



Conservation Reserve Program Sign-up 29 Environmental Benefits Index

Overview

USDA Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers to help them safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolled in CRP plant long-term, resource-conserving covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat.

FSA will hold the next CRP general sign-up from August 30 - September 24, 2004. More information on this sign-up is available in the FSA fact sheet "Conservation Reserve Program, Sign-up 29."

Ranking CRP Offers

Offers for CRP sign-up 29 will be ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). FSA collects data for each of the EBI factors based on the relative environmental benefits for the land offered. EBI rankings are unique for each piece of ground offered into CRP. Each offer is assigned a point score based on its relative environmental factors and competes with all other offers. Offer acceptability is determined based on the ranking results.

For sign-up 29, FSA will use the following EBI factors to assess the environmental benefits for the land offered:

- Wildlife habitat benefits resulting from covers on contract acreage (N1);
- Water quality benefits from reduced erosion, runoff, and leaching (N2);
- On-farm benefits from reduced erosion (N3);
- Benefits that will likely endure beyond the contract period (N4);
- Air quality benefits from reduced wind erosion (N5); and
- Cost (N6).

N1 - Wildlife Factor **Point score: 0 to 100**

Factor N1 is an evaluation of the expected wildlife benefits of the offer and is comprised of three subfactors (N1a-c). The formula for N1 = N1a + N1b + N1c.

- **N1a - Wildlife Habitat Cover Benefits (0 to 50 points)**
This subfactor is an evaluation of the wildlife habitat cover offered. Cover practice planting mixtures are assigned points based on the potential value to wildlife within each state. Cover types that are more beneficial to wildlife are awarded higher scores. Local USDA Service Centers have a list of approved planting mixes and the assigned point scores for each cover mix. Point scores are based on the weighted average score for

the cover mixes the producer selects. Native mixes of diverse species generally receive the highest point scores. Eligible cover practices under the N1a criteria are in Table 1. *(Producers should note that wildlife habitat cover selection is the most critical factor impacting wildlife benefits. Optimum cover types significantly increase the point score for this factor.)*

- **N1b - Wildlife Enhancement (0, 5, or 20 points)**

This subfactor provides up to 20 points for actions taken to enhance the wildlife benefits for the offered acreage. Enhancement to the acreage is necessary in order to receive the points. For example, to receive 20 points for water development, water must be limiting the potential wildlife benefits. A site that is split by a stream may not be eligible to receive points under this factor. Eligible practices under the N1b criteria are in Table 2.

- **N1c - Wildlife Priority Zones (0 or 30 points)**

FSA consulted with farm, commodity, wildlife, and environmental groups to develop high-priority wildlife areas that would benefit from being enrolled in CRP. For land located within this defined geographic area, points are

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awarded for planting cover mixes to benefit wildlife species. At least 51 percent of the offered acreage must be located within the wildlife priority zone.

N2 - Water Quality Benefits from Reduced Erosion, Runoff, and Leaching Point score: 0 to 100

A main goal of CRP is to reduce the amount of sediment, nutrients, and pollutants that enter our Nation's waterways. Factor N2 is an evaluation of the potential impacts that CRP may have on both surface and groundwater quality. N2 is comprised of three subfactors (N2a-c). The formula for N2 = N2a + N2b + N2c.

■ **N2a - Location (0 or 30 points)**

An evaluation of the benefits of improving ground or surface water quality impaired by crop production. States have identified water quality zones for protection. At least 51 percent of the acreage offered must be within an approved water quality zone to receive 30 points. Local USDA Service Centers have detailed maps of the approved water quality zones.

■ **N2b - Groundwater quality (0 to 25 points)**

Evaluates predominant soils, the potential leaching of pesticides and nutrients into groundwater, and the impact to people who rely on groundwater as a source of primary

drinking water. Point scores are based on the weighted average leach index for soils offered for enrollment and the population that utilizes groundwater for drinking.

■ **N2c - Surface water quality (0 to 45 points)**

An evaluation of the amount of sediment that may be delivered into streams or other water courses and the human population that may be impacted. This factor is determined by potential water erosion, distance to the water, and the watershed in which the offer is located.

N3 - Erosion Factor Point score: 0 to 100

Enrollment in CRP helps maintain the long-term productivity of the land for future generations. Factor N3 is an evaluation of the potential for the land to erode as the result of either wind or water erosion. This factor is measured using an Erodibility Index (EI). Points are awarded for the weighted average of the higher value of either the wind or water EI, based on the results from Table 3.

