

Participant Observations on Environmental and Social Effects of the Conservation Reserve Program: Results of a National Survey

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Abstract

A national survey of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contractees was completed to obtain information about environmental and social effects of the program on participants, farms, and communities. Over 75% of respondents believed CRP benefits to wildlife were important. Seventy-three percent of respondents observed increased numbers of wildlife associated with CRP lands. A majority of respondents (82%) believed the amount of assistance furnished by the U.S. Department of Agriculture related to planning and maintaining wildlife habitat associated with CRP lands was appropriate. The majority of respondents reported CRP benefits, including increased quality of surface and ground waters, improved air quality, control of drifting snow, and elevated opportunities to hunt or simply observe wildlife as part of daily activities. Income stability, improved scenic quality of farms and landscapes, and potential increases in property values and future incomes also were seen as program benefits. Negative aspects, reported by less than 30% of respondents, included seeing the CRP as a source of weeds, fire hazard, and attracting unwanted requests for trespass.

Introduction

Those with the greatest potential to observe changes resulting from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation policies are those who live on the land affected. Over the years, personal communications with farm operators enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) suggest that wide-ranging personal and social effects of the program have not been formally recognized. To many, the CRP has delivered an increased abundance of wildlife, reduced erosion, more aesthetically pleasing landscapes, financial stability,



White-tailed deer in Iowa. (USDA-NRCS)

control of drifting snow, and an agricultural landscape that cultivates recreational and social interactions among family and friends. From a national perspective, these conservation benefits may appear unquantifiable and relatively unimportant. To these individuals, however, these assets delivered by adoption of USDA conservation policies are not trivial. An appreciation of such unrecognized effects can improve our understanding of environmental and social implications of long-term conservation programs within agricultural ecosystems.

In 2001, a survey was completed by the U.S. Geological Survey at the request of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to collect information pertaining to environmental and social benefits of the CRP (Allen and Vandever 2003). The survey was delivered to 2,212 CRP participants across the 10 USDA Farm Production Regions (FPR). Survey response rate was 65%.

This chapter provides a brief summary of results of the survey presented primarily through a discussion of findings at the national level, and furnishes more detailed information presented by FPR of both positive and negative effects of the CRP as seen by those enrolled in the program. The complete report can be downloaded from the FSA web site at <<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crpinfo.htm>>.

Participant Observations on Environmental and Social Effects of the Conservation Reserve Program

Environmental Benefits

Eighty-five percent of survey respondents said the CRP has contributed to diminished erosion of soil (Table 1). The effect the CRP has had on wildlife associated with agricultural landscapes is illustrated by 73% of respondents reporting an increased abundance of wildlife associated with lands enrolled in the program. From a national perspective, 75% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that CRP benefits to wildlife are important and requirements to periodically improve habitat quality are a reasonable expectation of participation in the program. Although 38% of respondents reported that the CRP provided more opportunities to hunt and 12% found increased opportunities to lease land for hunting, nearly 60% of respondents believe the improved ability to simply observe wildlife was an important benefit of the program.

Table 1. Survey respondent identified environmental and social benefits of the Conservation Reserve Program by U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Production Region (FPR). Numbers represent percentage of respondents by FPR and combined national response ($n = 1,412$).

Benefit	Farm Production Region ^a										
	PAC	MTN	NP	SP	LAK	CB	DLT	SE	APL	NE	NATL
Improved control of soil erosion	93.4	87.9	84.9	90.7	76.6	89.3	79.4	85.2	88.1	74.1	85.4
Positive changes in wildlife populations	82.0	69.7	77.1	67.4	75.2	72.7	75.8	68.9	69.5	62.1	73.2
Increased opportunities to observe wildlife	62.3	50.5	55.8	45.3	72.0	58.6	67.7	57.4	61.0	60.3	59.4
Improved water quality	45.9	28.3	38.0	22.1	36.2	48.2	23.8	37.7	45.8	27.6	38.8
Increased opportunities to personally hunt	27.9	22.2	42.8	24.4	40.8	37.0	61.9	37.7	32.2	41.4	37.6
Improved scenic quality of farm or landscape	37.7	33.3	35.3	30.2	40.8	37.3	42.9	45.9	45.8	29.3	37.4
Improved control of drifting snow	41.0	56.6	51.2	33.7	34.9	22.3	0.0	0.0	11.9	8.6	30.5
Improved air quality	54.1	40.4	31.4	45.3	21.1	21.6	30.2	45.9	32.2	15.5	29.2
Increased permanence of surface water	36.1	21.2	19.8	25.6	19.7	27.3	20.6	18.0	23.7	27.6	23.7
Potential increase in future income (e.g., timber sales)	8.2	8.1	8.9	9.3	15.6	9.8	65.1	73.8	33.9	13.8	16.7
Increased opportunities to lease land for hunting	9.8	9.1	19.4	15.1	8.7	6.6	23.8	19.7	13.6	10.3	11.9
No positive effects	0.0	2.0	0.0	1.2	1.4	0.9	1.6	1.6	1.7	3.4	1.1

