

Chapter 1

PURPOSE AND NEED

Purpose and Need—The [environmental impact] statement shall briefly specify the underlying purpose and need to which the agency is responding in proposing the alternatives, including the proposed action (40 CFR 1502.13).

1.1 BACKGROUND

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners and operators, who receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource-conserving covers on eligible land (Figure 1.1-1). The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) makes annual rental payments based on the agriculture rental value of the land, and it provides cost-share assistance for up to 50 percent of the participant's costs in establishing approved conservation practices. Participants enroll in CRP contracts for 10 to 15 years. The CCC, through the Farm Service Agency (FSA), administers the program with program support provided by a number of technical service providers including the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES), U. S. Forest Service, state forestry agencies, and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts.



Fig. 1.1-1. Farming near Klingerstown, PA
Photo by Scott Bauer. USDA ARS image gallery

CRP is the Federal government's single largest conservation program on private lands. Through voluntary partnerships between individuals and the Government, CRP provides incentives and assistance to farmers and ranchers for establishing valuable conservation practices that have a beneficial impact on resources both on and off the farm. CRP encourages farmers to voluntarily plant permanent covers of grass, and/or trees on land that is subject to erosion—vegetation that safeguards millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion, improves water and air quality, provides food and habitat for wildlife, and protects ground and surface water by reducing water runoff and sedimentation.

1.2 PROPOSED ACTION AND PURPOSE AND NEED SPECIFIED

FSA's Proposed Action is **CRP Program Implementation and Expansion**. The **Purpose of the Proposed Action** is to promulgate regulations to implement the reauthorized CRP with provisions in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill) and amendments to the Food Security Act of 1985 (1985 Act), as amended. The **Need for the Proposed Action** is to fulfill FSA responsibility as assigned by the Secretary of Agriculture to administer certain conservation provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill.

To implement the Proposed Action, FSA would incorporate the provisions of the recently enacted 2002 Farm Bill into the CRP regulations and revise the CRP Handbook. This legislation, which governs Federal farm programs for the next 6 years, was signed into law on May 13, 2002, reauthorizes CRP through 2007 and stipulates the following changes be made to the CRP:

- Increase the acreage enrollment authority cap to 39.2 million acres;
- Expand the Farmable Wetlands Program (FWP) nationwide with individual States initially capped at 100,000 acres and an aggregate acreage cap of 1,000,000 acres;
- Change the cropping history requirements to be 4 of the 6 years prior to enactment;
- Provide a 1-year extension for certain lands planted to hardwood trees;
- Allow producers to enroll entire fields through the continuous CRP as buffers when more than 50 percent of the field is enrolled as a buffer and the remainder of the field is infeasible to farm;
- Allow landowners to continue existing vegetative cover, where practicable and consistent with the objectives of CRP; and
- Provide for managed haying (including for biomass), grazing and construction of wind turbines on CRP lands.

The codified CRP regulations at 7 CFR part 1410 and the CRP Policy and Procedures Handbook (2-CRP) would be revised to reflect the changes that FSA adopts. The specific changes that comprise the Agency's proposal are described in Chapter 4, Section 4.2, under Alternative 3: The Proposed Action. The current CRP is described in Chapter 3.

This chapter briefly describes CRP's legislative authority and the requirements FSA would be addressing in making the changes under the Proposed Action. The program changes form the basis for the evaluation and comparison of impacts in this Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) which was prepared in accordance with the:

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 as codified in United States Code (U.S.C.) Title 42, Section 4321 and following sections (42 U.S.C. § 4321 *et seq.*);
- Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations for implementing NEPA, codified in 40 CFR parts 1500-1508;

- FSA NEPA regulations (7 CFR part 799); and
- CCC CRP regulations (7 CFR part 1410).

1.3 PROGRAM LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY AND REGULATIONS

The current CRP is based on the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act (1996 Act) amendments to the 1985 Act that created CRP. The 1996 Act amendments continued CRP at a maximum enrollment of 36.4 million acres at any one time through 2002 and authorized producers to withdraw certain lands from CRP at any time, subject to 60-day notice to USDA. CRP regulations are codified at 7 CFR part 1410, which states under Section 1410.1, Administration:

- (a) The regulations in this part will be administered under the general supervision and direction of the Executive Vice President, Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), and the Administrator, Farm Service Agency (FSA), through the Deputy Administrator. In the field, the regulations in this part will be administered by the State and county FSA committees, (“State committees” and “county committees,” respectively).
- (b) State executive directors, county executive directors, and State and county committees do not have the authority to modify or waive any of the provisions in this part unless specifically authorized by the Deputy Administrator.

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE CRP PEIS

This Programmatic EIS is organized in accordance with CEQ regulations at 40 CFR part 1502.10. The cover sheet, summary, and table of contents are as specified by CEQ.

- Chapter 1 *Purpose and Need* explains why FSA is proposing the action evaluated in this PEIS.
- Chapter 2 *Affected Environment* describes the aspects of the environment that would be affected by the CRP Program Alternatives. It includes a general description of the environmental resources and human communities of croplands and pasturelands of the U.S. and their watersheds.
- Chapter 3 *Current Conservation Reserve Program* provides details on the development and administration of the current CRP.
- Chapter 4 *Alternatives including the Proposed Action* presents the details of the Program improvements and expansion that comprise the FSA proposal. Other program alternatives evaluated in detail, and alternatives considered but not evaluated in detail are included. Chapter 4 then compares the environmental impacts of the CRP Alternatives.
- Chapter 5 *Environmental Consequences* presents the analysis of impacts on environmental resources and human communities on which the comparison of alternatives is based.

- Chapter 6 *Consultation and Coordination* describes the interagency reviews and coordination associated with the development of the PEIS.
- The *List of Preparers* identifies the members of the FSA interdisciplinary team and other contributors to the preparation of the PEIS.
- The *Distribution List* provides a list of agencies, organizations, and persons to whom copies of the statement are sent.

The PEIS provides references for sources referred to in Chapters 1 to 5, a glossary of CRP terms and other technical terms used in the PEIS, and an index. Appendices provide:

- Public and Agency Scoping done for the PEIS (Appendix A);
- Conservation Practice Standards (Appendix B);
- State-by-State CRP Statistics by Program (Appendix C);
- Details of studies in the scientific literature supporting the impacts analysis (Appendix D);
- Invasive Plants (Appendix E);
- Farm Employment and Agricultural Services Employment (Appendix F);
- Correlation Coefficient Analysis (Appendix G);
- Comments and Responses Received on the Draft PEIS (Appendix H).