

Expiring Conservation Reserve Program Acres: Converting to Pasture

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service - Strategies for Conversion Jobsheet

Background

Many acres of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will be expiring. Depending on the care taken in seeding the land and subsequent maintenance activities, it may or may not be suitable for grazing.

Common Resource Concerns

Land that has been in CRP may be infested with invasive species, weeds, brush and small trees, depending on the initial establishment and maintenance that was performed or was allowable during the contract. Since it is much more difficult to control weeds once grazing has started, weed control should be done prior to the start of grazing.

Soil fertility may not be at optimum levels and may also need adjustment prior to grazing. Soil tests should be taken to determine the current levels of Phosphorous, Potassium and the pH to determine if adjustments are recommended.

Weed Control

The first step in developing a strategy to control weeds is to identify the weed species in the pasture and once identified, a treatment strategy should be formulated.

Not all plants that are considered a weed in row crops are weeds in pastures. Plants such as quackgrass and lambsquarter are actually quite nutritious in their vegetative stages.

Common methods of control include herbicides, mowing, and hand cutting. Once weeds are under control and fertility levels have been adjusted to optimum levels, a

well managed rotational grazing system will greatly decrease the number of weeds. Vigorous vegetative growth of desirable forage species will usually out-compete most weeds.

Mechanical Control

Some weeds can be controlled by mowing, clipping, or hand weeding. Some woody species such as boxelder and buckthorn may require use of a chainsaw. When weeds are in the bud to early bloom stage cut them no higher than 3-4 inches above the ground. Some hardy species such as musk, plumeless, and Canada thistles may require repeated mowings to be effective since these species send out new shoots after mowing and may bloom and set seed. Repeated mowings reduce root reserves and weaken the plants. In extremely bad infestations, sections of the pasture may need to be tilled and reseeded in order to address the weed problem. This may be the only solution available to organic producers.

Chemical Control

If mechanical methods are not able to solve the weed problem, chemical methods of control may be required. Organic producers may not have access to chemical control so they should contact their certifier before undertaking chemical control methods.

Herbicides can be applied as spot treatments or broadcast over the entire pasture. Keep in mind that most chemicals that will control broadleaf weeds will also kill legumes in the pasture. Effective use of herbicides requires careful identification of weed species because each herbicide will kill some species of weeds but not others. Consult with a professional agronomist or a local Agricultural Extension agent before applying herbicides to determine the kind

and rate of herbicide to use. Always follow label directions when applying herbicides.

Cultural Control and Maintenance

Developing a grazing plan and following it is critical to improving forage production and utilization. Weeds are usually more of a problem in overgrazed pastures that have low fertility. Some of the elements that must be considered are providing adequate rest for pastures, drinking water distribution, fence locations, soil types and balancing the number, kind and class of livestock with the available resources. A grazing plan will be developed using the NRCS Prescribed Grazing Standard 528 if land converted to grazing from CRP is enrolled in any other NRCS programs. In developing a grazing plan the existing vegetation will be evaluated to determine its suitability for grazing.

Specifications

When developing a Prescribed Grazing Plan for NRCS programs the following Conservation Practice Standards will be followed:

- Animal Trails and Walkways (575)
- Fence (382)
- Heavy Use Area Protection (561)
- Pasture and Hayland Planting (512)
- Pipeline (516)
- Prescribed Grazing (528)

Pumping Plant (533)

Watering Facility (614)

Considerations

Cut woody vegetation as low as possible to avoid puncturing tires with the stumps when later field operations such as mowing and fertilizing are done.

If the CRP was not mowed there may be a layer of dead vegetation (thatch) that has developed. Consider using very heavy stocking densities (greater than 50,000 pounds of grazing animals/acre) to incorporate the thatch into the soil and speed utilization of the thatch by microorganisms during the first year of grazing.

Other programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) or the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) may be available to help implement some of the conservation practices needed to implement a grazing system on these acres.

For More Information

For more information on management options with expiring CRP contracts or if interested in implementing a grazing plan, contact your local NRCS office.