



USDA Announces Conservation Reserve Program Signup for 2023

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that agricultural producers and private landowners can apply for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) General signup through April 7, 2023. CRP is a cornerstone voluntary conservation program offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address climate change and help agricultural communities invest in the long-term well-being of their land and natural resources.

“The Conservation Reserve Program is one of the largest private lands conservation programs in the United States, offering a range of conservation options to farmers, ranchers and landowners,” said Julia A. Wickard, FSA State Executive Director in Indiana. “CRP has and continues to be a great fit for farmers with less productive or marginal cropland, helping them re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and support wildlife habitat. Under this administration, we have made several updates to the program to increase producer interest and enrollment, strengthen the climate benefits of the program and help ensure underserved producers can find a pathway to entry into CRP.”

Producers and landowners enrolled more than 5 million acres into CRP through signups in 2022, building on the acceptance of more than 3.1 million acres in the largest Grassland CRP signup in history. There are currently 23 million acres enrolled in CRP, with 1.9 million set to expire this year. USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) is aiming to reach the 27-million-acre cap statutorily set for fiscal year 2023.

General CRP

General CRP helps producers and landowners establish long-term, resource-conserving plant species, such as approved grasses or trees, to control soil erosion, improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat on cropland. Additionally, General CRP includes a Climate-Smart Practice Incentive to help increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by helping producers and landowners establish trees and permanent grasses, enhance wildlife habitat, and restore wetlands.

Continuous CRP

Under Continuous CRP, producers and landowners can enroll in CRP throughout the year. Offers are automatically accepted provided the producer and land meet the eligibility requirements and the enrollment levels do not exceed the statutory cap. The Climate-Smart Practice Incentive is also available in the Continuous signup.

FSA offers several additional enrollment opportunities within Continuous CRP, including the Clean Lakes Estuaries and Rivers Initiative (CLEAR30), the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) Initiative, the Farmable Wetlands Program (FWP), and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The CLEAR30 Initiative, which was originally piloted in twelve states in the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay watershed, has been expanded nationwide, allowing producers and landowners to enroll in 30-year CRP contracts for water quality practices. Under this administration, FSA also moved SAFE practices back to the Continuous CRP signup, giving producers and landowners more opportunities to participate in the initiative. Through the FWP, producers and landowners can enroll land in CRP as part of their efforts to restore previously farmed wetlands and wetland buffers, to improve both vegetation and water flow.

This administration has also made significant improvements to CREP, which leverages federal and non-federal funds to target specific State, regional or nationally significant conservation concerns. Specifically, USDA made significant improvements to CREP to reduce barriers and make the program more accessible to a broad range of producers and new types of partners.

These updates included flexibility for partners to provide matching funds in the form of cash, in-kind contributions, or technical assistance, along with an investment in additional staff to work directly with partners. Through CREP, for the first time ever, three Tribal Nations are now partnering with USDA to help conserve, maintain, and improve grassland productivity, reduce soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat.

Grassland CRP

FSA will announce the dates for Grassland CRP signup in the coming weeks. Grassland CRP is a working lands program, helping landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland and pastureland and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as working grazing lands. Protecting grasslands contributes positively to the economy of many regions, provides biodiversity of plant and animal populations, and provides important carbon sequestration benefits to deliver lasting climate outcomes.

How to Sign Up

Landowners and producers interested in CRP should contact their local USDA Service Center to learn more or to apply for the program before their deadlines.

Producers with expiring CRP acres can use the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), which incentivizes producers who sell or enter a long-term lease with a beginning, veteran, or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher who plans to sustainably farm or ranch the land.

More Information

Signed into law in 1985, CRP is one of the largest voluntary private-lands conservation programs in the United States. It was originally intended to primarily control soil erosion and potentially stabilize commodity prices by taking marginal lands out of production. The program has evolved over the years, providing many conservation and economic benefits.



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Did you know?

Shifting consumer demands pose a challenge for any industry, including the agricultural sector. Farmers who want to ensure they're in the best position to meet consumer demands in the coming decades may be happy to learn that an aging population figures to work in the agricultural sector's favor. The Economic Research Service with the U.S. Department of Agriculture notes that individuals over age 65 are expected to make up a greater percentage of the overall population in the years to come. That should, the ERS notes, benefit farmers, as older individuals tend to be more health-conscious with their eating habits than younger generations. AG233765

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Are backyard chickens right for you?

Raising backyard chickens has been a growing phenomenon for several years. Many cities have passed laws legalizing backyard chickens, encouraging many to raise chickens as a rewarding hobby. One of the biggest benefits to raising backyard chickens is that their eggs are fresher and often tastier than store-bought varieties. Hens can lay one egg per day. Multiply that egg per hen, and breakfast is always available. Another benefit to chickens is they produce a natural fertilizer that can be used in gardens. “The Old Farmer’s Almanac” says chicken manure can be composted, aged and eventually added to the garden. In about six months, a person will accumulate about one cubic foot of manure per chicken. Egg shells and other compostable material can be added to create an even richer formula. Chickens also can help control bugs around the yard, offers the experts at Tractor Supply Company. Before investing in backyard chickens, people should determine if chickens will fit with their lifestyle. Costs and care are a big consideration. Each chick will cost anywhere between \$3 to \$5 a bird. Then there’s feed to consider. The most expensive item will likely be the coop. The experts at The Happy Chicken Coop, a resource for raising chickens and starting coops, says handy men and women can build homemade coops, but ready-made ones will cost a few hundred dollars. The coop will need to offer around four square feet of space per chicken (or what’s recommended for the breed). Despite being seemingly independent birds, chickens need people to be active caregivers. They require feed and water daily. The chickens will need a caregiver while you vacation. People who are frequently away from home should reconsider chickens. Chickens also are prone to worms, parasites and lice. They need to have rear feathers trimmed to stay clean and sanitary, and they will require an area where they



