

**Speech: Conference Overview and Objectives**  
**James R. Little, Farm Service Agency Administrator**  
**CRP: Planting for the Future Conference**  
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Well, good morning! On behalf of the Farm Service Agency and the Secretary of Agriculture, welcome to this very significant conference. We're all here -- just as the title says -- to help PLANT the future of one of our country's most successful environmental programs ever -- CRP.

I'd like to start by thanking Tom Casadevall and his staff at the U.S. Geological Survey for their support and teamwork in planning this joint FSA/USGS conference. I'd also like to thank Chief Bruce Knight and the NRCS staff, as well, for their support. USGS and NRCS' collaborative work on CRP has helped FSA harness the power of science to make CRP a more effective program.

This conference could not have happened at a better time. New farm bill discussions are right around the corner. And in just three years -- 16 million acres of CRP will expire. Another SIX million acres will follow in 2008. All told, that's 56 percent -- well over half -- of the land authorized for CRP enrollment.

These upcoming benchmark years -- and the ever-growing scrutiny from legislators, stakeholders, AND CRITICS -- require us to evaluate and address critical issues regarding the program. For example:

- How do we quantify CRP benefits and costs?
- How do we allocate acres in future sign-ups, while considering the program's varied objectives and regional differences?
- How do we meet the conflicting demands of a diverse group of stakeholders?
- And in today's environment, how do we factor in our conservation goals and still ensure a safe and viable food supply?

SOME may wonder if the program has outlived its usefulness, despite its huge success AND popularity. But we're NOT here to debate policy issues. We're here to meet with the top experts in the country -- to better understand in scientific and TECHNICAL terms what we KNOW AND what we NEED to know to improve the program.

The best way to be prepared for CRP's unknowns is to arm ourselves with knowledge. To properly move forward with CRP -- especially at such a critical time -- FSA needs a solid foundation of science-based research and analysis. When we've accomplished this, we can better inform legislators, budget overseers, and other decision-makers on how to proceed.

But before we talk about where we need to GO with CRP, let's take a quick look at where we stand right now.

CRP's role in improving wildlife habitat and protecting America's natural resources is widely recognized. The program is USDA's largest conservation initiative on private lands, with 34.6 million acres enrolled and a \$2 billion annual budget.

Much of the program's success is attributable to partnerships -- between USDA -- other federal and state agencies -- and private groups. But our performance really hinges on the remarkable commitment to the environment shared by America's farmers and ranchers. Their natural conservation ethic has laid a strong groundwork for maintaining and improving our natural resources.

Considering the size and complexity of CRP and the number of people involved -- in a country that holds private land ownership in the highest regard -- CRP is benefiting America on a national scale. The program:

- Has played a major role in reducing soil erosion by more than 40 percent since 1982.
- It's restored more than 1.9 million acres of wetlands and wetland buffers.
- It -- and other USDA conservation programs -- account for a net gain of about 26,000 wetland acres between 1997 and 2002. The programs have offset losses from converting wetlands to other land uses.
- It's installed more than 1.5 million acres of riparian buffers and grass filters.
- It's improved habitat that has increased populations of pheasants, ducks, many grassland birds -- including the sharp-tailed grouse -- and a multitude of other wildlife species.
- In fact, statistics show that more than 2.5 million new ducks -- are attributable to CRP -- per year.
- And CRP is the largest carbon sequestration program.

While these statistics are significant, what do they mean to the average person? The average taxpayer? The chair of the appropriations committee? The Office of Management and Budget? How do we communicate the BENEFITS of conservation in a meaningful way?

Under President Bush's Management Initiative, unless you can measure your accomplishments against your stated goals, your programs aren't going to be funded.

If we expect CRP to continue -- as a funded mandate -- we need to be able to measure and communicate CRP goals and accomplishments to the public AND to Congress -- well beyond the bounds of the agricultural and environmental communities.

FSA has already taken major strides in this area by initiating research to quantify CRP accomplishments and IMPROVE the program's accountability. Many of you are familiar with some of this research -- as you are some of its contributors.

