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# CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Issue 1

***Cecil Soil Conservation District***

March 2004

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## Farm Bill Program Updates by Lindsay Tulloch, District Conservationist

### ***Now, more than ever, buffers are the right choice***

Conservation buffers are a simple way for you and many other farmers to stay profitable while protecting your land. USDA supports the use of buffers on cropland, pasture and rangeland through several conservation programs, including the regular CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), the continuous CRP or (CCRP) and CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program). Unlike the regular CRP, sign-up for the CCRP and CREP is available year-round. Financial incentives available through CCRP and CREP\* are especially attractive. They may include:

- A signing incentive payment of \$100 to \$150 per acre for riparian buffers, filter strips, grassed waterways, shelterbelts, field windbreaks, living snow fences, farmable wetlands and wetland buffers, and marginal pastureland wildlife habitat and wetland buffers.
- Up to 50 percent cost sharing for practice installation.
- A practice incentive payment of up to 40 percent of eligible practice installation costs.
- A 20-100 percent rental rate incentive for riparian buffers, filter strips, grassed waterways and field windbreaks.
- A 10 percent rental rate incentive for wellhead protection areas.
- Higher annual maintenance payments per acre for certain activities.
- Competitive rental rates nationwide for installing riparian buffers on marginal grazing land.

### ***Eligible Practices***

One or more of these buffers may be right for your farm:

- Grassed waterways
- Contour grass strips
- Shelterbelts/field windbreaks
- Living snow fences
- Filter strips
- Riparian buffers
- Wetland restorations
- Farmable wetlands
- Farmable wetland buffers
- Marginal pastureland wildlife habitat buffers
- Marginal pastureland wetland buffers
- Shallow water areas for wildlife
- Public wellhead protection buffer



### ***Riparian Tree Buffer***

\***CREP** rules are currently changing. All applications will be on hold until rule changes are final.

## Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Environmental Quality Incentives Program sign-ups are underway. Applications received on or before April 9, 2004 will be grouped and ranked for 2004 funding. Two application pools exist. One is statewide with statewide competition, while the other is countywide with countywide competition.

For 2004, a statewide sign-up and evaluation will occur for certain practices. The practices include; animal waste storage, including waste storage facilities, lagoons, roof runoff and contributing watershed management (as it relates to managing animal waste), all other Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) components, heavy use area protection, composting facilities for manure if it's a component of waste storage and of the CNMP, and closure of waste impoundments, when they are no longer used for their intended purpose and when they impair surface and/or groundwater.

The same EQIP cost-sharing on systems and practices relating to cropland, grazing land, forest land, and irrigation/nurseries will be offered on a county-by-county basis. Each county has the ability to determine what percentage of their allocation will be devoted to each of the land use categories. Every category is assigned a percentage based on the anticipated needs in the categories noted above.

EQIP incentive payments may be provided for up to three years to encourage producers to carry out management practices they may not otherwise use. However, limited resource producers and beginning farmers and ranchers may be eligible for higher cost-share rates. Farmers and ranchers may elect to use a certified technical service provider for technical assistance.

**Get the latest Farm Bill Program information at:**

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/products.html>



## Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

**WHIP program sign-up is  
March 5 thru April 9, 2004**

**Specific objectives of the WHIP program in Maryland are:**

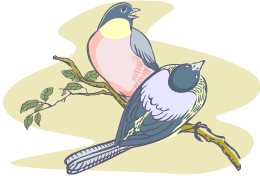
- Restore and manage upland grassland habitat to benefit ground nesting birds and associated wildlife.
- Restore and manage riparian corridor habitat to benefit terrestrial and aquatic species.
- Restore and manage shallow water and wetland habitat to benefit waterfowl, wading birds, and other wildlife.

### **Contract Requirements & Limitations**

- **Duration:** WHIP cost-share agreements shall be in effect for a minimum of 5 years, but not to exceed 10 years, from the date the contract is approved by NRCS.
- **Practice installation schedule:** At least one cost-shared practice must be installed within the first 12 months of the contract, and all cost-shared practices must be installed at least 2 years before the contract expires.
- **Funding:** Minimum of (1) Acre or \$300 in cost-share.
- **Cost-Share Payments:** A participant will receive his/her cost-share payments after a practice is installed according to NRCS specifications. Completed AD-1161, signed by the participant & District Conservationist (or Technical Service Provider), will be sent to the NRCS State Office for processing.

