

Better Weed Control

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an annual rent for each acre. In the 20 Pennsylvania counties eligible for CREP funds, landowners receive an average of \$96 per acre for rent, plus cost-share funds for establishing grasses or trees, Foose said.

Foose said that penalties can be imposed on landowners who fail to control plants that are on the state's list of noxious weeds. These include Canada thistle, multiflora rose, Johnsongrass, and shattercane, to name a few.

The FSA "usually (has) several cases every year" in which penalties are levied on CRP-enrolled landowners for noxious weed problems in Pennsylvania. No CREP landowners have been penalized to date, Foose said.

Scott Singer, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) wildlife habitat specialist, works with CREP landowners in Columbia and Montour counties. He said warm-season grasses in particular can take a few years to get established, making the weeds more of a challenge in the meantime. There are also instances of shorter grasses used in CREP tree plantings where weeds are a problem, according to Singer.

"Every day I'm giving advice to landowners on how to control weeds," he said. "If you get those weeds in your field you have to control them."

Singer said he frequently recommends spot-spraying with "effective chemicals" that are "least harmful to wildlife habitat."

According to George Hubbard, director of the FSA office for Columbia and Montour counties, mowing in CREP fields is limited in order to protect wildlife habitat. Contracts specify that mowing must only occur in the period from July 16 - Aug. 31. Even then, landowners should show restraint in mowing, he said.

"If you go out on July 16 and mow everything down like a golf course, it's not going to be beneficial to wildlife," Hubbard said.

Most Canada thistles have already gone to seed by then, Hubbard said. To control the weeds, he recommended spot-spraying earlier in the season.

According to Singer, warm-season grasses remain established longer and will eventually provide better weed control than traditional cool-season grasses such as timothy or orchardgrass.

"I have to keep reassuring people that patience is the key," he said.

Hubbard also acknowledged that lack of rainfall has made it hard to establish grasses on CREP land this year.

Wissler and Carl Shaffer, vice president of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and Columbia County crop farmer, however, said the weed control hasn't been good enough in some instances. The problem, particularly with the Canada thistle, started when CRP began in 1985, said Shaffer. He farms about 2,000 acres in the central Susquehanna area.

"We've constantly had to spot spray thistles over the years," he said. "It's a problem controlling them. The wind blows those seeds so far."

Shaffer said he has about four acres of "highly erodible" land enrolled in CREP. Wissler, who owns land in Montour County and farms a total of about 1,700 acres in the region, has no acreage enrolled in the program. Both farmers believe the government and landowners have to be more accountable in managing the program.

"Landowners are getting paid a substantial amount of money," Shaffer said. "There has to be more responsibility."

According to Wissler, noxious weeds on working farmlands are a different issue than those on CREP lands.

"I wouldn't say my farms are thistle-free," he said. "But I'm not being paid by the U.S. government."

CREP was designed to enhance the original CRP program — that's what the "E" in the name stands for. While CRP is funded entirely by the federal

government, CREP programs receive matching state funds.

With a pool of resources from various agencies including the Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and Ducks Unlimited, CREP sharpens the focus on water quality and wildlife habitat improvement, especially for grassland birds such as the ring-neck pheasant and certain songbirds.

According to Singer, there has been anecdotal evidence from landowners of increased numbers of some grassland birds since CREP began. "Personally, I've seen clutches of pheasants using the grassland habitat," he added.

However, the CREP program is still too young for the bird population data to be meaningful.

"It's really too early to give any kind of a conclusion," Singer said.

While gamebirds grab a lot of the spotlight in wildlife programs, much of CREP's habitat focus is on less visible birds, such as grassland sparrows, Singer said.

The length of a CREP contract depends on the specific practice adopted on the land, ranging from 10 to 15 years. After the contract expires the landowner can choose to resume farming if he or she wishes.

While both CRP and CREP are aimed at setting aside "marginal lands" for conservation purposes, the CRP is in decline in Pennsylvania.

According to Foose, CRP acreage in the state has decreased from about 130,000 acres in the late 1980s to about 60,000 today.

"Here in Pennsylvania, that program wasn't really too effective," he said. CREP, however, has enrolled about 50,000 acres in Pennsylvania since it began in 1996.



Jay Wissler is concerned about these thistles that have gone to seed in a CREP-implemented riparian buffer near land he farms in Montour County.

"It has been really successful with meeting its goals," he said.

According to Foose, agencies partnering with CREP in the state would like to see the program expand to include 21 more counties and encompass the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed within Pennsylvania.

The 20 counties currently enrolled in the program are Adams, Bedford, Berks, Chester, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Schuylkill, Snyder, Somerset, Union, and York.

Hubbard said that the counties of Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, and Schuylkill have the highest concentration of conservation program enrollment in the state.

About 12,000 acres are enrolled in CRP and CREP in Co-

lumbia County. Montour County has about 5,000. Acreage in both counties is almost evenly divided between CRP and CREP lands.

In the late 1980s, Columbia County peaked at about 16,000 idle cropland acres, evenly split between CRP lands and annual set-aside lands, Hubbard said.

In recent years, land set-aside programs have increasingly shifted focus to water quality and wildlife habitat. Earlier programs, including the Soil Bank program of the 1950s through the CRP in the 1980s and 1990s had more to do with reducing excess grain supplies and boosting depressed markets, Hubbard said.

Hubbard and Singer acknowledged the tension that can exist between crop producers and conservation programs.

"It's a balancing act — 90 feet up on a tight rope," Singer said.

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