N4 - Enduring Benefits Factor Point score: 0 to 50

Factor N4 is an evaluation of the likelihood for certain practices to remain in place beyond the CRP contract period. N4 values are determined by calculating the weighted average score for all practices in Table 4.

N5 - Air Quality Benefits From Reduced Wind Erosion Point score: 0 to 45 points

Factor N5 is an evaluation of the air quality improvements by reducing from cropland airborne dust and particulate caused by wind erosion. In addition, this factor has points for the value of CRP land that provides carbon sequestration. This factor is comprised of four subfactors (N5a-d). The formula for N5 = N5a + N5b + N5c + N5d.

■ **N5a - Wind Erosion Impacts (0 to 25 points)**

FSA will determine the potential for the site to have wind erosion damage. Points will be awarded based on potential wind erosion and the amount of population that may be impacted by the erosion. The potential wind erodibility is based on a climatic factor (wind speed, wind direction, and duration of wind events) and erodibility of the soil.

■ **N5b - Wind Erosion Soils List (0 or 5 points)**

A list of soils has been developed that are susceptible to wind and contribute significantly to nonattainment of air quality standards. These soils have a dominant component of volcanic or organic materials that are highly erodible and can be transported great distances on the wind. If at least 51 percent of the soils on the offer are comprised of these soils, the offer is awarded 5 points.

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■ **N5c - Air Quality Zones (0 or 5 points)**

The maximum of 5 points is awarded if at least 51 percent of the acreage offered is located in an air quality zone that contributes to nonattainment of air quality standards, and the calculated weighted wind EI is equal to or greater than 3.

■ **N5d - Carbon Sequestration (3 to 10 points)**

An evaluation of the benefits of sequestering greenhouse gases by practice over the expected life of the practice. Points are awarded based on a weighted average of carbon sequestration benefits for all practices using the value in Table 5.

N6 - Cost

Factor N6 is an evaluation of the cost of environmental benefits per dollar expended. This factor provides a weighted average to assist in considering optimizing environmental benefits per dollar for CRP rental payments. Factor N6 is comprised of three subfactors (N6a-c). The formula for N6 = N6a + N6b + N6c.

■ **N6a - Cost (point value determined after end of sign-up based on actual offer data)**

Offers with lower per acre rental rates may increase the probability of acceptability.

■ **N6b - Cost-share (0 or 10 points)**

All offers that include cost-share will receive 0 points. All offers that do not include cost-share will receive 10 points.

■ **N6c - Offer Less Than Maximum Payment Rate (0 to 15 points)**

Offers equal to the maximum payment rate will receive 0 points. Offers below the maximum payment rate will receive one additional point, not to exceed 15 points, for every whole dollar below the maximum payment rate for the offer.

EBI Changes

The EBI for CRP sign-up 29 is revised from the EBI used for the previous general CRP sign-up (sign-up 26). Wildlife food plots are no longer included in the weighted average N1a score. Also, a new practice for expired CRP hardwood trees on marginal pastureland was added.

EBI Thresholds for Offer Acceptance

After sign-up 29 ends on September 24, 2004, FSA will determine the EBI thresholds it will use for offer acceptance. EBI cutoff is determined after analyzing and ranking all eligible offers. As CRP is a highly competitive program, producers who would have met previous sign-up EBI cutoffs are not guaranteed a contract under sign-up 29.

Making CRP Offers More Competitive

While the United States has over 350 million acres of cropland, the maximum CRP enrollment authority is 39.2 million acres. As such, the demand to enroll land in CRP is expected to be greater than the amount that FSA can accept.

To make offers more competitive, producers should consider the following:

- The single most important producer decision involves determining which cover practice to apply to the acreage offered. Planting or establishing the highest scoring cover mixture is the best way to improve the chances of an offer being accepted.
- Producers should only offer the most environmentally sensitive land. Where possible, subdividing fields to include only the most sensitive acreage can substantially increase the point score for erosion and improve the water quality score and/or air quality score. Offering land with the highest EI will improve the score.
- Producers should consider enhancing covers for the benefit of wildlife by developing permanent water sources. In addition, producers may plant and manage hardwood or softwood trees that increase wildlife habitat values, or restore certain rare and declining habitats to increase the EBI score in subfactors N1a and N4.

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- Producers should consider accepting a lower payment rate than the maximum amount FSA is willing to offer.

Producers are encouraged to consult with local USDA experts on steps to take to maximize EBI points and increase the likelihood that an offer will be accepted.