^a Farm Production Region: APL (Appalachian): Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina; CB (Corn Belt): Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio; DLT (Delta): Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi; LAK (Lake States): Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan; MTN (Mountain): Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico; NATL (National): Results for all FPRs combined; NE (Northeast): Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware; NP (Northern Plains): North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; PAC (Pacific): Washington, Oregon, California; SE (Southeast): Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida; SP (Southern Plains): Oklahoma, Texas.

Slightly more than 29% and 39% of respondents acknowledged improvements in air and water quality, respectively. Improved control of drifting snow was recognized by 30.5% of survey respondents. Over 23% of respondents believed the CRP contributed to greater permanence of surface waters. Improvement in the aesthetic quality of agricultural landscapes was cited as a CRP benefit by 37% of respondents.

In addition to responding to formal questions in the survey many respondents “wrote-in” additional benefits derived from the CRP. Other positive aspects described included enhancement of soil organic matter and fertility improving potential future productivity of CRP lands, retention of water from rain and snow, and prevention of erosion on lands adjacent to CRP acres. Other environmental benefits included reappearance of springs below CRP fields, less debris in streams, and improved quality of well water.

Economic and Social Benefits

Respondents to the CRP survey described benefits of the program as elevation of grain prices, assistance in paying taxes, assured income to support retirement, provision of additional income to support continued operation of the farm, an increase in overall farm property values, stabilization of farm income, and savings in operation costs by not having to farm corners and small fields. Some respondents stated the CRP has enabled them to take land out of production that they knew should have never been farmed. Nearly 17% of respondents saw the CRP as contributing to their future income either through future sale of timber resources, improved fertility of soils, or increased recreational value of their land.

Enhanced recreation opportunities from the CRP. (G. Kramer, USDA-NRCS)



Social benefits described were diverse and included satisfaction from doing something favorable for the environment, having hay to give neighbors in time of need, providing a place for children and grandchildren to camp or play, provision of sites for local schools to hold conservation/ecology classes, and providing places for family/friends to hunt and socialize. Lower use of agricultural chemicals, diminished noise from equipment and other farm operations, and helping to prevent unwanted urban expansion/development also were attributed to the CRP. By far, the majority of comments focused on increased numbers and variety of wildlife associated with CRP lands. Numerous individuals stated the enhanced presence of wildflowers and insects were an unforeseen but welcome benefit of the program.

Negative Aspects of the CRP

Not all perceptions concerning environmental and social effects of the CRP were positive. Almost 29% of respondents viewed CRP lands as a source of weeds (Table 2). Similarly, 13% of respondents perceived the CRP as making their farm, or landscape, appear untidy or poorly managed. The CRP was viewed as a potential fire hazard by 19% of those responding to the survey. Four percent of respondents felt that too much land had been taken out of production and enrolled in the CRP. Likewise, 8% of respondents believed that the program had a negative effect on local economies due to lower production of crops and related impacts on local agricultural-based businesses. Conversely, others expressed apprehension about too many acres of highly erodible land going back into production due to more stringent enrollment requirements in recent CRP signups.

Table 2. Negative aspects of the Conservation Reserve Program as identified by survey respondents by U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Production Region (FPR). Numbers represent percentage of respondents by FPR and combined national response ($n = 1,412$).