## Operations and Maintenance Requirements

- WHIP participants are required to maintain practices for the effective life of the practice, not to exceed 10 years beyond the length of the contract.
- Operation & Maintenance after a practice is established is not eligible for cost-share.



## Agricultural Management Assistance

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) provides cost share assistance to agricultural producers to voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality, and erosion control by incorporating conservation into their farming operations. Producers may construct or improve water management structures or irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or construct Agrochemical Mixing Facilities.

### **Sign up period**

**March 22<sup>nd</sup> – May 28th**



## Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife

**Written by: Dan Polite**

Are you tired of getting stuck in wet and unproductive cropland? Do you want to turn that land into valuable wildlife habitat? Your field might be eligible for a *Shallow Water Area for Wildlife* (SWA). Shallow Water Areas are created for wildlife habitat by providing and managing shallow water and moist soil areas. Some general design criteria include the following:

- 70% of the pool area must be  $\leq 18''$  and the remaining 30% may be  $>18''$
- At least 20% of the pool area must be below the inlet pipe of the water control structure (this provides a permanent pool when the SWA is drained during the summer months)
- A minimum 35 ft wide cool or warm season grassed buffer

A water control structure is installed to manage water levels in the pool area. Stoplogs in the water control structure may be removed during the spring to slowly lower the water level, or left in allowing nature to manipulate the water levels providing nesting habitat for wildfowl. During the spring and summer months, natural vegetation in the pool area develops. Stoplogs are replaced in late summer to allow for the water level to rise back slowly to the maximum pool level. Migratory waterfowl are able to feed on the vegetation in the pool area grown throughout the summer months. Please contact the Cecil SCD if you are interested in a *Shallow Water Area for Wildlife* and start planning for next years duck and goose season.



*Completed Shallow Water Area for Wildlife*



*Close up of water Control Structure*

## *Soil Quality*

Written by: Eric Webberking

Why do some fields consistently yield good crops or provide lush pasture, even when growing conditions are less than Optimal? One important factor is “Soil Quality”- the soil’s capacity to produce, maintain and sustain plant, animal and human life:



### *High Quality*

- Crumbly: Easily broken apart. Roots penetrate and make channels through the soil, for air and water.
- Ground is soft. Water soaks in after heavy rains. No visual signs of soil erosion.
- A Topsoil layer is present -often 8 – 12 “ deep. Long after it rains, the subsoil (under the topsoil) remains moist.
- Earthworms are thriving in the soil. Organic matter is apparent.



### *Diminished Quality*

- Hard, dense clods. Not easily broken or crumbled.
- Ground is hard. Rainwater lays in puddles or runs off. The visual signs of soil erosion are often apparent.
- Little or no topsoil layer. Sand, Gravel or Clay at the surface. Hard and dry from the surface down except during and right after a rain storm.
- No earthworms or organic matter, only mineral materials.

### *How do we make a positive affect on Soil Quality?*

- Increase the organic matter of the soil.
- Maintain a surface cover of vegetation or residues.
- Increase permeability for better penetration of air, water and roots throughout the soil.
- Increase biological activity in the soil.
- Avoid working and traveling over fields when the soil is too wet. Maintain soil structure and reduce compaction.
- Follow good agronomic principles of crop rotation, nutrient management and fertility.

No-till farming, cover cropping and the use of soil conservation practices to reduce erosion all have beneficial effects on soil quality.

## *Cool Season Grasses Vs. Warm Season Grasses*

Written by: **Rachel Yeatman**

Most of you are probably familiar with different kinds of cool season grasses, but may not know much about warm season grass uses. Both types can provide erosion control, wildlife habitat, and forage when managed properly. Cool season grasses typically green up early in the spring and grow best in the cooler weather of spring and fall. Warm season grasses don't start growing until late spring/early summer and grow best during hot, dry weather from June to early September. Some common cool season grasses grown here are Orchardgrass, Fescue and Timothy. Warm season grasses include Big and Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Switchgrass, and Eastern Gamagrass. Because these warm season grasses are native to Maryland, they are likely to thrive in our climate and soil with little to no fertilizer use and tend to resist diseases and insect problems. There are some cool season grasses which are native to Maryland (Red Fescue, Virginia Wild Rye, and Fowl Meadowgrass), although not commonly used these too would be better adapted to our soil and climate compared to introduced grasses.