For More Information

For more information on CRP, contact your local FSA office or visit FSA's Web site at: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crp.htm>

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Table 1 - Cover Practices (CP) for the N1a Criteria

Practice 1/	Point Score
CP1 - Permanent introduced grasses and legumes.	
Planting of 2 to 3 species of an introduced grass species.	10
Mixture (minimum of 4 species) of at least 3 introduced grasses and at least 1 forb or legume species best suited for wildlife in the area.	40
CP2 - Establishment of permanent native grasses and legumes.	
Mixed stand (minimum of 3 species) of at least 2 native grass species and at least 1 forb or legume species beneficial to wildlife.	20
Mixed stand (minimum of 5 species) of at least 3 native grasses and at least 1 shrub, forb, or legume species best suited for wildlife in the area.	50
CP3 - Tree planting (general). 2/	
Southern pines (softwoods) - Solid stand of pines/softwoods (planted at more than 550 trees per acre).	10
Northern conifers (softwoods) - Solid stand of conifers/softwoods (planted at more than 850 trees per acre).	10
Western pines (softwoods) - Solid stand of pines/softwoods (planted at more than 650 trees per acre).	10
Southern pines (softwoods) - Pines/softwoods planted at a rate of 500 to 550 per acre depending upon the site index (state-developed standards) with 10 to 20 percent openings managed to a CP4D wildlife cover.	50
Northern conifers (softwoods) - Conifers/softwoods planted at a rate of 750 to 850 trees per acre depending upon the site index (state-developed standards) with 10 to 20 percent openings managed to a CP4D wildlife cover.	50
Western pines (softwoods) - Pines/softwoods planted at a rate of 550 to 650 per acre depending upon the site index (state-developed standards) with 10 to 20 percent openings managed to a CP4D wildlife cover.	50
CP3A - Hardwood tree planting.	
Solid stand of nonmast producing hardwood species.	10
Solid stand of a single hard mast producing species.	20
Mixed stand of 2 hardwood species best suited for wildlife in the area.	30
Mixed stand (3 or more species) of hardwood species best suited for wildlife in the area.	50
Longleaf pine or Atlantic white cedar - Planted at rates appropriate for the site index.	50
CP4B - Permanent wildlife habitat (corridors), noneasement.	
Mixed stand (minimum of 4 species) of either grasses, trees, shrubs, forbs, or legumes planted in mixes, blocks, or strips best suited for various wildlife species in the area. A wildlife conservation plan must be developed with the participant.	40
Mixed stand (minimum of 5 species) of either predominantly native species including grasses, forbs, legumes, shrubs, or trees planted in mixes, blocks, or strips best suited to providing wildlife habitat. Only native grasses are authorized. Introduced grasses are not authorized for and cannot be included in cover mixes for 50-point N1a scores for CP4B. A wildlife conservation plan must be developed with the participant.	50
CP4D - Permanent wildlife habitat, noneasement.	
Mixed stand (minimum of 4 species) of either grasses, trees, shrubs, forbs, or legumes planted in mixes, blocks, or strips best suited for various wildlife species in the area. A wildlife conservation plan must be developed with the participant.	40
Mixed stand (minimum of 5 species) of either predominantly native species including grasses, forbs, legumes, shrubs, or trees planted in mixes, blocks, or strips best suited to providing wildlife habitat. Only native grasses are authorized. Introduced grasses are not authorized for and cannot be included in cover mixes for 50-point N1a scores for CP4B. A wildlife conservation plan must be developed with the participant.	50
CP10 - Vegetative cover - grass - already established.	
Solid stand of 1 to 3 species of introduced grasses.	10
Solid stand of 1 to 3 species of native grasses.	40
Mixed stand (minimum of 5 species) of at least 3 native grasses and at least 1 shrub, forb, or legume species best suited to wildlife in the area.	50

(Table continues on next page)