The studies will offer insight on the changes that occur when conservation COVERS are established on cropland. From there, we can report our progress more effectively:

- For instance, rather than simply reporting the number of restored wetland acres, we want to be able to talk about:

- HOW MUCH POLLUTION these wetlands are keeping from our streams, rivers, and lakes.
- HOW MUCH EROSION was prevented.
- HOW MUCH CARBON was sequestered.
- AND how have the restored wetlands reduced flood levels.
- Along with noting the NUMBER of established WILDLIFE acres, we want to document the INCREASES in WILDLIFE populations -- similar to my previous remark that we've increased the number of new ducks by 2.5 million per year.
- Rather than just saying how many acres of riparian buffers and grass filters have been installed, we want to show how much nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment the buffers and grass intercept before reaching our surface waters.
- We also want to talk about the effects different grassland MANAGEMENT activities have on vegetative vigor and wildlife populations. A great example is the effect haying and grazing has on CRP lands.

In a nutshell, we need to apply the best science available to make the most informed program decisions. So if certain aspects of CRP are not performing as well as we would like, we can then determine where we need to fine-tune the program.

While I believe we need to ensure CRP remains sustainable, the means of education must be sustainable as well. Many of US have witnessed new wildlife and vegetation -- that helps bear out the results of our strategies, but COMMUNICATING these results is often difficult.

I'd like to share a story that illustrates this point. See, I grew up in Old Town Alexandria, right outside of Washington. When you fly in to Ronald Reagan Airport, you can actually see my parents' home where I grew up. When I was growing up, the Potomac River had a horrible reputation of being polluted.

Thirty/forty/fifty years ago, swimming in the Potomac was forbidden -- and you'd dare NOT eat any fish you might have caught. But over the years, with good stewardship, the health of the Potomac has improved.

As an avid runner, I take an early morning run along the Potomac River before I report to my South Building office. And over the past four years, I've witnessed a flock of blue heron establish itself right at the base of the Jefferson Memorial in the Tidal Basin. Along side these blue heron you can even find beaver -- literally within the shadow of the Washington Monument.

The Potomac River is a true environmental success story evident throughout the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay watersheds. And these both, in my opinion, can be considered some of the most significant CRP success stories in the Atlantic region. But we need to be able to QUANTIFY what these improvements are.

Better science will lead to better reporting of CRP accomplishments in quantitative terms that have real-world meaning. For example, lake and seaside charter boat crews who know cleaner water means more fish -- they know more fish mean more happy customers -- which translates CLEARLY into positive economic benefits -- all attributable to CRP.

With better data, we can better defend the program's societal worth to those who control the purse strings -- and defend it against our critics -- as well. As budget pressures INCREASE, we can forever expect even more competition for limited discretionary funds. Agencies that can't relay their story and justify their budget requests will be less likely to receive full -- or any -- funding in the future.

We know that both budget constraints and commodity availability will always play a role in conservation programs. That's a given. And we need to UNDERSTAND the ramifications of these givens, and what these trade-offs mean to the PROCESS of developing policy. I would argue, however, that the MORE we UNDERSTAND in QUANTITATIVE terms about the impacts of CRP, the BETTER we can focus limited FUNDS and limited ACRES to get the most benefit out of the program.

FSA is aggressively moving ahead to identify goals with measurable outcomes. In terms of CRP, this means achieving the maximum agricultural and environmental benefits at a minimal cost to the taxpayer.

John Marburger, the President's science advisor, has said -- and I QUOTE -- "Agriculture is not only the first industry, it is -- in a sense -- the first SCIENCE as well." We need to bear this philosophy out -- by developing a rigorous scientific basis for future CRP policy and program discussions.

That's why we're having this conference. We need your feedback -- the top CRP experts. The tasks at hand include:

- Reviewing ongoing and planned research.
- Identifying lessons learned.
- AND determining future research needs.

Many items on the agenda may raise questions or issues. They may also raise eyebrows. I encourage you to voice your opinions freely, but constructively. As I said before, this is not a debate and I'm confident that this stellar group can use its collective brainpower to make CRP a model of conservation success.

With the insights gained and intelligently applied to the process of developing policy, the potentially divisive issues will become less divisive, and program decisions will become more informed. The challenge is to make GOOD public policy even better with a clearer understanding of how to manage the program in the public interest.

#### CONCLUSION:

CRP affects far more people than those on the farms and ranches where it's implemented. Every U.S. citizen is a stakeholder in our natural resources. CRP helps SAVE many of the environmental characteristics that define a community's character, culture, and very way of life.

If this conference can contribute usefully to this vision, then it can be regarded as a great success!

Thank you again for coming! And thank you in advance for your contributions and for making this conference a success!