



2023

State of Nebraska
Platte-Republican Resources Area
Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
Annual Report

NEBRASKA

Good Life. Great Water.

DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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FY2023 CREP Annual Report Data
CREP Agreement Name: Nebraska II-Platte Republican Resource Area

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a partnership between state agencies and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency (FSA). Through these partnerships, CREP provides financial incentives to farm landowners willing to voluntarily implement conservation measures on sensitive land in lieu of continued agricultural production. Conservation practices implemented under CREP (e.g., stream buffers, conservation plantings, restored wetlands) contribute to improved water quality, reduced water losses, increased water storage, and increased habitat quantity and quality for a variety of wildlife species; but are targeted towards specific State or nationally significant conservation concerns. Under the terms of CREP agreements, partners are required to submit annual reports that summarize progress towards meeting CREP agreement goals. This is the information submitted by the CREP Partner for the FY2023 Annual Report.

NOTE: The information provided by CREP partners is used by FSA to compile the required Annual Report to Congress, but the information provided on this document is not the formal report provided to Congress. Additional information provided by the CREP partner outside of the online report may not be represented in this document.

A copy of the official CREP Annual Report to Congress, which compiles relevant data from all CREP project areas, will be made available at a later date.



Summary of Agreement

The original agreement between the USDA, CCC, and the State of Nebraska initiated the Nebraska II Platte Republican Resources Area CREP for the improvement of water quantity and quality, and the enhancement of wildlife habitat in designated areas of the Platte and Republican River Basins. The Memorandum Of Agreement (MOA) was signed by Floyd D. Gabler, Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services for the USDA and Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman on March 19, 2005. Several amendments were made to that MOA. In June of 2016, a new MOA was signed by Brad Pfaff, Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs of the Farm Service Agency, and Nebraska Governor, Pete Ricketts. This MOA took the place of the previous MOA and its amendments. The new MOA allows for re-enrollment of existing contracts.

The overall goals of the Nebraska II Platte-Republican Resources Area CREP are to significantly reduce the amount of irrigation water consumptive use and agricultural chemicals and sediment entering waters of the State from agricultural lands and transportation corridors. The reduction of ground and surface water use for irrigation and reduction of non-point source contaminants, through establishment of permanent vegetative cover, will also enhance associated wildlife habitat, both terrestrial and aquatic. These goals are to be accomplished by terminating all irrigation practices on a maximum of 100,000 acres of land located in the State Conservation Priority Area for Water Quality (the "Priority Area"). The Priority Area includes land adjacent to the Republican River, the Platte River, and their tributaries.

During Fiscal Year 2023 there were 1,464.2 acres enrolled of which, 823.1 were new acres. The re-enrolled 641.1 acres represents 7 of the 12 expiring contracts. Overall there was a net gain of 319.7 acres in the program.



FY2022 Federal Summary (data provided by FSA)

New Acres Enrolled in 2023: 823
Acres Re-enrolled in 2023: 641
Total Acres Enrolled in 2023: 1,464

Total Project Acres Enrolled as of 9/30/2023: 40,047
Total Number of Contracts Enrolled as of 09/30/2023: 468

Federal CRP Rental Payments: \$7,529,785
Federal Signup Incentive & Practice Incentive Payments: \$0
Federal Cost-Share Payments: \$164,612
Other Federal Incentive Payments: \$0

Total Federal Commitments: \$7,694,397

Non-Federal Financial Commitments

Total Non-Federal Financial Commitments: \$3,117,367
Total Non-Federal Financial Commitments Directly to CRP Participants: \$599,223

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support: \$1,880,628
Total Non-Federal In-kind Support Directly to CRP Participants: \$154,370

Total Non-Federal Commitment: \$4,997,994

Non-Federal Financial Commitments:

The Nebraska II Platte Republican Resources Area CREP (CREP) is coordinated by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR, Department) in cooperation with the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA). The NeDNR has thirteen partner agencies who contribute financially and comprise the CREP Steering Committee. The partner agencies consist of seven natural resources districts (NRD), four Irrigation/Public Power Districts, a sister state agency and a state commission. The NRDs are: Central Platte NRD, Lower Republican NRD, Middle Republican NRD, Upper Republican NRD, North Platte NRD, Twin Platte NRD, Tri-Basin NRD. The irrigation/public power districts are: Nebraska Bostwick Irrigation District (NBID), The Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District (CNPPID), Nebraska Public Power District, Pathfinder Irrigation District, all of whom own and operate irrigation canals in the Platte and Republican River Basins. The partnering state agency is the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. The Nebraska Game & Parks Commission is another state-level partnering entity.