can “dust” and self-groom. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises not to cuddle and kiss chickens like pets because they can carry salmonella. Not every coop is completely varmint-proof, and some chickens may succumb to predators. Squeamish or sentimental folks may find chickens aren’t the right fit. Chickens require commitment and care that many people can provide. It is essential to do one’s homework to ensure that backyard chickens are a sound investment. TF194846

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How labor shortages are affecting agriculture

The agricultural work-force is shrinking, and has been for some time. The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates there are roughly 2.4 million farm jobs that need to be filled annually, but there has been a drastic decline in workers each year. There are a number of reasons for the shortages. The AFBF says more than 73 percent of farm workers are immigrants from South America and Mexico. While the United States' H2-A visa program, which allows employers who meet specific requirements to bring foreign laborers in for temporary work, has increased the number of accepted applications for immigrants to 250,000, this number is still just a drop in the bucket in terms of labor needs. Another factor is a career in agriculture isn't always easy or lucrative. According to the U.S Department of Agriculture, for every



dollar spent on food, a farmer receives only 7.6 cents. Farmers were predicted to lose 9.7 percent of total net income in 2021. Declining interest in the field has also affected the number of farm workers. As more farm operators reach retirement age, fewer young farmers are replacing them due to volatile pricing, high real estate and land costs, steep initial machinery investment costs, and other factors. The physical demand of the industry also takes its toll. So what does this mean for the agricultural industry?

Many with knowledge of the industry indicate sweeping changes are warranted. Ellen Poeschi, the project director for the National Association of Agricultural Educators Teach Ag campaign, has said that a lack of agricultural education is contributing to the problem. Increasing availability of ag education courses across the country could build interest in the industry. Connecting students to internships or mentors may help, too. Another option is to rally for greater economic opportunities in agriculture. The ag industry in gen-



SUBMITTED PHOTO BY LAUGHERY VALLEY AG

eral needs to find ways to make the economic benefits more competitive to other industries, and improve the working conditions and job flexibility. Agricultural industries currently average only 60 percent of what other industries offer in salaries. Farm wages have been rising due to the H-2A program, which requires farm worker pay to be higher than the state/federal min-

imum wage. More change is needed, but this may have to come at the federal level or be sparked by efforts on the part of agricultural advocacy groups. Additional strategies farm operators can employ to combat shortages are: scaling back farm operations; integrating ag technology to reduce labor burdens; pivoting to crops that require fewer laborers; leasing portions of

land to have extra money; employing temporary guest workers; and moving operations abroad. Worker shortages continue to be problematic for the agricultural industry. A greater focus on remedying the issue is needed on a grand scale. AG233740

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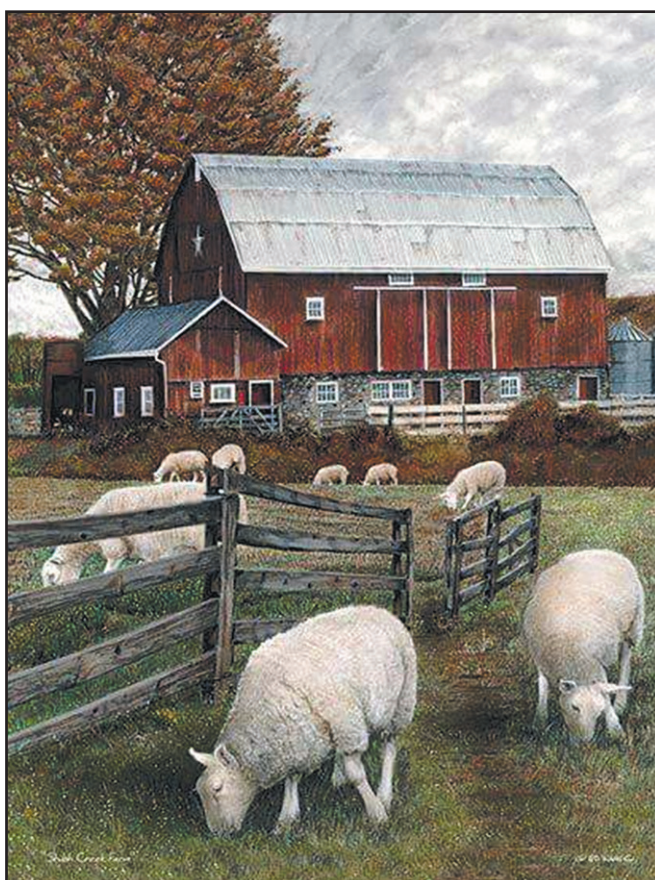


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