Negative effect	Farm Production Region ^a										
	PAC	MTN	NP	SP	LAK	CB	DLT	SE	APL	NE	NATL
Source of weeds	34.5	23.7	29.7	22.8	32.2	33.6	14.1	13.6	26.3	21.1	28.8
Potential fire hazard	44.8	46.4	24.7	30.4	19.6	8.9	17.2	15.3	10.5	1.8	19.3
Attracts unwanted requests for permission to hunt	20.7	12.4	20.5	16.5	12.6	23.3	14.1	13.6	15.8	7.0	18.0
Makes farm appear unkempt or poorly managed	12.1	9.3	6.2	11.4	18.7	14.2	18.7	8.5	22.8	14.0	13.1
Attracts unwanted wildlife	10.3	8.2	7.7	11.4	7.9	11.0	4.7	3.4	7.0	5.3	8.7
Negative effects on local economy	20.7	23.7	11.2	16.5	3.7	3.9	4.7	1.7	3.5	3.4	7.8
Too much cropland taken out of production	3.4	8.2	3.1	5.1	3.3	3.4	7.8	5.1	3.5	5.3	4.1
No negative effects	25.9	24.7	7.7	40.5	40.7	13.3	54.7	39.0	47.4	52.6	25.4

^a Farm Production Regions: APL (Appalachian): Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina; CB (Corn Belt): Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio; DLT (Delta): Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi; LAK (Lake States): Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan; MTN (Mountain): Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico; NATL (National): Results for all FPRs combined; NE (Northeast): Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware; NP (Northern Plains): North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; PAC (Pacific): Washington, Oregon, California; SE (Southeast): Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida; SP (Southern Plains): Oklahoma, Texas.

In relation to wildlife, 18% of respondents indicated that the CRP had caused problems due to greater numbers of wildlife. The CRP has attracted unwanted wildlife that includes an increase in insects, deer (*Odocoileus* spp.), coyotes (*Canis latrans*), predators, and other “varmints”. Eighteen percent of respondents attributed an increase in unwelcome requests for permission to hunt to presence of the CRP. One of the most commonly voiced concerns was trespass and an apparent presumption by some individuals that CRP lands were open to public hunting. In some cases, the increase in habitat quality furnished by the CRP resulted in more requests from strangers to have access to land for hunting.

Satisfaction with U.S. Department of Agriculture Performance

Overall, survey respondents appreciated the high quality of information and assistance in CRP enrollment and administration furnished by the USDA. Eighty-two percent of respondents believed that the amount of assistance furnished by USDA related to planning and maintaining wildlife habitat associated with CRP lands was appropriate. Only 2% believed that too much aid in relation to wildlife issues was furnished. Slightly more than 15% of respondents advocated more awareness of wildlife needs, while 11% believed that wildlife had received excessive attention in CRP enrollment criteria. Almost 16% of respondents thought that not enough assistance was furnished, while 55% felt that they had been well informed about why specific types of CRP management practices were required to maintain or improve wildlife habitat. In contrast, 38% of respondents felt they had been only partially informed, and 7% said they had not been informed about these requirements at all.

Nearly half (49%) of respondents to the survey wished to see the CRP continue relatively unchanged. Many respondents indicated a willingness to implement management to maintain vegetation quality and wildlife habitat but seek financial assistance, educational materials, and technical assistance to do so. Written comments by respondents indicated a desire for more on-the-ground technical assistance, simplification of paperwork, integration of periodic use or management to maintain long-term quality of grasslands, and greater amounts of information and conservation options that extend beyond CRP lands into entire agricultural ecosystems.

Summary

The goal of the participant survey was to describe largely intangible, undocumented environmental and personal effects of the CRP as seen by those most affected. Because the agricultural community and American public value environmental health and because conservation

programs have long-term effects on the social fabric of rural communities, improvement in program performance has become an increasingly important goal of USDA conservation policies (USDA 2001). Appropriate incentives for agriculture to deliver societal benefits beyond production of food and fiber will require a thorough understanding of ecological as well as social and economic issues as affected by agricultural and land-use policies (Robertson et al. 2004).

Not all conclusions about program performance must be made upon years of data and analysis of results. While scientific evaluation is unquestionably needed, straightforward observations and uncomplicated statements from those who have seen their land change in response to conservation after decades, or even generations, of production reflect the perceived value of the program. Recognition of opinions and constraints expressed by participants is essential for refinement in administration and management of lands enrolled in conservation programs. Individual benefits may be imperceptible at the national scale but knowledge of local, personal profits, and successes ultimately will support greater involvement in conservation programs, thereby improving the connection of agriculture to rural and national environmental health.

Literature Cited

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