Table 1 (continued) - Cover Practices (CP) for the N1a Criteria	
Practice ^{1/}	Point Score
CP11 - Vegetative cover - trees - already established.	
Solid stand of pine/softwood or solid stand of nonmast producing hardwood species.	10
Solid stand of a single hard mast producing species.	20
Mixed stand (2 species) of hardwoods best suited for wildlife in the area.	30
Mixed stand (3 or more species) of hardwoods best suited for wildlife in the area.	50
Established longleaf pine or Atlantic white cedar best suited for wildlife in the area.	50
Pine/softwood established at, or thinned as needed, to provide 10 to 20 percent openings of native herbaceous and/or shrub planting or natural regeneration best suited for wildlife in the area. Tree thinning, if required or recommended by the State Forester, must be completed within 3 years of the CRP-1 effective date. Trees must be removed from the site.	50
CP12 - Wildlife food plot. ^{3/}	
Wildlife food plots are small non-cost-shared plantings in a larger area. Wildlife food plots will never be the predominant cover.	NA
CP25 - Rare and declining habitat restoration. ^{4/}	
Seeding or planting will be best suited for wildlife in the area. Plant species selections will be based upon Ecological Site Description data.	50
CP32 - Expired CRP hardwood tree planting on marginal pastureland.	
Solid stand of hardwood species.	10
Mixed hardwood trees established at, or thinned as needed, to provide 10 to 20 percent openings of native herbaceous and/or shrub planting or natural regeneration best suited for wildlife in the area. CP12 (food plot) can comprise a portion of the 10 to 20 percent openings. Tree thinning, if required or recommended by the State Forester, must be completed within 3 years of the contract effective date. Trees must be removed from the site.	50
Footnotes:	
^{1/} Cover established must accomplish the purpose of the practice.	
^{2/} State Conservationist may revise the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) on planting rate to be consistent with CRP. The opening for southern and western pines must be a minimum of 2 acres up to a maximum of 5 acres in size for fields of 20 acres and larger. For smaller fields, the size is based on a percentage. Opening in northern conifers will be one-half to 2 acres in size. The opening may include buffers on the interior of the field. Field edges (borders) may be used if they are irregular in shape and average 30 feet in width. Natural regeneration of native herbaceous or shrubby vegetation with required maintenance may be permitted within open areas if it is consistent with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical standards and the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, and has concurrence from state fish and wildlife service (FWS) or U.S. FWS officials. Open areas of native grasses and/or shrub planting best suited for wildlife in the area is considered CP3 for EBI scoring and contract purposes.	
^{3/} CP12 acreage is not included in the weighted average point score. For example, a 50-acre offer with 45 acres planted to CP25 and 5 acres planted to a wildlife food plot would calculate a weighted average using only the 45 acres of the CP25 planting. This calculates as follows: 45 acres x 50 points (CP 25 EBI score) = 2,250 points. 2,250 points / 45 acres = 50 points.	
^{4/} Technical practice standards for the selected habitat type must meet applicable standards and be approved by FSA at least 30 calendar days before the beginning of sign-up.	

Table 2 - Practices for the N1b Criteria	
Practice	Point Score
Wildlife water development. This is only permitted when it is consistent with the FOTG and where water may be a limiting factor.	20
Conversion of at least 51 percent of a primarily monoculture stand to a mixture of native species that provides wildlife benefits.	20
Annual or permanent food plot (CP12) that remains in the same location for the contract length, or rotated food plot (CP12) for which the location on the contract is moved during the contract length consistent with the NRCS FOTG up to 10 percent of a field, not to exceed 5 acres per field.	5

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Table 3 - Erodibility Index Points ^{1/}

EI	Points	EI	Points	EI	Points
4	5	10	35	16	65
5	10	11	40	17	70
6	15	12	45	18	75
7	20	13	50	19	80
8	25	14	55	20	90
9	30	15	60	21+	100

^{1/} EI of less than 4 = 0 points

Table 4 - Practices for the N4 Criteria

Practice	Point Score
New hardwood tree, longleaf pine, and/or Atlantic white cedar plantings (CP3A) and CP25 (Rare and declining habitat restoration) if the plant community to be established is primarily trees.	50
Existing hardwood tree, longleaf pine, and/or Atlantic white cedar plantings (CP11, CP32).	40
New pine/softwood tree (CP3).	30
Rare and declining habitat restoration (CP25) where the plant community to be established is comprised of primarily grass and/or shrub complex.	25
Existing pine/softwood tree - original contract signed as CP3 (CP11).	20
All other conservation practices not listed.	0

Table 5 - N5d Air Quality

Practice	Point Score
CP3 (Tree planting - general), CP3A (Hardwood tree planting), and CP25 (Rare and declining habitat restoration) planted to trees.	10
CP11 (Vegetative cover - trees - already established) and CP32 (Expired CRP hardwood tree planting on marginal pastureland).	7
CP25 (Rare and declining habitat restoration) planted to grass/shrub complexes.	5
CP4b (Permanent wildlife habitat (corridors), noneasement) and CP4d (Permanent wildlife habitat, noneasement).	4
CP1 (Permanent introduced grasses and legumes) and CP2 (Establishment of permanent native grasses).	3
CP10 (Vegetative cover - grass - already established) and CP12 (Wildlife food plot).	0