



Mark Vandever

Conservation Reserve Program Boosts Outdoor Recreation in Rural Communities

As growth in the biofuels industry increases demand for raw materials, market pressures to devote more land to crop production may lead to the conversion of millions of current Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres back to cropland. The 36.7 million acres of U.S. farmland currently enrolled in the CRP provide a range of environmental benefits. Those positive effects could be lost if CRP lands were brought back into production.

The CRP is a voluntary program run by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). Agricultural producers enrolled in CRP

plant long-term, resource-conserving vegetative covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat. In return, FSA provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance. Contracts last from 10 to 15 years.

By improving wildlife habitat and air and water quality, CRP has significantly increased the number and variety of wildlife, attracting bird watchers, hunters, anglers, and other outdoor recreation enthusiasts, who then spend money in rural areas. In 2004, ERS research con-

firmed that the CRP's environmental benefits can substantially increase recreational expenditures in rural counties. Based on data from national surveys of farmers and hunters, increases in recreational spending attributable to CRP enrollment are estimated to be as much as \$290 million per year. This dollar amount includes revenue reported by farmers from recreational uses of their CRP land, as well as the non-farm local spending of visitors to CRP land for outdoor recreation.

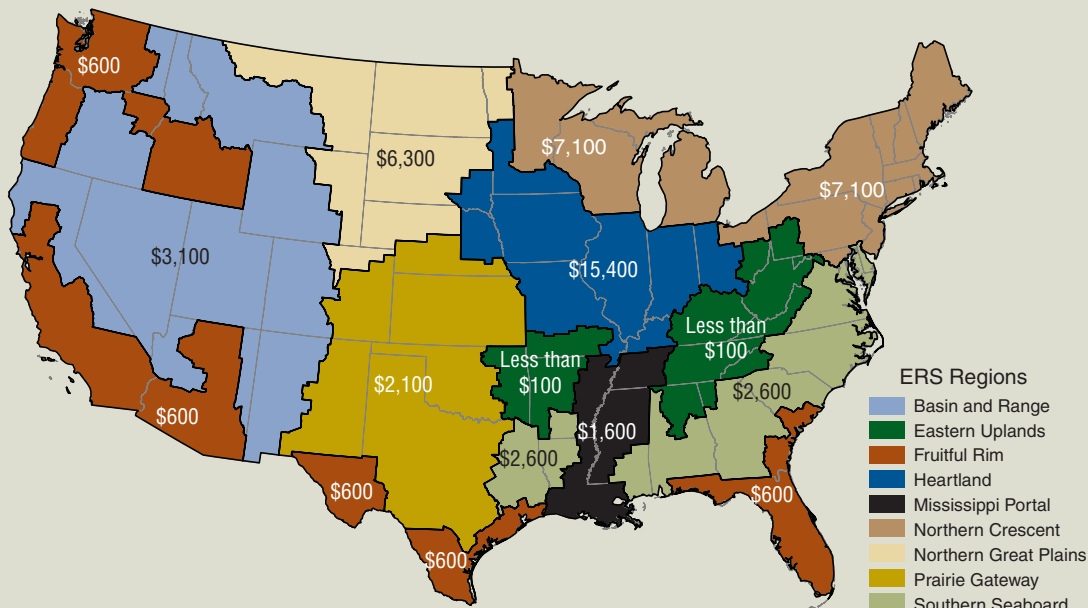
A number of simplifying assumptions were needed to arrive at this estimate, making its precision hard to gauge without more detailed information from landowners and outdoor recreation enthusiasts. However, other analyses also found similarly substantial economic benefits from CRP-induced recreation. For example, one study by Dean A. Bangsund, Nancy M. Hodur, and F. Larry Leistritz of North Dakota State University estimates that CRP lands in North Dakota attract about \$13 million per year in recreation-related spending. The same attributes that attract hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts—clean air and water and a healthy ecosystem—create attractive landscapes that make rural communities more pleasant places in which to live and work. ∞

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This finding is drawn from . . .

The Conservation Reserve Program: Economic Implications for Rural America, by Patrick Sullivan, Daniel Hellerstein, LeRoy Hansen, Robert Johansson, Steven Koenig, Ruben Lubowski, William McBride, David McGranahan, Michael Roberts, Stephen Vogel, and Shawn Bucholtz, AER-834, USDA, Economic Research Service, November 2004, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aer834/

Total recreational expenditures on farms with land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program vary by region



Note: Values are in thousands of dollars.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the 2001 Agricultural Resource Management Survey.