



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, CRP 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 implementation of certain high-priority conservation practices, such as riparian buffers and contour grass strips. Check with your local FSA office for eligibility information (nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ok/contact/local/?cid=nrcs142p2_000584).

Grazing

Using the 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, several federal and state programs exist to defray the costs—check qualification rules. These programs are described later under cost share programs. If you do not own cattle, you may wish to lease your land to someone who does. Recent land leasing rates can be found in CR-216 Oklahoma Pasture Rental Rates (<http://factsheets.okstate.edu/documents/cr-216-oklahoma-pasture-rental-rates-2016-2017/>). Contact the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office in your county to discuss a grazing plan and to determine the appropriate stocking rates (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ok/contact/local/>).

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
facts.okstate.edu

Haying

Similar to grazing, some CRP land is ideal for hay production, assuming that it is not too rolling and terraced. This can also be leased to other producers. If your CRP land is in native grass, plan on cutting hay only once per growing season. Cutting in early July typically balances forage quality and quantity in Oklahoma. Cutting native hay earlier yields less forage, and cutting later yields poor quality. 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. To minimize mortality of wildlife during haying view NREM 5006 - Reducing Mortality of Grassland Wildlife during Haying and Wheat-Harvesting Operations (<http://factsheets.okstate.edu/documents/nrem-5006-reducing-mortality-of-grassland-wildlife-during-haying-and-wheat-harvesting-operations/>)

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 in northern Oklahoma and the Panhandle. Quail, dove, prairie-chickens, wild turkey and white-tailed deer are other species that are compatible with CRP. If you have a playa lake within your CRP field, then waterfowl is another species that can be hunted. Lease rates for Oklahoma 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 information on a lease agreement, see Extension fact sheet NREM 5032-Lease Hunting (<http://factsheets.okstate.edu/documents/nrem-5032-lease-hunting-opportunities-for-oklahoma-landowners/>).

Conversion to Native Grass

Many of the original CRP plantings in the Southern and Central Great Plains were seeded to exotic grass monocultures, such as Old World bluestem and weeping lovegrass. While



In the absence of management, CRP fields often become invaded by woody plants such as eastern redcedar, Osage orange, Siberian elm and cottonwood. Eventually, this site will become woodland with limited agriculture potential and reduced wildlife habitat for species such as pheasant, prairie-chicken and quail.

these species provide permanent cover and can be used for grazing and haying, they are not ideal for many species of wildlife. Therefore, landowners who wish to diversify their use and income potential on expired CRP land, conversion to a native mix of grasses may be desirable. This is especially true if the stand is dominated by only dense exotic grass species. If this is something you are considering, there are government programs that can assist. These programs are listed below under cost share programs. Note that conversion can be difficult, time consuming and costly. Discuss conversion with a range professional before attempting.

Cost Share Programs

EQIP

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is administered by the NRCS. This program provides both technical and financial assistance for eligible practices that promote conservation practices on agricultural lands. Eligible practices vary between states and regions, but address issues such as soil erosion, water quality and wildlife. Additionally, within EQIP there are specific state initiatives that target critical conservation issues. If you have CRP in northwestern Oklahoma, southwestern Kansas, southeastern Colorado, eastern New Mexico or the Texas panhandle, one specific EQIP program to consider is the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (<http://www.lpcinitiative.org/>). For eligible landowners, this program can assist in carrying out various land management activities such as prescribed fire, tree removal and prescribed grazing.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This program also 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 check qualifica-



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

tion for this program, contact the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (<https://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/Oklahoma/pwp.htm>).

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 Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Grasslands (<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/crp-grasslands/index>) pay landowners to give up the right to develop or convert grass 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 CRP Grasslands program. Private conservation organizations also periodically purchase



A recently converted CRP field that has a high native plant diversity. This field will provide forage, wildlife, soil and water benefits.

or accept conservation easements through the Agriculture Conservation Easements Program. 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. For more information on conservation easements, see NREM-2889 – Protecting Open Lands in Farms and Ranches from Development through Conservation Easements (<http://factsheets.okstate.edu/documents/nrem-2889-protecting-open-lands-in-farms-and-ranches-from-development-through-conservation-easements/>).

Conversion to Farming

Some landowners may decide to convert their expired CRP land back to crops. Before making this decision, consider the following. First, remember that to qualify for CRP originally, the land was classified as marginal for crop production and may have highly erodible soils. Thus, you should not expect high production from this land and significant steps should be in place to minimize erosion. The local NRCS office can assist in establishing terraces, buffers and other practices to minimize erosion. Conservation tillage or no-till farming should be considered. Field buffers in particular should be considered.



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)

Not only do they minimize soil loss from the field, they provide wildlife habitat that will add to the value of the land. Additionally, they will greatly increase the amount you can receive for lease hunting (particularly for pheasant) on that land. Whether or not you decide to convert the expired CRP back to crops, contact the local FSA office regarding the Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs. The ARC/PLC programs may allow a landowner to receive payment on base acres associated with the expired CRP (cropped or not cropped), provided the eligibility requirements are met and you are signed up for the program. These programs are intended to provide risk management so farm income is more stable when commodity markets are low.

Management of Encroaching Trees

Grasslands and prairies were historically maintained by fire. In the absence of fire or some other periodic disturbance, trees such as eastern redcedar and mesquite will eventually invade the area. As these increase in number and size, the cost to remove them increases dramatically. It is recommended to burn the grassland at least once every seven years to remove seedling trees. 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 native woody plants, there are nonnative invasive plants, such as Siberian elm and saltcedar that warrant control. Check with the local NRCS office to identify any problem plants and get technical advice on control methods. Visit <https://www.okinvasives.org/> for more information.

Summary

There are many agencies and groups ready to help 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 what is decided, carefully weigh the long-term costs and benefits rather than the short-term gains. This will ensure the land remains productive for future generations.