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Making sense of production strategies

The Conservation Reserve Program in Colorado has encouraged farmers to take marginal agricultural land out of production. Expiring contracts mean farmers must consider future land use options. Extension educational workshops connect them to needed information.

Situation

Contracts on over two million Colorado farmland acres taken out of production and put into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will expire by 2013. Established under the USDA-Farm Service Agency in 1985, CRP offers farmers long-term rental payments in exchange for removing highly erodible and marginal farmland from production. Farmers have converted land to grassland to control erosion, protect water quality and provide grazing and wildlife habitat. Returning CRP lands to cropping is just one of several agricultural production strategies available.

Extension's Response

Beginning in 2009, Colorado State University Extension agents and specialists—working across Eastern Colorado—created a regional CRP workshop. The team piloted two successful workshops in 2010 before offering a series of five 'CRP Information Meetings' in Yuma, Phillips, Sedgwick, Logan and Cheyenne counties. Meetings occurred in February and March of 2011.

Each workshop was designed to explain the different agricultural options available to producers—cropping, grazing or a combination of both—and the economics behind each choice. Workshops also educated producers who are considering putting acreage back into CRP. During the half-day workshops, the Extension CRP team presented up-to-date, technical information on:

- Best agronomic practices
- Grazing opportunities
- Economic analysis, including a CRP decision-making software
- Weed control
- Range and grass management

In all, 45 producers from across Eastern Colorado attended the five CRP workshops presented in 2011. A total of approximately 52,000 acres were represented at these workshops. Of these, approximately 21,000 acres are held in CRP contracts.



The Bottom Line

- Extension agents and specialists help farmers and ranchers with expiring CRP contracts learn valuable technical information to make informed decisions about managing their land for the best economic and conservation outcomes.

By the Numbers

- National rank, by acres, for total number of CRP contracts expiring: 4
- Number of Colorado CRP contracts, in acres, expiring in 2011: 346,351
In 2012: 573,060
- County with the largest number of CRP contracts, in acres, expiring in 2011:
Lincoln, 40,295
In 2012: Kiowa, 103,584

Results

By attending the CRP workshops, farmers and ranchers with expiring CRP contracts learned valuable technical information that will help them make informed decisions about managing their land for the best economic and conservation outcomes. This was determined through Power Point surveys using 'clicker' technology so agents could electronically collect participant responses. The following results were tallied together across all five locations (n=45 respondents).

Survey Questions and Responses:

1. Was this program of benefit to you and your operation?
 - 99 percent of respondents said yes.
2. Will you make a change in your operation as a result of this program?
 - 51 percent of respondents indicated they will make a change as a result of the information presented. Respondents who reported they will not make a change may have learned enough information to determine that their current course of action is appropriate.
3. Which session was most beneficial?
 - Respondents indicated that the FSA/NRCS/DOW session was most beneficial to their operation. This session explained the current rules and regulations that are critical to know when re-enrolling CRP acres, or establishing a new CRP contract. All other sessions rated nearly equal in value following the FSA session.
4. How many total acres do you have?
 - Respondent answers totaled 51,650 acres.
5. How many total acres are in CRP?
 - Respondent answers totaled 20,650 CRP acres. Note: only a portion of acreage belong to CRP participants is put into CRP. However, acres currently not enrolled in CRP are also eligible to be nominated.
6. What do you plan to do with your CRP acres?
 - A majority of respondents said they would either maintain their CRP acres as grassland, or were uncertain regarding future plans with these acres. A high number of individuals indicated preference for a dual option of leaving some acres as grassland and cropping the rest.
7. What do you think the will be dollar per acre benefit to your operation as a result of attending this program?

| \$ Benefit per acre | % of respondents |
|---------------------|------------------|
| \$0 to \$5 | 26 |
| \$10 | 60 |
| More than \$10 | 14 |

| Financial benefits of program | |
|--|-----------|
| Average \$ benefit per acre reported for all 5 workshops | \$9.40 |
| Total CRP acres represented at all 5 workshops | 20,650 |
| Total \$ benefit for 5 workshops combined | \$194,110 |
| Average \$ in combined attendee benefit per workshop | \$38,882 |

Colorado State University Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Colorado counties cooperating. Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. June 2011. Written by Carol Busch.

Conservation Reserve Program

Through the USDA Farm Service Agency's competitive Conservation Reserve Program, producers can receive annual rental payments to establish long-term (10 to 20 years), resource conserving cover crops on eligible farmland. Rental payments are based on countywide soil productivity and dryland cash equivalents. In some cases, CRP payments have proved to be more cost-effective than cropping, depending on local economic conditions. Due to changes in the U.S. Farm Bill, producers with CRP contracts will have very limited opportunity to re-enroll their land into CRP—a significant change for many farmers who have kept lands in CRP for over two decades.

CRP Workshop Partners

CSU Extension

John Deering, *Northeast Region agriculture and business management specialist*

Michael Fisher, *Golden Plains Area livestock agent*

Alan Helm, *Golden Plains Area agent weed scientist*

Casey Matney, *Northeast Region range specialist*

Ron Meyer, *Golden Plains Area agronomist*

State & Federal Agencies

Farm Service Agency

Colorado Division of Wildlife

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Natural Resources Conservation Service Resource, Conservation and Development

Yuma Conservation District

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