

Can
buffers
boost
your
bottom
line?



Buffers in CRP: How it works

Under the continuous signup option of the USDA Conservation Reserve Program, landowners may enroll eligible cropland into filter strips or forest riparian buffers for 10 to 15 years. Annual rental payments are based on the soil types present in the field and can range from about \$20 to \$130 per acre in Wisconsin. In order to encourage participation and to reduce landowner costs, the continuous CRP will pay 50% of the cost of installing the buffer. Landowners are also eligible for a Practice Incentive Payment that is equivalent to 40% of the costs. In addition, landowners receive a one-time signing incentive payment of \$10 per acre for every year of the contract.

So altogether, the CRP provides cost-sharing and incentives that cover up to 90% of the landowners' costs, plus signing incentive payment and annual rental payments. Compared to the low yields of the field edge rows, it's easy to see how CRP buffers come out ahead.

For more information on conservation buffers or other conservation practices, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service or the Farm Service Agency at your local USDA Service Center, county Land Conservation Department, or Cooperative Extension office.

Are buffers along streams better for your bottom line than corn or soybeans? In many cases, they are. A buffer is a narrow strip of land along a stream, usually 30-foot-wide or more, that is planted to permanent grass as an alternative to cropping close to the water.

How can taking land out of production make money? Because crops planted next to the stream usually yield less than in the center of the field. By putting the buffer between the crop and the stream bank, you don't invest in seed, fertilizer and chemicals on the lower-yielding land. And buffers prevent erosion from robbing the topsoil and cutting gullies into the high-yielding parts of the field.

Since Conservation Reserve Program rental rates have been updated, more farmers are finding that putting in conservation buffers with CRP along streams or other water can be more profitable than cropping those field edges. This is especially true if the area is wet, shaded, droughty, steep or consistently low-yielding land. A recent study in Kenosha County compared CRP payments to corn and soybean profits. It showed that field edges with low yields – less than 40 bu./ac. for soybeans and less than 115 bu./ac. for corn – would be more profitable if enrolled as buffers in CRP.

In order to find out whether CRP is more profitable than cropping field edges, consider production costs (seed, chemicals, equipment, fuel), expected yield, crop prices, and CRP rates and incentives for your area. In Wisconsin, the average CRP rental rate is \$65 per acre.

However, as most farmers will tell you, conservation buffers through CRP are not only about profits. Buffers reduce erosion and protect water quality. They make field management easier by reducing gullies, brush and trees crowding the crops. Buffers allow easy access to the stream and stream bank, even during the growing season. And conservation practices like buffers improve property values and protect natural resources – essential to long-term success and future farm generations.





Here's what one farmer says about CRP buffers:



“Buffers have improved the value of our farm and also improved the bottom line, especially noticeable in a wet year. The stream banks had grown up with box elder and cottonwoods, which shaded and robbed moisture from the crops 8-12 rows in from the end. There was no grass on the banks, which eroded easily and trees toppled into the channel. When we established the buffers, those outside rows were planted to native grass, and the banks were shaped and seeded down. There is no doubt the buffers will make it a much better stream. They carry the surface water safely off the field and filter it, the banks are stable, and the corn and soybean yields are high right up to the buffer. We also can get access to the banks and the creek if we need to during the summer, to clean up any debris from upstream or to mow it. We're way ahead with buffers.”

— Chuck Stanhope, corn and soybean grower near Footville, in the Bass Creek Watershed in Rock County, Wisconsin, installed 30-foot-wide buffers along 1,800 feet of stream. More will be installed through the continuous sign-up option of the CRP.



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