

Findings Abstract

Stakeholder Opinions Regarding Management of Conservation Reserve Program Lands to Address Environmental and Wildlife Issues

MARK W. VANDEVER¹ AND DANA L. HOAG²

¹U.S. Geological Survey, Fort Collins Science Center, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

²Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Introduction

In June 2004, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Farm Service Agency (FSA), the U.S. Department of Interior (USDI), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) co-sponsored a national conference on the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in Fort Collins, Colorado. The purpose was to provide science-based analysis of CRP impacts to inform producers, legislators, budget overseers, and other decision-makers on how best to manage CRP, minimize taxpayer costs, and maximize agricultural and environmental benefits (Allen & Vandever, 2005).

The CRP is a voluntary program created to establish long-term, resource-conserving covers on environmentally sensitive agricultural land. Producers enrolled in the CRP plant these covers to improve the soil, water, air, and wildlife habitat quality. As of September 2004, 34.8 million acres of land have been set aside in this national program (FS4, 2005; <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/>). The CRP rules and objectives have significant influences on participants, environmental quality within and beyond agriculturally dominated landscapes, wildlife, agricultural interests, and rural communities.

Methods

In association with the June 2004 CRP conference, conference participants were asked to evaluate: (a) satisfaction with services provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and FSA administered land uses of CRP, (b) economic implications on rural communities, (c) future issues concerning the CRP, and (d) environmental and wildlife issues related to the program. The questionnaire identified the unique perspectives brought to the conference by its participants and aided the FSA in refining the CRP to

Address correspondence to Mark W. Vandever, U.S. Geological Survey, Fort Collins Science Center, 2150 Centre Avenue Bldg C, Fort Collins, CO 80526, USA. E-mail: Mark_Vandever@usgs.gov

better meet local and regional needs. Information gathered was compared with previous CRP surveys (Allen & Vandever, 2003; General Accounting Office, 2002; Hughes, Hoag, & Nipp, 1995).

Of the 213 official conference participants, 124 (58%) completed the questionnaire. Respondents categorized themselves as employed by state or federal agencies (54%), agribusiness or commodity/producer groups (20%), environmental or conservation groups (16%), academia (6%), and no answer or "other" (4%). Results related to wildlife management are summarized in what follows.

Results

Management of CRP Lands

Management and disturbance of CRP lands has become an issue of substance that may influence what lands remain in or are accepted into the program. Recent changes brought by the 2002 Farm Bill authorize periodic management of CRP land to meet long-term habitat management objectives. Seventy-one percent of conference respondents felt periodic disturbance of CRP would best be administered at the state or local level, or a combination of both, whereas 21% believed administration was more appropriate at the regional (14%) and national levels (7%). Many respondents, however, indicated global guidelines that might override local concerns. For example, roughly half of the respondents believed haying (48%) or grazing (38%) should only be allowed during declared emergencies. Emergency haying or grazing of CRP with a 25% reduction in rental payment is permitted to lessen physiological stress on livestock when a county endures a minimum 40% loss of average moisture and forage during a 4-month qualifying period. Respondents held similar views that emergency haying or grazing should be permitted but only for environmental (48%) and wildlife applications (60%).

Emphasis of Enrollment for Environmental Benefits and Wildlife Habitat

All land proposed for CRP enrollment is evaluated with an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) based on a combination of six components, including wildlife habitat. When questioned if the current EBI adequately weights its components, over half (53%) of respondents believed wildlife were effectively represented, whereas 29% believed the EBI factors the wildlife component too low. Subsequent to targeting water quality, 62% of respondents identified wildlife habitat as an objective that should be targeted for the future. Respondents reported current CRP guidelines are somewhat effective to effective in addressing desirable changes in wildlife populations (75%) and improving wildlife habitat (78%).

Future Changes to the Farm Bill

Respondents were asked to select and rate the importance of upcoming management and implementation issues for the 2007 Farm Bill. Wildlife habitat, which previously had been given little consideration, was given increased precedence. Respondents identified monitoring of wildlife/environmental impacts as the second highest priority (44%)

behind continued emphasis on conservation priority areas (52%). Only 2% of respondents believed wildlife habitat was not a priority in the definition of future management of CRP lands.

Stakeholder Opinions

The questionnaire provided respondents the opportunity to elaborate on how to improve administration or management of the CRP. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of participants responded that wildlife and management issues were of great concern. Respondents less inclined to support wildlife issues with CRP commented that “too much emphasis is being put on wildlife habitat” and that “CRP should go back to being a soil and water protection program.” A number of supporters believed the CRP should “target areas with threatened or endangered species” instead of just targeting game species. Some believed that “maintenance and management of enrolled CRP acres should meet whatever the priority objective is for the area in which the acreage is enrolled” while the concept of “one size fits all does not address the variety of species of wildlife and the need of the grass.” The issue of land management for wildlife rallied several respondents with one noting “management is critical for improved wildlife habitat” and another responding “management should focus on maximizing wildlife benefits, not increase forage value.”

Comments on the EBI ranged from specific concerns such as “EBI should give greater weight to wildlife benefits” to a more generalized “not a vanilla, one EBI fits all approach.” Other respondents felt the EBI should equally weigh the three major components—soil, water, and wildlife to reflect a non-bias split.

Conclusion

Diverse political environmental and agricultural stakeholders have a vested interest in bettering and extending the CRP into the future. Given that over 200 individuals participated in the CRP conference at a time when travel authorization and budgets were tight merits recognition of the importance given to this conservation program. Although some negative perspectives were established, many believed only slight adjustments to modify administration of the program were needed.

References

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