The NRDs have been successful in working with state and local partners including Nebraska State agencies, Universities, and UNL Extension, to research groundbreaking technology, cropping strategies, and input practices that best address local management needs. This research has been used to engage producers and stakeholders and demonstrate both the economic and conservation impacts of best management practices. Several NRDs have developed their own

programs and networks that work to demonstrate efficiency impacts and offer producers real-time data and information to assist in making effective conservation-minded management decisions. While there are special Water Quality and Quantity Management Areas where certain practices are required, many of the most effective practices being implemented by producers across the state are done so voluntarily. Utilizing NRD funds to leverage state and federal dollars, local boards have been able to provide cost-share incentives to producers for innovative, research-driven advances in irrigation management. These programs utilize local funds raised through taxes and fees, which are leveraged with matching funds from state and federal partners.

The NRDs facilitate implementation of conservation practices on farms utilizing practices that are authorized by various programs including: Nebraska Natural Resources Water Quality Fund, Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund, Nebraska Water Sustainability Fund. They work directly with agricultural producers at the local level.

The irrigation/public power districts are involved with conservation activities and recently have focused on canal system efficiency improvements to reduce waste and system loss. Recently a new program, the Surface Water Irrigation Infrastructure Fund (SWIIF) with an initial \$50,000,000 funding was authorized by the Nebraska Legislature. Some of the funds are being utilized to improve irrigation delivery efficiency within the CREP area.

Payments made directly to CRP participants can be divided into three categories of action. The Department of Natural Resources reimburses 50% of the cost of vegetative cover to establish the approved practice(s) under contract. The second category is payments from the State for participation in the Buffer Strip Program administered by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Finally, direct payments were made by the Upper Republican Natural Resources District to establish a permanent conservation easement which would take effect at the termination of the CREP contract period. These activities all contribute to improvement to streamflow quantity, quality and wildlife habitat availability.

All partnering agencies contribute personnel and equipment to conduct the activities of administering the CREP program, their conservation activities, data collection and dissemination, education, office and field services, steering committee

Details of Non-Federal In-kind Support #1:

The Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR) administers and coordinates the CREP program. It provides the coordinator, support staff, field operations and associated expenses. Processing water use contracts, coordinating and collaborating with state and local Farm Service Agency professionals, local natural resources districts and irrigation districts are some of the activities undertaken in this role. They work for and directly with the agricultural producers to implement, advise and complete contract applications. The CREP Steering Committee is organized and convened by the NeDNR in collaboration with the State FSA Office. The NeDNR reimburses 50% of the cost of vegetative cover to establish the approved practice(s) under contract.

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support #1: \$173,291

Details of Non-Federal In-kind Support #2:

The Natural Resources Water Quality Fund was established by the Nebraska Legislature in 2001 to provide funds to natural resources districts (NRD's) for support of their water quality programs. The source of these funds are a portion of pesticide registration fees and pesticide applicators license fees collected by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. The Nebraska Department of Natural Resources serves as the administrative body for passing funds for this program through to NRD's. Funds are allocated among the NRD's and administered locally based on rules and regulations established by the Nebraska Natural Resources Commission. The NRD's are able to extend the reach of the program by providing additional money to carry out activities which include:

- (1) the purchase, installation, maintenance, and use of ground water sampling and testing equipment;
- (2) the purchase, installation, maintenance, and use of surface water sampling and testing equipment;
- (3) education and information programs related to water quality issues;
- (4) administration of ground water quality management areas;
- (5) purchase, installation, and maintenance of special monitoring wells and related equipment;
- (6) flow meters and other equipment required in ground water management areas;
- (7) source water protection programs and activities;
- (8) preparation and updating of ground water management plans;
- (9) implementation of water quality "best management" practices in both rural and urban areas, including programs which cost-share expenses of landowners and operators in installing or using such practices;
- (10) soil sampling and testing programs for soils in and below the crop root zone.

