

How (And Why) Peoples Company Land Managers Use CRP

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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the enrollment period for the 2020 Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in mid-December. This was an anticipated announcement for the 35-year-old program as Peoples Company Land Managers consider CRP a valuable tool in maximizing the most productive acres while protecting the most sensitive acres of each farm.

As a refresher, CRP is one of the largest programs in the United States directed at private lands to control soil erosion, restore wetlands, and create wildlife habitat. There are currently 22 million acres enrolled across the nation with the current farm bill allowing the number to increase to 27 million. This is a voluntary program where landowners can enroll farmland into 10 to 15-year contracts and receive an annual rental payment. There are various programs within CRP, with requirements and payments differing per program.

The enrollment process begins in the Farm Service Agency (FSA), one of the 28 agencies of USDA. General program requirements are reviewed in the FSA on the county level and then work is done in tandem with the county Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) office to find the right program to fit the acres specific to each farm.

While there are many benefits of CRP plantings, there are a few factors that Peoples Company Land Managers focus on when enrolling managed acres in CRP:

Soil Erosion

Topsoil is very difficult to rebuild. When erosion occurs on a farm, the topsoil is essentially lost permanently – and the fertility goes with it. Reducing soil erosion is critical in protecting the long-term value of a farmland asset.

Reducing tillage is an excellent start to reducing soil erosion. Taking marginal ground that is more sensitive to movement out of production is another. Peoples Company Land Managers look to pull highly erodible land out of production where productivity is reduced.



PHOTO 1: The farm in the above photo has a lot of soil variability across the field, with very good producing soils along the road but then poorer producing as the landscape drops off into the timber. CRP was installed (center of photo, lighter yellow-green color) on the section of the farm where the most erosion was occurring, and overall average field yield improved with the tillable acres reduction.

Slowing down water as it moves across a field also helps reduce erosion. When water is slowed, there is less momentum for soil sediment to move with it. CRP prairie strips work to slow down water moving across a field, with the long-rooted plants working as a sponge to absorb water. Peoples Company Land Managers make sure to work with operators to ensure the prairie strips are planted in widths that do not impede equipment movement.

Water Quality

Permanent plantings installed along field borders allow an opportunity for plant material to absorb water runoff before leaving the field. These plants work as a filter, catching fertilizer and chemicals moving in the water and soil. There are several CRP programs to fit various field specifications.



PHOTO 2: The farm in the above photo has a large waterway moving water off the field towards a drainage ditch that runs across the field. There is a wide CRP strip along each side of the drainage ditch to help filter water before it leaves the farm field.

These CRP strips could also play an important role along field edges where production is reduced to wildlife or lack of sun from nearby timber. Putting a CRP strip along this type of field edge would have

conservation benefits as well as reduce farm input costs where the farmer is not seeing a return.

Farmability

As equipment gets bigger, there are areas of farms that are not as easy to farm. Squaring up farm fields by planting odd areas to a permanent planting can ease equipment operation – something we often refer to as “farmability.” By taking those more difficult acres out of production, the operator is only farming the best acres – and is more inclined to pay premium rent when these type of considerations are made.



PHOTO 3: The farm in the above photo had timber draws that came into the field, making narrow points of the field as it moved back into the timber. The field was squared off closer to the timber and a pollinator seed mix was planted.

While the farmland return is harder to calculate, another valuable reason to install CRP is for wildlife habitat. Permanent plantings provide valuable cover with many programs also include a food plot component. The grass CRP plantings may be most common, but there are also programs that include heavy mixes of prairie flowers, trees/shrubs and small grain food plots. These plantings play a critical role in farm-dense landscapes for both insects and animals.

Peoples Company Land Managers often find that when they solve an economic problem there is almost always an environmental benefit. CRP plantings are an excellent tool for addressing conservation issues while also increasing productivity that ultimately increases annual farm rent and land values.

Landowners can visit their county FSA office to learn more about CRP opportunities on their farm. Now is the time to act as the first round of deadlines for CRP enrollment is February 28.

Peoples Company Land Managers are available to coordinate CRP enrollment, installation, and ongoing maintenance on behalf of landowners. To learn more how a Land Manager can coordinate the CRP process, email LandManagement@PeoplesCompany.com or call 855.800.5263 (LAND).