

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is to cost-effectively assist owners and operators in conserving and improving soil, water, and wildlife resources by converting highly erodible and other environmentally sensitive acreage normally devoted to production to a long-term resource-conserving cover.

CRP participants enroll contracts for periods from 10- to 15-years in exchange for annual rental payments and cost-share and technical assistance for installing certain conservation practices.

An Environmental Benefits Index has been used to prioritize and rank CRP offers since the tenth signup in 1991. The EBI was refocused for signup 15 to comply with a desire to improve the program and rulemaking in February 1997.

The environmental components of the EBI were modified for signup 16 to reflect the experience gained from signup 15 to better address air quality benefits, recognize enhanced covers for wildlife habitat, recognize the enduring benefits of the diversity of land offered for CRP, and award acreage offered at less than the maximum payment rate.

When an applicant submits an offer, the employees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency collect environmental and other data. Each bid is assigned a point score based upon relative environmental benefits of the bid. After the end of the signup period, offers were ranked in comparison to all other bids offered nationally and selections made from that ranking.

Signup 16 was conducted during a 5-week period from October 14, 1997, through November 14, 1997.

Another CRP opportunity includes continuous signup which is available anytime through local USDA Service Centers for practices that have high environmental benefits while enrolling relatively small acreages such as riparian buffers, field windbreaks, and grass waterways.