The Continuing Growth of Conservation Practices in Farming

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Conservation is by no means a new concept, but in the last several decades it has increased substantially as farmers have become more conscious of their impact on the environment. There are many different conservation practices being utilized today, and they work in different ways to control different potential problems such as erosion, chemical runoff, and retaining excess soil nutrients. These practices increase sustainability, overall soil health, and improve water quality in local watersheds. Some of the most common practices associated with commodity crops are grass waterways, buffer strips, cover crops and land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Grass Waterways: Grass waterways are a site-specific control measure implemented throughout a field, primarily on steeper parts of the field where water flow concentrates. These waterways are seeded to perennial grasses and farmed around, providing water a place to flow with continuous vegetation to hold the soil in place eliminating erosion on sensitive areas of the field. Waterways can vary in length, width, and are typically placed in between two hills or areas in a field with a high concentration of water flow during rain events.

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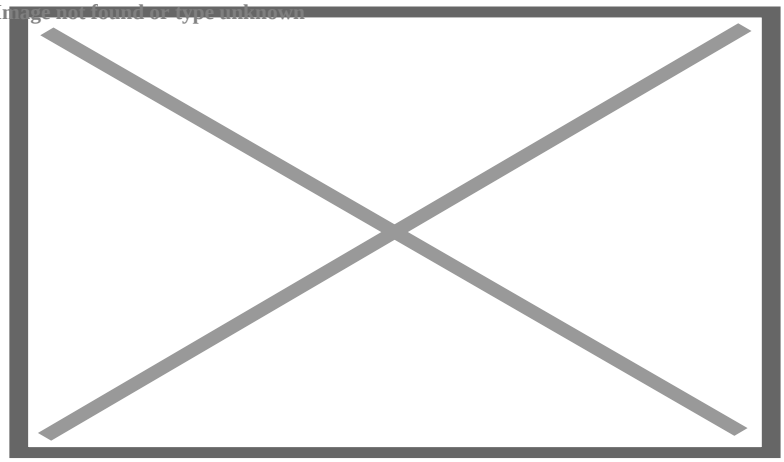

Buffer Strips: Buffer strips are vegetative swaths placed along the edge of a field or surrounding a ditch or body of water. Buffer strips provide a “catch strip” for nutrients and soil particles as water runs off the field and before it enters a body of water. The vegetation slows the runoff, allowing time for soil and nutrients to settle in the ground where they can then be utilized by the plants inhabiting the buffer strip instead of running off into a neighboring water source.

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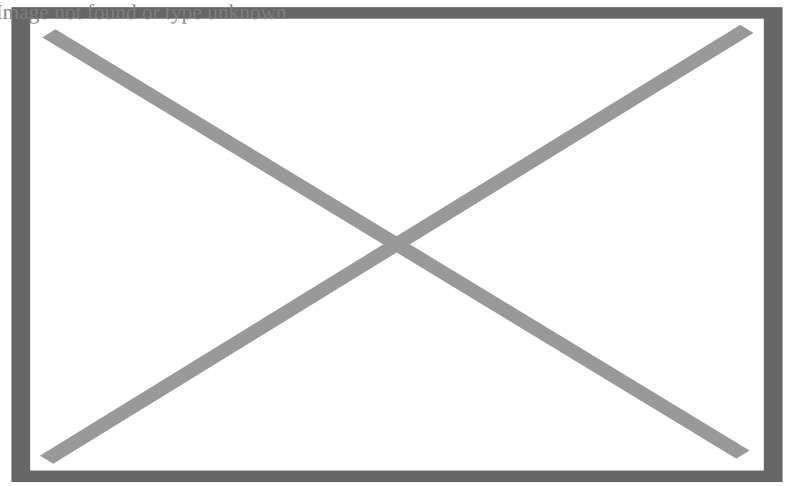

Cover Crops: Cover crops are typically a hardy winter small grain crop that is seeded into a standing crop or seeded after harvest to provide vegetative cover over the winter months. Cover crops also uptake and hold excess nitrogen further preventing them from exiting the soil and entering a body of water. The benefits of cover crops include reduced erosion, increased organic matter, and reduced nitrates/excess nutrients from exiting the soil. Cover crops also increase soil tilth with their extensive root systems that move throughout the soil, creating pores for water and carbon dioxide to move freely. Common cover crops include oats, wheat, barley, and tillage radishes. Cover crops that are not killed by the cold will be planted into and then sprayed in the spring, blanketing the soil and increasing water retention.

