



Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program Florida State

Overview

USDA and the State of Florida have launched a \$153 million Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to restore environmentally sensitive land in the Florida Everglades, its estuaries, and river lagoon systems.

CREP, which is administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), uses Federal and state resources, through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), to meet state-specific environmental objectives and to safeguard environmentally sensitive land.

Under CREP, producers convert cropland and marginal pastureland to native grasses, trees, wetlands, and related conservation buffer practices to improve water quality, soil, and wildlife habitat. CREP provides rental payments, cost-share assistance, and other financial incentives to encourage producers to voluntarily enroll in 14- to 15-year CRP contracts.

Benefits

The Florida CREP has the potential for significant water quality and wildlife habitat benefits. When fully implemented, it will protect waterways and substantially reduce the nitrogen and sediment deposition caused by agricultural practices.

The Florida CREP targets 30,000 acres in the Florida Everglades and protects the diverse ecosystem by reimbursing farmers who retire cropland and marginal pastureland.

Goals

The goals of the Florida CREP are to:

- reduce average annual phosphorus loading into the Everglades Protection Area by approximately 100 metric tons annually through establishment of conservation practices;
- increase the water storage capacity in the Lake Okeechobee and Indian River watershed through wetland restoration/creation;
- reduce pollutant loading from agricultural operations adjacent to the lower St. Johns River and in the Ocklawaha and Indian River Basin by at least 25 percent below modeled historic average annual loading; and
- provide substantial wildlife habitat enhancement for the preservation of natural diversity of Florida's biological resources, including threatened and endangered species associated with riparian and wetland habitats.

Program Costs

Based on the full implementation of the Florida CREP with an enrollment of 30,000 acres, the federal and state financial obligation will be approximately \$153 million over 15 years, with \$96 million provided by FSA and \$57 million provided by the state. The state's share is approximately 37 percent of the total program costs and the federal government's share is approximately 63 percent. CREP participants will also incur a portion of the practice establishment costs.

The State of Florida will:

- seek voluntary conservation easements covering land converted to Riparian Buffers (practice CP22) and Restored Wetlands (practice CP23). These easements will have either permanent or 15-year durations and will begin after the CREP contracts expire;
- provide additional cost-share assistance for implementation of the buffer practices;
- provide an additional 50-percent cost-share for practice implementation on permanent easements sites, and 25 percent additional cost-share for 15-year "conservation lease" easement sites; and
- offer a one-time supplemental payment equal to 25 percent

of the total of CRP rental payments for landowners who sign up for a voluntary permanent easement contract.

Eligible Areas and Land Eligibility Requirements

Producers can offer eligible land within the Everglades and St. Johns-Ocklawaha-Indian River Lagoon Systems. Certain eligible land in the South Florida Water Management District and St. Johns Water Management District may also be enrolled.

To be eligible for CREP, conservation buffer practices must be needed and feasible and the applicant must also satisfy the basic eligibility criteria for CRP. Eligible land is:

- cropland (including citrus groves and field margins) that is planted to an agricultural commodity during 4 of the previous 6 crop years from 1996 to 2001, and which is physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity;
- marginal pastureland that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer planted to trees, wildlife habitat buffer, or wetland buffer; and
- owned or operated for at least 1 year prior to enrollment.

Sites under an existing CRP contract, or an approved CRP offer with a contract pending, are ineligible for CREP until that contract expires. Participants must also

have an adjusted gross income of \$2.5 million or less annually to qualify for the federal portion of CREP payments.

Producers should contact their local FSA office for specific information concerning their eligibility for CREP.

Approved Conservation Practices

The following conservation practices may be eligible for land enrolled into the Florida CREP:

- CP3A - Hardwood Tree Planting;
- CP4D - Permanent Wildlife Habitat;
- CP9 - Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife;
- CP21 - Filter Strips;
- CP22 - Riparian Buffers;
- CP23 - Wetland Restoration;
- CP29 - Marginal Pasture and Wildlife Habitat Buffer; and
- CP30 - Marginal Pasture and Wetland Buffer.

Note: CP3A and CP4D enrollment acreage may not exceed 5,000 acres.

Sign-up

Eligible producers may enroll in 14-year to 15-year CREP contracts.

Enrollment for the Florida CREP will be on a continuous year-round sign-up basis within the approved area until December 31, 2007, or until terminated by USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation or the State of Florida.

CREP Payments

Participants enrolled in the Florida CREP may be eligible for annual rental payments, cost-share assistance for the installation of the conservation practices, and incentive payments.

Per acre annual rental rates will be calculated by FSA in accordance with the following schedule and CRP policy:

- for Riparian Buffers (CP22), Wildlife Habitat Buffers (CP29), and Wetland Buffers (CP30) on marginal pastureland, the base rate will be determined using the county marginal pastureland average CRP rental rate within the respective county as the base rate;
- for cropland, the base rate will be determined using the calculated weighted average for the three predominant CRP soil rental rates on the enrolled acreage;
- an 80-percent incentive rate will be applied to the respective base rate for all Florida CREP practices established on either marginal pastureland or cropland;
- a maintenance payment-rate per acre, established according to CRP policy, will be included in the annual rental rate for the practices established;
- for Wetland Restoration (CP23) sites a one-time 25-percent Wetland Restoration Incentive Payment to restore

natural hydrology will apply;
and

- for Filter Strip (CP21) and Riparian Buffer (CP22) sites, a one-time Signing Incentive Payment and Practice Incentive Payments will apply.

FSA will pay up to 50 percent of the cost of installing eligible conservation practices as determined by FSA.

Enrollment in Other Programs

CREP is another option that farmers may select to enhance their land; applicants may still enroll in the general sign-up CRP or continuous sign-up CRP. CREP provides additional benefits not available through the general and/or continuous CRP. Under CREP, applicants have the flexibility to extend conservation benefits through a state-funded program and thus increase the sum total of rental payments. Also, the enrollment process is on a continuous basis and per acre payments are generally at a higher rate.

Haying and Grazing

Currently, haying and grazing are not permitted during the CREP contract period unless the Secretary of Agriculture permits it for emergency purposes or under managed haying and grazing provisions.

For More Information

More information on the Florida CREP is available at local FSA offices and on FSA's Web site at: www.fsa.usda.gov

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