

CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE ON **POST-CRP** LAND

OVERVIEW

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has reduced wind and water erosion in Oregon's Columbia Basin counties by an estimated five million tons annually. CRP has also had a major impact on reducing sediment and nutrient run-off into streams; and has provided wildlife with food and cover in dryland cropping areas across eastern Oregon.

Many producers will return CRP acres to crop production when their contract expires. CRP fields that are highly erodible land (HEL) require a conservation compliance plan. Typical HEL plans for dryland cropping systems in the Columbia Basin include practices for crop rotation, crop residue management, and cross-slope seeding.

Your existing CRP grass stands can be used to achieve several conservation practices to meet conservation compliance requirements. These conservation practices include: conservation cover, grass waterways, contour buffer strips, field borders or filter strips and tall grass wind barriers.

CONSERVATION PRACTICES AND CRP GRASS STANDS

USDA Conservation Cover

Many CRP grass fields include high-erosion hazard areas, such as steep slopes, shallow and eroded areas, 'blow sand' spots and areas of low crop production. You can maintain your existing CRP grass cover on these areas as part of a conservation compliance system.

The benefits of conservation cover will vary by field; but generally, this practice will reduce erosion and sediment loss and enhance or maintain wildlife habitat. Leaving low-producing areas in a permanent cover may also lower your crop production costs.

Grass Waterways

Many CRP fields include areas where water concentrates as it runs through or off the field. Without permanent vegetation to slow this run-off and guide it off the field, gullies will form — which results in high sediment loss.

If you return your CRP fields to crop production, it's important to maintain the established grass areas near these areas to protect the soil from concentrated flow erosion. Grass waterways may be used as outlets for terrace systems to convey terrace run-off from the field without causing erosion.

Contour Buffer Strips

Another form of erosion control for conservation compliance is using contour buffer strips. You can establish these by leaving strips of CRP grass alternated with wider cultivated crop strips fanned on the contour. The grass strips slow run-off, reduce erosion and trap sediment. When used with contour farming, contour buffer strips are an effective conservation practice.

Establishing contour buffer strips from CRP grass can reduce erosion as much as 60 percent, or as little as 10 percent, depending on the slope and the amount of grass left in field strips. For example, 20-foot-wide contour buffer strips, coupled with 180-foot-wide crop strips, with a 10 percent crop residue cover after planting on a 10 percent slope will reduce soil erosion by 50 percent.

Contour buffer strips can also provide food and nesting cover for wildlife.

Field Borders

Field borders are strips of perennial vegetation established at field edges to prevent sheet, rill and gully erosion. You can maintain CRP grass in these areas to reduce erosion and provide turning areas for farm equipment. These turning areas may provide access to strip-cropping and contour buffer strip systems. Field borders can also provide wildlife food and cover.

Filter Strips

Filter strips are used at the lower end of the field where run-off and sediment contribute to surface water pollution. In these locations, you can maintain CRP grass for filter strips to protect surface water quality. Using CRP grass as filter strips will help keep sediment, pesticides and nutrients out of lakes and streams.

Tall Grass Wind Barriers

In dryland cropping areas with high wind erosion hazards, you can use perennial grasses (two to five feet high) to reduce wind erosion. CRP grass can be left in narrow bands from two to six feet in width, perpendicular to the erosive winds. Crop strip width between the wind barriers will vary based on crop residue cover and soil surface roughness.

In Oregon's wind erosion area, a typical field in a winter wheat-fallow rotation with an unsheltered distance of 3,000 feet will need 40 percent residue cover in the spring to meet conservation compliance requirements. The same field with four-foot-high tall grass barriers from CRP, spaced 200 feet apart, would need 20 percent cover to meet conservation compliance requirements.

As you begin planning what to do with your CRP acres, consider keeping some CRP grass as part of your conservation plan if your goal is to return your fields to crop production. For advice and recommendations on planning and implementing any of these conservation practices, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office.



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