They work for and directly with the agricultural producers to implement the programs.

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support #2: \$355,814

Details of Non-Federal In-kind Support #3:

The Soil and Water Conservation Fund was created in 1977 to provide financial assistance to private landowners for installation of soil and water conservation practices. Various conservation practices are eligible for cost-share assistance of up to 75 percent. The Nebraska Natural Resources Commission (Commission) determines the list of eligible practices, establishes operating procedures, and annually allocates the funds among all the 23 natural resources districts (NRD's). The United States Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical assistance needed in planning and verifying proper installation of conservation measures. The NRDs are responsible for the administration of the program at the local level, including accepting applications from landowners, setting priorities and working with the landowners and contractors to complete the practices and prepare the necessary documentation for submittal to the Department of Natural Resources. Among the eligible practices for cost-share assistance are terraces, terrace outlets, irrigation reuse pits, grade stabilization structures, dams, diversions, grassed waterways, control basins, pasture and range seeding, planned grazing systems, and irrigation water management.

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support #3: \$484,467

Details of Non-Federal In-kind Support #4:

State Recreation Areas provide critical infrastructure related to water quantity and quality issues and provide outdoor recreation opportunities within the CREP area. The in-kind contributions consist of maintenance and upkeep of facilities for outdoor recreation including hunting and fishing which are enhanced by the water quality and quantity improvements and wildlife enhancements from the CREP program.

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support #4: \$728,576

Details of Non-Federal In-kind Support #5:

The Pathfinder Irrigation District funded three water saving projects in the CREP delivery area in 2023. They have a long-term project to convert open ditch irrigation laterals to buried pipe to reduce the amount of water it takes to deliver an equivalent number of acre-inches to patron's irrigated fields. Similarly, they conducted a water saving project to seal the main canal with clay and silt to reduce loss on route to irrigated parcels. They also improved delivery efficiency by reshaping 18.5 miles of their main canal.

Total Non-Federal In-kind Support #5: \$138,480

Other Non-Federal Commitments or Support:

There are 3 additional types of Non-Federal In-Kind support to report in this section as the software only allowed for the entry of 5 types of Non-Federal In-Kind support in the previous section.

Nebraska Buffer Strip Program

This program is administered from fees assessed on registered pesticides. Cropland adjacent to perennial and seasonal streams, ponds, and wetlands can be enrolled in buffer strips, which are designed to filter agrichemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides. Two kinds of buffer strips are eligible - filter strips, which are narrow strips of grass; and riparian forest buffer strips containing trees and grass. The minimum widths are 20 and 55 feet, respectively; the maximum widths are 120 and 180 feet, respectively. The program is designed to be used in conjunction with the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), or other programs, however it can be used by itself, as well. These strips are placed next to seasonal or permanent streams, wetlands and ponds. These practices provide protection between cropland and waterbodies by helping to stabilize the environment and filter agrichemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides. Contracts run from 5 to 10 years. The amount spent on this activity in 2023 was \$17,212.00.

CREP Partner Water Quality and Quantity Program Administration

This contribution includes staff time and expenses for reviews of pending water use contracts, compliance checks, meetings related to CREP and administration of water quantity, quality and habitat improvement programs within the CREP area. These programs are administered by the Natural Resources Districts (NRD) and surface water Irrigation Districts. Some of these NRDs have active programs to read, record and report water meter data in support of water allocation programs and to inform producers who are actively engaged in efficient irrigation management.

