

Getting More From Your CREP Land

Just uphill of a tidy farmhouse in York County, gullies scarred the fields, sending muddy water into a small stream at the base of Jeff Hersh's property. The retired engineer-turned-farmer wanted more out of his land than an ugly, eroding hillside.

Sixty miles away, Lancaster County farmer Dave Byers grew tired of seeing too little wildlife habitat after years of fencerow to fencerow cropping practices. He too wanted something more out of his land. He wanted to see pheasants, wild turkey and small game roam his fields.

Both landowners soon discovered CREP – the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, a national program launched in 2000 to improve local waterways and enhance wildlife habitat. In return for retiring marginally

productive cropland and pastureland, landowners receive annual rental payments and financial help in covering the cost of installing conservation practices. Administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Pennsylvania Game Commission and a host of private groups and public agencies, CREP contracts last 10-15 years.

Even the smallest parcels of land can be eligible, a striking and appealing element of the program. Jeff and Sally Hersh live on a small, 17-acre farm in North Codorus Township. For 20 years prior to enrollment in CREP, corn, hay and wheat grew on the sloping terrain. At the base of the hill, a stream, small enough to jump across, was repeatedly slammed with runoff from Hersh's property and an upstream farm.

In 2001, an article in the local Sunday paper featured a CREP participant and Hersh took a closer look. "We wanted to conserve the land and do something fairly long term," says Hersh. "CREP seemed like a good fit for our small acreage."



Jeff and Sally Hersh found CREP a good match for their small farm.

Six years later, he's proud of turning the eroding hillside above his home into a mix of cool and warm season grasses. A strip of trees and wildflowers lines about 280 feet along one side of the small headwater stream. The streamside (riparian) buffer, 160 feet wide on

average, protects streambanks from the onslaught of rain events, shades the stream's water, and offers a smorgasbord of food including seeds and nuts for birds and small mammals.

"The little stream's in much better shape now," says Hersh. He's pleased with the stream's response to the protective buffer.

Within the streamside buffer, a mix of sycamores, black gum, sweet gum, red



A walking path allows the family to enjoy the flora and wildlife within the streamside buffer.

PA CREP Highlights



Pennsylvania leads the nation in total acreage enrolled in CREP.

Statewide Stats:

Total CREP allocation (PA goal):

256,000 acres

Total acres enrolled: 177,533

(69% to goal)

Total number of contracts: 9,229

Average annual rental rate: \$103/acre

Average acres/contract: 19

Total buffered stream miles: 1,500

CREP is a true partnership program; 16 agencies and private organizations contribute money and staff to bring the wild back to our farmland.

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maple, green ash, hackberry and a few shrub species have outgrown their tree shelters that were first slipped over the tender two-year old seedlings to protect them from deer, rodent and insect damage. CREP covered 100 percent of the cost to buy and plant the trees, as well as the cost of tree shelters. The only out-of-pocket expense for Hersh was for the stakes to support the tree tubes.

“The shelters worked well against the deer,” says Hersh. “And they keep the limbs high. I’ve had to straighten some tubes out, but other than that, not a whole lot of maintenance on the buffer is needed now that it’s established.”

Hersh reports no problems with voles or mice but says wasp nests have been a nuisance. The nets over the tube tops were removed once the tree growth topped the ends. A few tubes still remain around trees whose trunks are not thick enough to warrant their removal but Hersh keeps a vigilant eye on them each season.

“We picked trees that were flood-tolerant,” added Hersh. “A few trees died, but we replaced them the following year. The sycamores grew like crazy. Hackberry did poorly, though.”

For the first two years, Hersh mowed between the young trees to help them out-compete unwanted plants, but he

hasn’t had to mow since then. CREP doesn’t allow mowing in riparian forest buffers after the first three years or once the trees are established.

Multiflora rose has been Hersh’s biggest maintenance challenge. He has used a mix of Banvel and 2,4-D herbicide and plans to spot spray again this fall to keep the woody, prickly plant from spreading. According to the *Landowner Guide to Buffer Success* by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, regular herbicide use is the single most critical step for overall success of seedling plantings.

