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The Conservation Reserve Program: A Tool for Public Participation in Biodiversity Management and Conservation

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Abstract: This article introduces Extension professionals to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. CRP allows agricultural landowners to receive rental and incentive payments for entering into resource-conserving land cover contracts of between 10 and 15 years in duration. CRP is a mutually beneficial manner in which the agricultural public can contribute to the maintenance and conservation of our nation's biodiversity. Extension professionals may find CRP helpful in improving the quality of crop acreages and pasturelands within a particular jurisdiction and reclaiming agricultural land lost to soil erosion or invasive cover species.

Introduction

This article introduces Cooperative Extension Service agents to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a tool for public participation in the biodiversity management and conservation process. In his book, *The Policy Process: A Practical Guide for Natural Resource Professionals*, Tim W. Clark (2002) states, "Natural resource policy is both a process and a product of people interacting" (35). Clark refers to individual citizens as *participants* in the social process by which natural resource problems are remedied (Clark, 2002).

A recent trend has emerged toward encouraging public participation in mitigating natural resource problems through community-based initiatives that serve the common interest (Brunner et al., 2005; Clark, 2002). In that spirit, this article suggests the relevance of CRP to Extension professionals as a mutually beneficial means by which the agricultural public may participate in biodiversity management and conservation.

Overview of CRP

CRP is "administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) providing technical land eligibility determinations, conservation planning and practice implementation" (NRCS, 2008). CRP allows agricultural landowners to receive rental payments, maintenance allowances, and cost-share incentives in exchange for entering 10- to 15-year contacts to establish "long-term, resource conserving [land] covers on eligible farmland" (CRP, 2008). Eligible lands include cropland planted for agricultural commodity in 4 of the previous 6 years as well as some marginal

pastureland (CRP, 2008). Rental payments, based on the agricultural rental value of participating acreages, are made by the Commodity Credit Corporation (CRP, 2008). CRP encourages a variety of land cover practices, and NRCS, state forestry agencies, local soil and water conservation districts, some private sector businesses, and Extension professionals may provide technical support to the landowner (CRP, 2008).

CRP is mutually beneficial to the landowner and the biodiversity maintenance and conservation cause. The landowner can expect increased protection against soil erosion, higher water quality due to reduced runoff, and higher quality agricultural soil (CRP, 2008). At the same time, CRP participation contributes to an overall increase in suitable wildlife habitat, wetland conservation, and better ecosystem management capabilities (CRP, 2008).

CRP Applications

Extension professionals will find CRP an easy sell to agricultural landowners. According to FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter, CRP prevents 450 million tons of soil from eroding annually, has restored 1.8 million acres of wetlands since the mid-1980s, and provides for the survival of approximately two million additional water fowl each year through the establishment and maintenance of suitable habitat (CRP, 2008). Landowner success stories are well documented.

There are benefits to long-term CRP participation. One landowner in North Carolina has enrolled approximately 250 acres in CRP continuously since 1987. 150 acres of this tract are devoted to trees, while the rest supports introduced grasses and legumes (CRP, 2008). The landowner carefully performs maintenance practices on the acreage, removing dead trees and participating in controlled burns (CRP, 2008). Benefits to the landowner include an increased wildlife population, control of soil erosion, and a "crop of marketable timber on his acreage" (CRP, 2008).

CRP provides effective means by which to maximize the potential of crop acreage or pastureland. Through a CRP enhancement initiative in the state of Oregon, one landowner reclaimed pastureland lost to a large wall of invasive Himalayan blackberries (CRP, 2008). The blackberries "hindered access to 15 acres of pasture and a nearby stream" (CRP, 2008). Through CRP enhancement efforts, the blackberries were removed and a workable riparian buffer installed (CRP, 2008). These efforts increased productive pastureland on the farm and improved the stream and the quality of its Coho salmon population (CRP, 2008).

CRP and the Cooperative Extension Service

Public participation in biodiversity management and conservation efforts grows increasingly important. Many natural resource professionals tirelessly seek partnerships with private landowners to allow for such efforts outside of state or federally protected tracts. Extension professionals represent an authoritative, yet underutilized resource through which these partnerships may be facilitated. CRP provides a mutually beneficial means by which agricultural landowners can participate in biodiversity management and conservation. The Cooperative Extension Service can play an extremely important role in marketing CRP to landowners and farmers throughout the United States.

CRP is a versatile program that allows for the enrollment of small, medium, or large tracts of land and offers considerable leeway in the types of conservation practices implemented. Extension professionals may find CRP a helpful tool for improving the overall quality of agricultural lands within a particular jurisdiction. CRP initiatives have also been extremely successful at reclaiming agricultural lands lost to soil erosion or invasive land cover species (CRP, 2008), issues sure to be faced by Extension professionals as they serve the public.

Conclusion

CRP constitutes a tool worthy of further or continued exploration by Extension professionals. The mutually beneficial nature of CRP contributes to public participation in biodiversity maintenance and conservation efforts as well as the cultivation of higher quality crop acreages and pasturelands. Extension professionals may find it useful to market CRP as a program that serves to meet the individual needs and desires of landowners, often making it easier to produce marketable crops and livestock while simultaneously contributing to the preservation of our natural resources. A full description of CRP is available online at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp>. This Web site includes more detailed information on CRP, its applications, and sign-up procedures. CRP information may also be obtained by calling a local FSA office.

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