NRD staff also make seasonal groundwater level measurements which are used in the management of allocation programs designed to maximize groundwater aquifer life. Groundwater aquifers are directly tied to Nebraska streams, providing a significant amount of the base flow in streams. Conservation of groundwater results in reductions to stream depletion by groundwater pumping. The NRDs provide staff to work directly with agricultural producers to assist them in developing and implementing best management practices. They take advantage of numerous federal, state and local conservation programs and cooperate with program administrators in the other branches of government. The personnel and equipment are funded by the districts. The amount spent on this activity in 2023 was \$742,756.45.

Natural Resources District Conservation Program

Direct payments were made by the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) to establish a permanent conservation easement which would take effect at the termination of the CREP contract period. The North Platte Natural Resources District conducted habitat improvement projects in the North Platte River valley and its tributaries. These activities all contribute to improvement to streamflow quantity, quality, and wildlife habitat availability. The amount spent on this activity in 2023 was \$476,770.50.

Total Other Non-Federal Commitments or Support: \$1,236,739

Total Other Non-Federal Commitments or Support Directly to CRP Participants: \$444,853

Goals and Objectives of CREP Agreement

Goal 1:

Reduce the application of water for cropland irrigation in the project area by 125,000 acre-feet annually from 2004 irrigated usage levels.

Goal 1 Type: Water Quantity

Progress Towards Meeting Goal 1:

The estimated consumptive use savings for curtailing irrigation on the CREP program acres for the 2023 irrigation season is 36,710 acre-feet. The implied irrigation efficiency within Goal 1 and Goal 2 is 0.68. Therefore, the expected reduction in application of water for 2023 is 53,985 acre-feet. This is 43% of the goal. For the 2023 irrigation season, there were approximately 40% of the maximum acres enrolled in the program. The progress is in line with the level of participation. The Nebraska Legislature passed a bill in 2017 that makes re-enrollment of irrigated land under a surface water appropriation more likely, because the number of years that a surface water appropriation may be protected from cancellation for nonuse was increased from 15 to 30 years. This paved the way for 15-year contracts to be renewed for another 15 years without placing the water appropriation in jeopardy.



Difficulties – Goal 1:

The success of fully achieving this goal is directly related to the percentage of enrollment. It would likely be met if all the possible acres were enrolled. The \$50,000 payment limit per entity can be problematic for reenrollment. There are no incentive payments for re-enrollments. The payment cap also can be a deterrent for new sign-up because SIP has been interpreted as an annual rental payment, subject to the \$50,000 cap. Other programs that offer more flexibility such as dryland farming or incentivized reduction in application of irrigation water can appear more attractive to some producers.

Goal 2:

Increase surface and ground water retention by a target amount of 85,000 acre-feet of water annually within the project area reservoirs, groundwater tables and streams.

Goal 2 Type: Water Quantity**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 2:**

The retention of surface and groundwater is dependent and synonymous with the reduction in consumptive use. Consumptive use of irrigation water is lost to the lakes, streams and groundwater aquifer through the activity of irrigation. The estimated retention (consumptive use) from all sources is 36,710 acre-feet for 2023. That is 43% of the goal. As stated in the summary for Goal 1, this is in line and correlated with the overall level of participation. Goal 1 and Goal 2 are closely related. The Nebraska Legislature passed a bill in 2017 that makes re-enrollment of irrigated land under a surface water appropriation more likely, because the number of years that a surface water appropriation may be protected from cancellation for nonuse was increased from 15 to 30 years. This paved the way for 15-year contracts to be renewed for another 15 years without placing the water appropriation in jeopardy.

Difficulties – Goal 2:

Just as with Goal 1, the success of fully achieving this Goal 2 is directly related to the percentage of enrollment. It would likely be met if all the possible acres were enrolled. The \$50,000 payment limit per entity can be problematic for re-enrollment. There are no incentive payments for re-enrollments. The payment cap also can be a deterrent for new sign-up because SIP has been interpreted as an annual rental payment, subject to the \$50,000 cap.

Goal 3:

Provide up to 85,000 additional acres of native grassland habitat for wildlife in the project area, increasing the populations of pheasants and other ground nesting birds by 25 percent in the area.