A combination of warm and cool season grasses would be beneficial for wildlife habitat and possibly grazing systems by providing food (green foliage and insects) and shelter early and late in the year with the cool season grasses and filling in the summer months with the warm season grasses.

Several programs including CRP, CREP and WHIP help landowners establish these diverse grass plantings for water quality, wildlife habitat and erosion control. However each program has different requirements and restrictions so be sure to find out the details of each program before enrolling. The following table gives a brief comparison between cool and warm season grasses.



*Warm Season Grasses*



*Cool Season Grasses*

**Brief Summary of the Benefits and Drawbacks of Warm-Season vs. Cool-Season Grasses**

**Warm- Season Grasses**

**Cool-Season Grasses**

<b><u>Erosion Control and Water Quality</u></b>	Provide long-term benefits for erosion control and sediment trapping.  Produce more overall biomass for nutrient uptake than cool-season grasses. Provide nutrient uptake during the summer when cool-seasons are dormant.	Provide short-term and long-term benefits for erosion control and sediment trapping.  Provide nutrient uptake earlier in the spring and later in the fall than warm-season grasses.
<b><u>Wildlife Habitat</u></b>	<p>Provide excellent nesting and feeding habitat. Bunch grasses provide openings for feeding, while maintaining overhead protection from predators.</p> <p>Stiff-stemmed grasses are more likely to remain standing for good winter protection.</p> <p>Plantings are more likely to remain diverse, supporting a balanced mix of plant species and insect populations.</p>	<p>Due to earlier "green-up," provide a better source of food (green foliage and insects) in early spring than warm-season grasses.</p> <p>Tend to mat down more quickly than most warm season grasses as they age. This degrades the quality for nesting, feeding, and overhead protection.</p> <p>May harbor more agricultural insect pests in the summer, especially if plant diversity has declined.</p>
<b><u>Establishment</u></b>	<p>Usually need a specialized drill to plant.</p> <p>Seed may be more expensive and less readily available than cool-season grasses.</p> <p>Usually don't need much lime or any <u>fertilizer</u>. Tolerate poor soil conditions (i.e., nutrient-poor and/or low pH) better than cool-season grasses.</p> <p>Seeds are slow to germinate. Seedlings usually need 2 to 3 years to establish.</p> <p>Weed competition is often a problem during establishment, especially on the better soils.</p> <p>Seedlings and established stands are very drought tolerant. Good for sites with low moisture-holding capacity (e.g., sand hills, rocky slopes).</p>	<p>Plant with a conventional grass drill or cultipacker seeder. Can sometimes be planted with a grain drill.</p> <p>Relatively inexpensive, readily available seeds.</p> <p>Have higher nutrient requirements than warm season grasses. Less tolerant of poor soil conditions.</p> <p>Seeds germinate fairly quickly. Seedlings are usually well-established 1 to 2 years after planting.</p> <p>Rapid seedling growth results in less weed competition during establishment.</p> <p>Higher seedling mortality and thinning of established stands on dry sites or during drought periods, unless supplemental water is applied.</p>
<b><u>Maintenance</u></b>	<p>Maintained by using prescribed burning or light strip disking on a 3 to 4-year rotation.</p> <p>Grasses are long-lived and usually do not need reseeding.</p> <p>Can be hayed or grazed with careful management.</p> <p>Selective herbicides may be used for weed control.</p>	<p>Maintained by mowing on a 2 to 3-year rotation, and by overseeding with legumes every 3 to 4 yrs.</p> <p>As stands mature, grasses may thin out and need to be reseeded.</p> <p>Can be hayed or grazed with careful management.</p> <p>Selective herbicides may be used for weed control.</p>
<b><u>Other Issues</u></b>	<p>Most species grow very tall (5 to 8 feet), and depending on where they are planted, can "block the view." This may be a benefit or a drawback, depending on what is nearby.</p>	<p>Tend to be low-growing (3 feet tall or less).</p>