In addition to the riparian buffer, Hersh turned twelve acres of steep cropland into a permanent warm and cool season grassland.

After initial herbicide treatments to kill existing clover, a mix of native warm season grasses — Big and Little Bluestem and Indiangrass — was planted on the lower 1.5 acres, while a cool season blend of Bromegrass, Orchardgrass and Timothy was seeded on the upper 10.5 acres.

In accordance with his CREP conservation plan, Hersh mowed parts of the field the first two years.

Since then, he has not needed to mow as the grasses took hold and filled in.

“If you really want it nice, you need to work at it. You can’t plant it and forget about it.”

Jeff Hersh, CREP Landowner

His problem weed is Canadian thistle, which he spot sprays every spring with Banvel and 2,4-D herbicide. He also had a problem eradicating what he believes was turnip or radishes that were previously planted by the tenant farmer. “Whatever it was, it had big yellow flowers and it took years to get rid of them,” says Hersh. Eventually, he won out.

Although his cool season

grassland is thick and healthy, his warm season grasses are a bit spotty. He says he’d look at switchgrass instead, noting a nearby field of switchgrass that is much thicker. From their farmhouse, the couple has spotted fox, deer, rabbits and turkey, but no pheasants yet.

“If you really want it nice, you need to work at it,” emphasized Hersh. “You can’t plant it and forget about it.”



Hersh’s cool season grasses uphill of the riparian buffer. CREP gave him the financial support to replace corn, wheat and hay production with grasses much better suited for the hilly terrain.

Wildlife a Motivator

In southern Lancaster County, Dave Byers has been a farmer and avid hunter all his life. He farms 256 acres with his son, who now manages their 50-head dairy herd alongside a more recent venture — raising ducks.

It bothered Byers that there weren’t any open fields or areas for wildlife in which to hide. Fawns could get killed while mowing hay. Nesting areas were easily destroyed. While considering options for laying out his fields, Byers was told about the CREP program and its emphasis on wildlife habitat.

Byers enrolled 22 acres in CREP in 2000. Byers planted trees on a half-acre strip of land on top of a hill next to a corn field.

“Major reason we did it was for habitat value,” says Byers.

The plot had a rough start. Advised not to mow, Byers lost some trees to competition with other plants and mice chewed at the tree trunks inside the tree shelters.

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CREP Coverage



Initially offered to 20 counties in the lower Susquehanna and Potomac river basins, CREP is driven in large part by the efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay. Over half of Pennsylvania drains into the Susquehanna and Potomac river basins, which feed half of the Bay’s freshwater needs.

By 2003, CREP expanded north to include 23 additional counties. Just last year, 16 counties in the Ohio River basin were added to the program.

Buffers Forever

Forests found along our streams, rivers and lakes are nature's best defenders of clean water. Also known as riparian forest buffers, they act as a living sponge by storing, cleaning and slowly releasing much of the water that maintains stream flow and replenishes groundwater.

Forest buffers filter runoff, absorb pollutants, stabilize stream banks and shorelines, improve fisheries, provide wildlife habitat and reduce flooding. Every property along a waterway either helps or harms water quality depending on whether or not it has a riparian forest buffer.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has initiated a program to assist landowners who wish to help protect our waterways and lakes for today and future generations.

Landowners can permanently protect riparian forest buffers on their property by entering into an agreement with a local conservation organization.

The agreement is called a "Riparian Forest Buffer Protection Agreement".

In the agreement, the owner places restrictions on use of the buffer to protect it from human interference and grants the conservation group the right to uphold the restrictions. The agreement is recorded in the County Recorder of Deeds Office. This ensures that any future owners of the land abide by the limitations in the agreement.

For more information contact DEP' Bureau of Watershed Management at (717) 772-5807.



A freshly planted buffer installed at the Graver farm in Lancaster County.

"Early on, the program stressed reduced mowing for the length of the contract," explains Beth Swartzentruber, a NRCS biologist who's now providing guidance to Byers on his CREP acreage. "It's often important to mow during the first few years of establishment. It is difficult to make a blanket management recommendation for all CREP acres. Each site requires different management tools."

