



**Fact Sheet**

**Conservation Reserve Program**

**16th Sign-Up Period**

**October 14 - November 14, 1997**

**Background**

CRP is USDA's largest conservation/environmental program.

The law allows a maximum enrollment of 36.4 million acres. CRP payments will be about \$1.8 billion for FY 1997.

27.6 million acres were under contract at the beginning of Fiscal Year 1998.

4.8 million acres currently under contract will expire September 30, 1998.

Final rule published in *Federal Register* on February 19, 1997, retargeted CRP to enroll the most environmentally sensitive acreage. The rule addressed the 3,467 public comments received.

**Sign-Up 15**

USDA processed a quarter of a million offers on over 23 million acres during a 4-week sign-up period--by far the largest CRP sign-up ever held.

Turn-around time from end of sign-up to notification of accepted/rejected offers was shortest in history of the program -- less than 2 months.

Over 70 percent of applicants offered to enhance existing cover.

Over 60 percent reduced their offer below the Maximum Payment Rate (formerly called the Bid Cap).

With the new enrollment, CRP has obtained an estimated 80 percent increase in environmental benefits over the benefits from previously enrolled acres:

- Greatly enhances wildlife benefits;
- Restored 800,000 acres of wetlands;
- Planted an additional 300,000 acres of trees;
- Protects 13.4 million acres of highly erodible land.

**Sign-Up 16**

The 16th CRP sign-up period will be conducted during the 5-week period from October 14 - November 14, 1997.

Several changes were made to further improve the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). The new EBI:

1. Adjusts the EBI factor for Wildlife Habitat Benefits to award points for the cover subfactor for cover mixes with up to 5 different species. This point scheme is more definitive than sign-up 15 in which points were awarded for the vague "mixed stands" which led to different interpretations between States and regions.

2. Defines the minimum percentages of offered acreage on which cover must be improved before awarding greater points for improved cover, rather than simply using "predominance." The minimums are:

- 51 percent of the acres must have improved cover for offers containing only existing acres (offered acres already under contract);
- 70 percent of the acres must have improved cover for offers with a mixture of existing and new acres;
- 90 percent for offers for only new acres;
- 100 percent of the acres to be devoted to trees for tree practices.

3. Changes the name from 'Long-Term Retention Benefits' factor to 'Enduring Benefits' and includes points for the following:

- Restoration of rare and declining habitat;
- Cultural resource areas such as historic sites and certain tribal lands;
- Shrub planting for certain wildlife;
- Non-CRP obligations to maintain the functions of CRP practices by entities, such as State governments and private organizations such as The Nature Conservancy.

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4. Improves the Air Quality factor by replacing the 1 factor used in sign-up 15 with 3 subfactors:

- Subfactor to evaluate wind erosion impacts using a county rather than ZIP code basis. Revised tables give greater weight to rural areas;
- Subfactor recognizing soils with a high percentage of fine material that are more likely to be suspended, such as volcanic soils;
- Subfactor for air quality zones to evaluate areas in which agriculture impacts air quality or that are located within 50 miles of Class 1 air quality areas, such as National Parks.

5. Adds to the cost factor a subfactor to provide points for every whole dollar for which an offer is below the Maximum Payment Rate, not to exceed 15 points.

To avoid a repeat of some errors that plagued sign-up 15, additional oversight was added for sign-up 16:

- A longer lead-time was provided to State and county offices between national training and the beginning of sign-up to help ensure that a complete information campaign is conducted;
- Every applicant will be required to certify on the CRP-2 Worksheet that all of the EBI except the cost factor has been explained and that the applicant has been informed that certain actions such as planting an approved cover mixture, enhancing existing cover, offering less than the

maximum payment rate, and/or declining cost-share assistance may enhance the acceptability of the offer.

- Offer data will be uploaded weekly during sign-up and analyses performed to identify any trends or major discrepancies immediately so that areas of concern may be addressed and corrected before the close of sign-up;
- NRCS national Oversight and Evaluation Teams will be in the field during sign-up to monitor offer evaluation.

The EBI cutoff score for sign-up 16 will not be known until after sign-up ends and all eligible offers are evaluated. *There is no guarantee that the EBI cutoff score will again be 259 points* as in sign-up 15.

Amount of acreage to be enrolled will be determined after sign-up ends and all eligible offers are evaluated. Enrollment will be dependent in large part upon the quality of the acres offered.

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