insect populations on both the CRP stands and other croplands in close proximity. Are these lands serving as a reservoir for insects and, perhaps, plant diseases? Would fire effectively control these insects populations and/or plant diseases? Will intervention by other means, perhaps chemical, be necessary or desirable?

The potential benefits to wildlife also require intensive research. Efforts need to be directed towards the development of plant species and their arrangement on the landscape to enhance wildlife habitat. The most optimum mix of grazing, mowing, and fire for wildlife benefits needs evaluation. Shrubs, trees, and perhaps some grass species obviously provide cover and food at all stages of the wildlife occupation of the land. Snow catch and its effect on both the wildlife habitat and the vegetation in general needs to be investigated. The effects of CRP lands on the well being or detriment of endangered wildlife and plant species should be evaluated. CRP may be beneficial or detrimental to these species depending upon their proximity and the projected land use.

Other research is needed to determine the feasibility of taking livestock closer to a finished product on grass alone. Related to this is the need for economic research of grass versus crops on marginal land. Present research is based on averages; e.g., crop yields are computed for cropland on marginal lands by county while forage yields are averaged over all unmanaged grasslands. County-average cropland is generally better land with the application of modern technology while grasslands are largely unmanaged; this is an obvious bias.

Cost-share relationships for the establishment of native grasses versus introduced species needs to be changed immediately to reflect differences in costs.

Evaluation

In my opinion, the most difficult task may be evaluating the effectiveness and desirability of this program from the operator's standpoint. Input can be solicited from land operators, agency technicians, university researchers, and conservation groups through questionnaires or similar techniques. The development of multi-agency, multi-disciplinary teams of resource people are needed. Natural resource economists are needed to develop in-depth analyses methodology, including the effect of CRP on surpluses, farm income, community, and societal impacts. We need to determine the current "true cost" of this program and project into the future. This must include the cost of extending the program. Total costs and benefits must include the cost of continued soil and nutrient losses, air and water pollution abatement costs, the cost

of storing or selling crop surpluses at a loss, subsidizing exports, subsidizing storage, price supports, and any other costs incurred by bringing these lands back into production.

Vegetation reestablishment costs need to be included as we have already carried this out for a third time in this century. The benefits also must be addressed. Benefits, and/or costs in either case must be assessed in terms of individual operators, agricultural industries, and entire communities as related to *extended periods of time*. In the short term there definitely will be negative impacts on the community due to losses to the agro-businesses. A period of adjustment will be required which, given the proper time frame, will probably result in a different level of stability.

In addition to landowners, organizations and individuals need to have a major input into the future of this program. The immediate rental costs paid by the taxpayers are enormous. All of us have a stake by already paying most of the "costs" mentioned earlier in some form or another over the years. The bottom line is that all natural resources (soil, water, etc.) belong to all of this country's citizens. The right to use the land to make a living belongs to the individual who holds title to a piece of ground; the right to destroy it does not come with this title. Society at large should be willing to pay for changes in land use; in turn the land owner should be cognizant of the citizens' right as well. In my mind, indefinite extension of the CRP would be more cost effective than repeating the same mistakes we have already made.

What do we need to know to make CRP work?

It is generally assumed that most of the cropland presently being converted to grassland will automatically become grazing land for domestic livestock. Some of this will occur, but it is improbable that a substantial percentage will ever be utilized for this purpose. Individuals who are presently farmers will, in all probability, remain so; and in some instances the CRP lands are situated in such a way that it may not be feasible to switch to a livestock operation. I believe that the majority of livestock operators could be surveyed by questionnaire and/or focused interviews as to their intentions following the CRP. Questions that need to be asked are: (1) What do you intend to do with the CRP after the 10 years? (2) Will you still be farming/ranching?

Massive educational efforts need to be implemented three or four years before the contracts expire to aid operators who intend to keep CRP lands in permanent cover. Alternative uses, such as fee hunting or other recreational uses should be stressed. County-wide information/planning sessions must be conducted by qualified individuals to assist contract holders in making wise decisions. The SCS is presently mandated to work with individual operators to aid them in coming into Conservation Compliance before the contracts expire. It would seem appropriate that this agency be given the resources to enlarge their staff. The resources to adequately plan for

the impact of CRP were far short of what was necessary to adequately plan "up front" when the program was implemented. It now makes sense to provide those resources to do the job properly to avoid total plowout of the present CRP land. It may well be that regardless of the amount of money spent on this effort, conversion back to cropland will happen for other reasons.

The bottom line is that without an economic incentive, most of the present CRP land will be plowed again. Other factors to be considered are changes in the law that requires giving up present wheat base on CRP acres after year 10, complete elimination of any type of subsidies on Class IV land and above, sod busting that allows wheat base transfer, aid in developing facilities such as cross-fencing, water or developing wildlife habitat while the present contract is in force or perhaps reseeding in cases where stands are deemed to be marginal as a permanent vegetative cover. Serious consideration of permanent conservation easements should be vigorously pursued.

Monitoring

A major portion of this concern is included under the *Research* section. Plant communities must be observed and evaluated at various times over the 10-year period to determine their status relative to expected outcome. More agency resources must be made available to accomplish this assignment. New sophisticated technology needs to be employed where available, such as remote sensing from aircraft, to monitor large-scale changes followed by ground truthing crews for more exact determinations of plant composition and ground cover.

While many other comments and suggestions were offered by members of federal and state agencies and SRM section CRP committees, this presentation encapsulates the majority of concerns mentioned. It is clear there is a pressing need for action on a number of fronts by a combined effort and support by natural resource management entities and individuals at all levels of government. Given the short time-frame of a mere $7 \pm$ years remaining in this program, the urgency becomes very real and evident. All of us have a responsibility and an opportunity to individually or collectively to see remain in place one of the most appropriate and timely conservation programs ever proposed in this country. Let us be pro-active in our efforts to see it to fruition!

Literature Cited

- Grazing Lands Forum.** Grazing Lands at the Conservation Research Program, Execution Summary. Third Forum, Harpers Ferry, WV. October 11-13, 1988.
- Goetz, Harold.** 1987. The Conservation Reserve Program—A Perspective. In: John Mitchell (ed.) Proceedings of Conservation Reserve Program Symposium, September, Denver, CO.