

March 10, 2015

Val Dolcini
Administrator
Farm Service Agency
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Administrator Dolcini,

As you develop post-2014 Farm Bill plans to manage future enrollments in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the undersigned organizations respectfully urge the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to set a robust target for continuous sign-up (CCRP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) enrollments to achieve critical water quality benefits as well as aquatic and other wildlife habitat benefits.

Originally established under the Food Security Act of 1985, CRP initially served as a supply management tool to reduce U.S. production and carryover stocks, with the ancillary goals of reducing soil erosion and protecting water resources on highly erodible cropland. However, starting with the 1990 Farm Bill, Congress recognized the need to enroll targeted environmentally sensitive lands dedicated to specific partial field practices in the CRP on a continuous basis. The continuous sign-up and CREP enrollments clearly provide effective tools to obtain the type of targeted benefits sought by policymakers, farmers and stakeholders.

Accepted conservation practices for enrollment in continuous CRP include riparian buffers, filterstrips, grass waterways, contour grass strips, windbreaks and shelterbelts, living snow fences, salt tolerant vegetation, buffers for wildlife habitat, wetland restoration, wetland buffers, and shallow water areas for wildlife.

Additional tools FSA has at its disposal to maximize water quality and other environmental benefits from continuous sign-up and CREP include the use of Signing Incentive Payments (SIPs) and Practice Incentive Payments (PIPs). These tools can be used to encourage the enrollment of particularly important lands and also can encourage the adoption of conservation practices that can improve water quality, wildlife habitat, and other critical environmental goals.

As of the end of 2014, 24.3 million acres were enrolled in CRP, 6.1 million acres (25%) of which were enrolled through the continuous sign-up (4.5 million acres), CREP (1.22 million acres), and the farmable wetland initiative (0.35 million acres). Of the 4.5 million acres enrolled through the continuous sign-up, 1.6 million acres are in riparian buffers and filter strips, 1.5 million acres are in specific wildlife habitat practices, and an additional 0.73 million acres in specific wetland and bottomland practices.

Over the course of the next three years, however, 1.33 million of those 6.1 million acres will be expiring, with landowners facing decisions about whether or not to re-enroll.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of CRP, FSA should refocus its efforts to meet the goals of today's CRP to enroll cropland and marginal pastureland that benefits water quality, wildlife habitat, air quality and reduces soil erosion, all of which would be strengthened through greater use of continuous sign-up and CREP enrollments. With this in mind, we urge you to adopt the following policies with respect to the continuous sign-up and CREP:

- Reserve at least 800,000 acres annually and, over the long-term, at least 8 million acres in total for new enrollments and re-enrollments for all types of continuous enrollments.
- Make all continuous sign-up practices eligible for SIP and PIP.
- Closely monitor enrollment progress in the special wildlife (SAFE) and wetland initiatives and increase acreage allotments as needed.
- Ensure that all landowners with expiring contracts are notified by letter, well in advance of contract expiration, of the option to enroll a portion of their acres in the continuous sign-up to preserve important conservation values.
- Redouble outreach efforts to farmers and landowners about the benefits of conservation buffers and special wildlife habitat initiatives.

We greatly appreciate your attention to this important matter and thank you in advance for considering our recommendations.

Sincerely,

American Feed Industry Association

American Rivers

Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Corn Refiners Association

Gulf Restoration Network

National Association of Conservation Districts

National Association of Clean Water Agencies

National Farmers Union

National Grain and Feed Association

National Oilseed Processors Association

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

North American Millers' Association

Soil and Water Conservation Society

Water Environment Federation

Cc: Chairman Pat Roberts
Chairman Mike Conaway
Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member Collin Peterson