A short distance away, Byers planted more trees along a small headwater stream that feeds the Conowingo Creek. Once used as pasture land, the corridor was open to cows that trampled the banks. Like an open sore, the banks eroded with every storm event, getting steeper and barer as time went on.

Today, lush vegetation hugs the streambanks along the narrow stream channel. The half-acre buffer has a healthy mix of flowering perennials beneath a growing canopy of native hardwoods.

Nearby, Byers enrolled another 21 acres on land he rents and farms. On

one hillcrest lies a field of warm season grasses – Big Bluestem, Indiangrass and Switchgrass – that is now well established after a spring 2006 replanting.

Next to the grassland, a patch of trees struggles to grow and Byers isn't sure why. Swartzentruber suspects deer browsing since the area has a fairly healthy deer population.

Another hillside has been rehabilitated with cool season grasses. Canadian

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A patch of mixed hardwoods replaced corn and hay production and provides food and cover for wildlife on Byers' farm.

Maintenance

Fall Tips



For your streamside buffer...

- ▶ Apply broad-spectrum herbicide (omit pre-emergent) around sheltered tree seedlings. Application is especially useful to control voles which prefer grass over broadleaf plants.
- ▶ Straighten trees with tubes if knocked down by floods. Replace broken or rotted stakes and ties.
- ▶ An early fall mowing around trees in the first three years will give young trees more light, moisture and nutrients and decrease attractive habitat for voles and mice.
- ▶ Do not remove tree shelters in the fall -- tender tissue may be harmed by winter temperatures. Wait till spring to remove shelters on trees that have outgrown their shelters.

For your grassland...

- ▶ Follow your site-specific CREP conservation plan for mowing restrictions. Approved non-annual mowing must occur during August for established stands.
- ▶ During establishment, mowing no more than once per month will reduce weed competition. You must allow 10-12 inches of regrowth before the first killing frost.
- ▶ For long term maintenance, rotate your mowing so that only 1/3 of the CREP field is mowed each August.
- ▶ To control noxious weeds and woody plant invasion, spot spray with selective herbicides. Okay to spray anytime of year.

That Nasty Canada Thistle

Fall is the ideal time to maximize injury to the thistle's root system. Only a few herbicides available for use in CREP plantings are truly effective control products. Spring treatments are also necessary to prevent seed set and eliminate the first flush of growth.

Approved fall herbicides include Milestone, Forefront R&P, Telar, Roundup Pro and Vanquish.

For more information on controlling Canada Thistle, see Factsheet 1 by Penn State available at www.pgc.state.pa.us/crep. Copies also available from your local NRCS or Capital RC&D offices.

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thistle tends to be more of a problem with the cool season grasses, claims Byers, who has had to spot spray periodically to keep it under control. This fall, he'll treat the isolated thistle with one of the herbicides approved for eradication.

"CREP is a good program," says Byers. "Not just for the money, but for the wildlife habitat it's providing." Lancaster County CREP payments range from \$138 - \$242 per acre, but Byers barely mentions the financial aspects of the program. For him, restoring habitat to

support wild turkey, pheasants, and other game animals was the ticket to participating in CREP.

The program continues to evolve. Today, the 20 original counties in southcentral Pennsylvania can only enroll acreage to install forested riparian buffers since the



Dave Byers inspects his warm season grasses.

region has already met its allocated CREP acreage. Statewide, another 10,000 landowners are anticipated for enrollment.

For more information, contact your county FSA or NRCS office.

CREP Wildlife Spotlight Eastern Meadowlark

The Eastern Meadowlark is a bird of the grassland. The female will begin her nest construction in the spring with a hoofprint or natural depression in the ground, which she shapes with her bill. She lines the nest with fine grasses and creates a roof by pulling adjacent vegetation over her nest to form a dome. The nest looks like a tuft of green and brown weeds and is open only on one side. Concealment is her best defense.

The meadowlark is in the middle of nesting during June and July, which is why mowing

under CREP is not allowed during this time. Meadowlarks are relatively silent while nesting and caring for their young. If you

hear a meadowlark resume singing in the summer, you'll know the first brood has probably fledged and the parents are about to start a second nest.



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