

# CREP Doubles In Size

(Continued from Page A1)

proved CREP will mean big improvements in water quality as well as significant dollar returns for the state's farmers and landowners.

"We got off to a slow start, and had some rocky areas for a while," said Robin Heard, state conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. "We haven't even begun to realize all those water quality benefits yet."

CREP is a voluntary program that pays participants to plant hardwood trees or establish grass filter strips, riparian forest buffers, vegetation, streambank fencing, and other conservation practices on environmentally sensitive land. In return, participants receive annual rental payments, cost-share assistance, and other financial incentives.

Richard Pallman, director of the Pennsylvania Farm Service Agency (FSA), the agency administering the program under the USDA, said the program is being improved, especially in the type of land it will encourage to enroll.

There will be stronger incentives for enrolling "marginal" land not well-suited for crop production, Pallman said, noting that the program aims to keep the best land in crop production. Larger payments will be made on land with a high "erodibility index," a measurement that gauges the likelihood of soil erosion.

CREP has generated some producer concerns about landowners enrolling whole farms, including fields well-suited to crop production.

Some farmers have also taken issue with noxious weeds, such as Canada thistle, spreading via poorly managed CREP plantings.

One of the drawbacks of the original CREP was that there were "very few meetings" conducted to help get information out, Pallman noted. When the meetings did begin — about a year and a half into the program — the "meetings became contentious," he said, with farmers raising management issues.

The FSA hopes to initiate CREP in the northern counties with plenty of informational meetings from the start, according to Pallman. These meetings will ideally be offered by local agencies such as county extension offices and Farm Bureau chapters, he said. Pallman said the program should benefit tenant farmers as well as landowners. Program leaders will encourage landowners to share rental payments with producers

to help them maintain the CREP lands.

Farmers in the northern part of the state, particularly dairy producers, should be able to reap significant financial benefits from enrolling CREP lands, according to Pallman. Rental payments will likely average \$70-100 per acre for CREP lands in the northern tier, he said.

Enrollment for the original 100,000 acres in 20 southcentral counties is "just about at its limit right now," Pallman said.

Charles Abdalla, Penn State associate professor of ag economics, also provided a brief history of CREP at the Ag Progress forum. CREP grew out of the original Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) first mandated by the U.S. Food Security Act of 1985. CREP was first authorized in 1996, with Pennsylvania coming on board in 2000.

CREP workers presented workshops throughout Ag Progress Days to explain details of the initiative.

Jeff Finn, Pennsylvania CREP biologist, said the program is shifting to award good land managers more than in the past.

"(CREP) was pretty much like any other farm program — if you

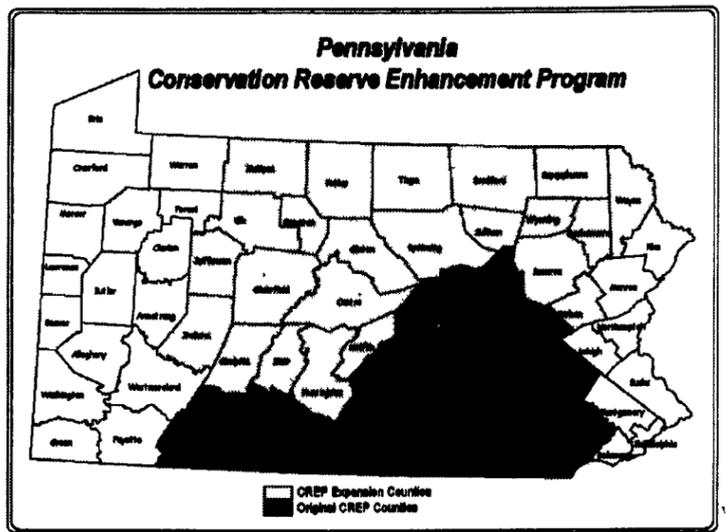
were doing a good job, there wasn't much help," he said.

One of the changes in the new CREP will be allowing the enrollment of productive hay land, he said.

CREP partners include the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, and Pheasant Forever.

"With over 71,000 acres planted to conservation practices, the Pennsylvania CREP is one of the most effective private lands conservation programs in the state's history," Pallman said. "Expanding the program to include additional counties will reap the countless rewards of reduced runoff contaminants, healthier wildlife, and cleaner water."

According to the FSA, the Pennsylvania CREP has prevented 1.1 million tons of sediment and reduced more than 1 million pounds of nitrogen and phosphorus from entering the Chesapeake Bay. In addition to filtering sediment and nutrients from runoff water, vegetation planted through the program improves water quality and provides shelter, nesting areas and food for various wildlife species, such as grassland birds and small game.



The map shows the entire CREP area in Pennsylvania, including original and newly eligible counties. Graphic provided by Farm Service Agency

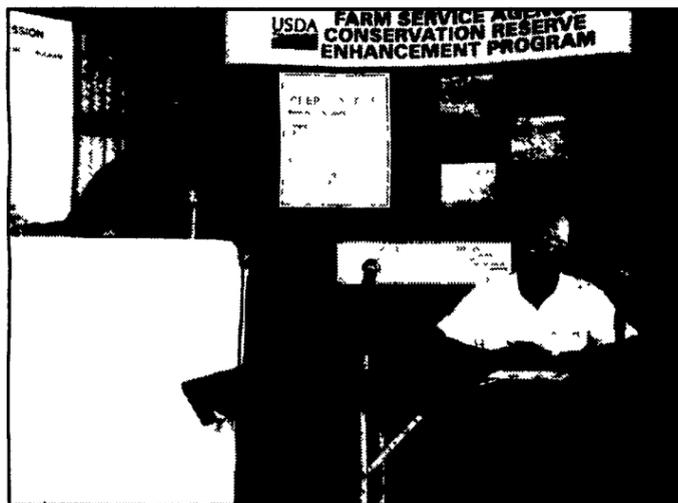
The original program, announced in April 2000, was funded at \$210 million. The additional \$200 million brings the total funding to \$410 million. Of the \$200 million, USDA is expected to pay up to \$129 million of the cost of enrolling the additional 100,000 acres in the program. Pennsylvania's share is \$71 million.

The states of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware also have CREP agreements with USDA to help restore and preserve the Chesapeake Bay.

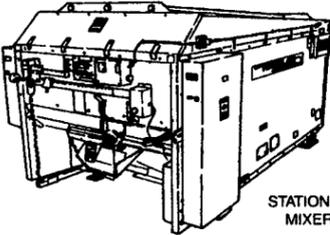
Interested farmers and ranchers should contact their local FSA offices for more information on eligibility requirements and application procedures. Additional information is also available online at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crep.htm>.



Colleen DeLong, CREP biologist, outlines details of the newly expanded program.



Mike Linsenbiger, federal technical manager for CREP, touts benefits of expanding the program in Pennsylvania. Richard Pallman, Pennsylvania FSA director, joined with Linsenbiger and other officials at Ag Progress Days to announce that the program has been doubled to include all 43 Pennsylvania counties in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.



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