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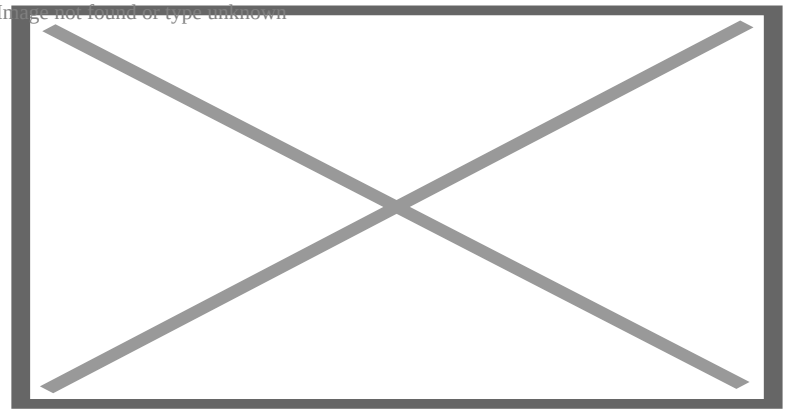

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): CRP is an incentive-based government program administered by the United States Farm Service Agency. This program establishes a rental rate based off region and soil types and pays farmers for taking environmentally sensitive acres out of production while still generating revenue on those acres via government compensation. The acres are taken out of crop production and enrolled in a pre-approved program that locks the land in a contract and ensures it will stay seeded for a number of years. There are many different options for implemented practices such as seeding switch grass, prairie strips, and native grasses that protect soil and filter pollutants by plant absorption. In addition to their stewardship characteristics, they also provide excellent habitat for upland game, pollinators, and other forms of wildlife.

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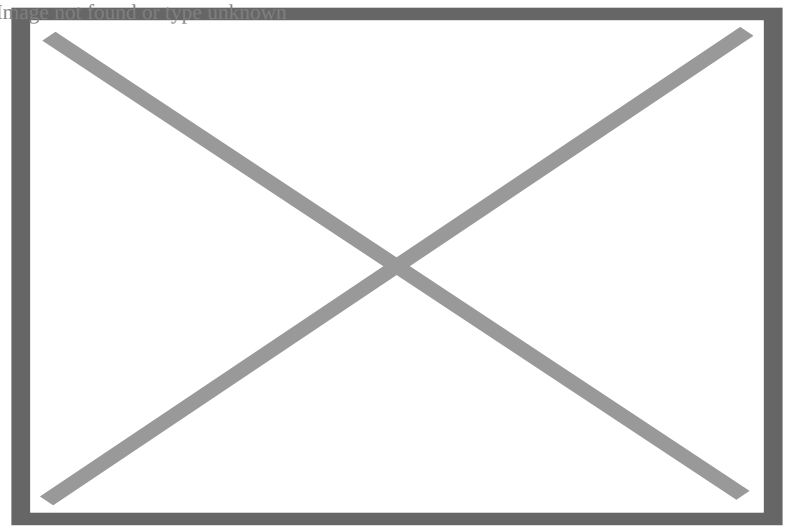

Conservation continues to grow in popularity throughout the agricultural community and more advanced programs continue to be developed to reduce our impact. Conservation improves our local and national ecosystems, supports premium appreciation, and is our responsibility as farmers and stewards to protect the land for the next generation to prosper.