

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program – Arkansas, Illinois River Watershed

Overview

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a federal-state natural resources conservation program that addresses state and nationally significant agricultural related environmental concerns. Through CREP, program participants receive financial incentives from USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to voluntarily enroll in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in contracts of 14 to 15 years. Participants remove cropland and marginal pastureland from agricultural production and convert the land to native grasses, trees and other vegetation. CRP is authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended. USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers CRP and CREP on behalf of CCC.

The Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP is a partnership between USDA and the state of Arkansas. The program seeks to enroll 10,000 acres of eligible marginal pastureland and cropland in 14 to 15 year contracts within the Illinois River watershed. The project will establish or restore riparian forest buffers and wildlife habitat buffers by planting native grasses, forbs, trees, and shrubs. This CREP project area includes parts of Benton and Washington counties. The primary goals of the project are to enhance wildlife habitat and improve water quality by filtering agricultural runoff.

Benefits

The Arkansas Illinois River

Watershed CREP establishes tree buffers around streams and rivers in the Bayou Meto watershed. The establishment of these buffers will help:

- Remove nutrients, sediment, organic matter, pesticides, and other pollutants from surface runoff and subsurface flow.
- Restore native plant communities, stabilize stream banks and reduce flood damage impacts.
- Create shade to lower water temperature to improve habitat for aquatic organisms.
- Provide a source of detritus and large woody debris for aquatic organisms and habitat for wildlife.

In addition, this project will enhance habitat for the preservation of natural diversity of Arkansas' biological resources, including many species of concern that may be threatened or endangered. The project seeks to reduce the amount of sediments and nutrients entering streams from agricultural sources and restore habitat for both terrestrial and aquatic species through a voluntary, incentive-based program.

Goals

The goals of the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP are to:

- Enroll up to 10,000 acres of eligible marginal pastureland and cropland in riparian buffers to improve and protect the water quality of the Illinois River watershed.
- Enhance the effectiveness of

numerous on-going programs in the watershed area that filter runoff, stabilize stream-banks, shade stream channels and improve aquatic habitat.

- Enhance habitat for the preservation of natural diversity by increasing the amount, quality and connectivity of protected riparian corridors which many species depend upon for habitat and migration paths.
- Reduce sediment deposited into waterways toward a goal of 85,000 tons annually.

Eligibility Requirements

Applicants must be able to offer eligible acreage and satisfy the basic eligibility criteria for CRP. Land must be cropland that has been planted or considered planted four out of the six crop years from 2002 through 2007 and is physically and legally capable of being cropped. Marginal pastureland is also eligible provided it is suitable for use as a riparian buffer planted to trees or a wildlife buffer primarily planted to grasses, shrubs and forbs. Applicants must have owned or operated the land for at least one year prior to enrollment. Those with an existing CRP contract or an approved offer with a contract pending are not eligible for CREP until that contract expires.

The following are some of the eligibility requirements producers and their land must meet in order to be enrolled in the Arkansas Illinois River CREP:

- Land enrolled under the ripar-

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ian buffer practice must have a minimum average width no less than 50 feet and a maximum average width no greater than 300 feet.

- The maximum average width may be widened to include areas of overland out-of-bank flow that show evidence of scour erosion, sediment deposition or debris deposits. Extending average width to the highest debris line would prevent damage to fences used to exclude livestock from the riparian buffer. The width of the buffer can extend to the highest debris line or floodplain line as determined by NRCS or TSP.
- CRP contracts must follow the CRP regulations at 7 CFR part 1410, FSA National Directives, and the provisions of the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP agreement.

In addition, cropland must meet cropping history criteria and be physically and legally capable of being cropped in a normal manner. Marginal pastureland along streams, watercourses and certain upland areas also are eligible for enrollment according to FSA National Directives and the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP agreement.

Other requirements also may apply. Interested producers should contact the local FSA service center for specific information regarding eligibility for this CREP.

Sign-Up and Contract Duration

After the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP sign-up has begun, sign-up will continue until enrollment goals are met or until CRP authority expires, whichever comes first. Land enrolled under

this program will remain under contract for a minimum of 14 years, but no more than 15 years, as specified in the contract.

Approved Conservation Practices

Eligible practices and enrollment targets under the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP are:

- CP22 Riparian Buffer (Cropland and Marginal Pastureland) – 6,700 acres;
- CP29 Marginal Pastureland Wildlife Habitat Buffer (Marginal Pastureland) – 3,300 acres.

CCC Payments

Arkansas CREP participants will be eligible for the following types of USDA payments (subject to contract terms and certain limitations):

- Annual Rental Payment: An annual rental payment according to FSA CRP National Directives and the Arkansas CREP agreement. The maximum annual rental rate is based on posted CRP rental rates and is calculated as follows:
 1. For enrolled cropland, CCC will determine the base rental payment per acre using the weighted average soil rental rates for the three predominant soils;
 2. For marginal pastureland, CCC will determine the base rental payment per acre using the County Marginal Pastureland rental rate, plus;
 3. A 100 percent incentive payment will be added to the base soil rental rate or marginal pastureland rate plus;
 4. A per-acre maintenance incen-

tive payment as provided under normal CRP rules.

- Signing Incentive Payment: A one-time additional payment of \$100 per acre for land enrolled in practice CP22 (Riparian Buffer) and practice CP29 (Marginal Pastureland Wildlife Habitat Buffer). This payment is made after the contract has been signed and approved.
- Practice Incentive Payment: A one-time additional payment equal to 40 percent of the eligible reimbursable cost for establishment of practice CP22 and practice CP29.
- Cost-share assistance: 50 percent cost-share of reimbursable costs to install approved conservation practices.
- Cost-share assistance: Up to 50 percent for approved management activities according to national CRP directives.

State of Arkansas Payments and Provisions

The state of Arkansas will provide the following payments (subject to contract terms and certain limitations):

- The state, in partnership with the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission, will provide a one-time total of \$400 per acre signing incentive payment on the first 1,000 acres enrolled in the Illinois River Watershed CREP project. After the first 1,000 acres have been enrolled, the state of Arkansas will provide a one-time \$200 per acre signing incentive payment for participation in the CREP project.
- The state will allow eligible participants to utilize a riparian and wetland restoration state tax credit for out-of-

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pocket costs incurred as part of the CREP practice installation.

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- Provide the opportunity to all CREP participants on a voluntary basis to enroll federal contract acres in a state permanent or long-term easement.
- Pay all costs associated with the state's annual environmental monitoring programs.
- Provide administrative and technical assistance to implement the CREP.

Cost

The total cost for the Arkansas Illinois River Watershed CREP over the life of the project is estimated at \$21.1 million for a total enrollment of 10,000 acres. The state of Arkansas will contribute about \$5.7 million as support of the overall program cost.

Enrollment in Other Programs

Applicants may still enroll in general or continuous sign-up CRP; however, CREP provides additional benefits not available through the general and/or continuous sign-up. For instance, the CREP enrollment is on a continuous basis and payments are at a higher effective rate.

Haying and Grazing

Haying and grazing is not allowed during the CRP contract period unless USDA permits it for emergency purposes under normal CRP rules.

For More Information

For more information about the Arkansas CREP and other FSA programs, visit a local FSA service center or visit us on the Web at

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