Goal 3 Type: Habitat**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 3:**

Under the MOA 85,000 acres may be put into the following practices: Permanent Native Grasses CP2, Permanent Wildlife Habitat CP4D, and Rare and Declining Habitat CP25. In addition, practice Wildlife Food Plot CP12 may be used in conjunction with any of the three primary practices. Currently all but 111.43 acres of the enrolled acres in the CREP program are in these practices. Therefore, the practices are attractive to producers. Monitoring of wildlife populations in the Platte and Republican River Basins CREP area continues to be completed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) using standard game surveys. The primary impact on wildlife in the CREP area at this point has been the enrollment of 39,935.57 acres of formerly cropped irrigated fields into appropriate wildlife cover. The bulk of the CREP acres were enrolled in the spring of 2005 and were planted to perennial cover in the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006 and now are being reenrolled. The NGPC has graphed several species' survey data showing prevalence since 2005. The survey data provides a baseline for detecting changes in populations that can be attributed, at least in part, to the CREP enrollment. Annual variations in wildlife populations are very common, and in Nebraska, are typically tied to weather conditions.

Surveyed wildlife populations in the CREP area are compared to those across the state to better understand the relative impact of CREP habitat enrollments on Nebraska wildlife populations of interest.

Pheasants improved slightly in the PR CREP area as did bobwhite quail likely due to dry conditions during nesting and hatch. All surveyed species in the CREP area though are faring as good or better than the statewide average. Without suitable habitat like that provided by CREP acres, this may not have been the case.

Difficulties – Goal 3:

It is difficult to determine a baseline from which to calculate a 25% improvement. The surveys show that the species used to gage the success of the program do show better populations within the CREP areas. 2023 weather in the CREP area and the rest of Nebraska was highly variable. Overall, the winter of 22-23 saw areas with harsh winter weather with high amounts of snowfall, while other areas had milder weather patterns. Survival of pheasants are variable based on the localized weather events and availability of cover, such as the cover provided by CREP acres. The multi-year drought eased in portions of western and southwestern Nebraska during summer 2023. These summer rains provided CREP fields which have been hayed the previous year an opportunity to see a flush of vegetative growth providing better nesting and brood rearing conditions compared to previous years.

Goal 4:

Provide up to 15,000 additional acres of conservation buffers and restored wetlands.

Goal 4 Type: Habitat

Progress Towards Meeting Goal 4:

There are Sign-up Incentive Payments (SIP) and Practice Incentive Payments (PIP) for applicable practices; Filter Strips CP21, Riparian Buffer CP22, Wetland Restoration CP23 and Wetland Restoration/Non-Floodplain CP23A to encourage achieving this goal. Cover establishment is reimbursed with a 50/50 share between the USDA and State Partner to further incentivize participation. The 15,000-acre target is further broken down to 10,000 acres for CP21 and CP22, and 5,000 acres for CP23 and CP23A. Currently there is only one contract for 111.43 acres of CP23 practice. It is unusual in that it has irrigated land situated partly in a wetland area.

Difficulties – Goal 4:

Irrigation systems are expensive investments and it is likely that eligibility of the land is an issue. Irrigated crop ground is less likely to qualify as a filter strip, wetland restoration etc., due to a preference for field locations more conducive to irrigation, such as flatter terrain and no wetlands.

Goal 5:

Seek to reduce the application of triazine products by approximately 93,000 pounds annually, when fully enrolled, from existing application rates in the project area.

Goal 5 Type: Water Quality

Progress Towards Meeting Goal 5:

Under the terms of the program, lands included under contract must be replanted to native grasses and, therefore, would not be treated with herbicides. The average amounts of application associated triazine compounds at the inception of the program was 1.3 pounds per acre.

Therefore, the amount of triazine that likely would have been applied to the contracted acres, had they remained as irrigated cropland is approximately 52,061 lbs. This is 56% of the goal, which has only partially been met. This is in part due to 40% participation rate for total enrolled acres.

Difficulties – Goal 5:

The success of fully achieving this goal is directly related to the percentage of enrollment. It would likely be met if all the possible acres were enrolled.

Goal 6:

Seek to reduce leaching of nitrate compounds into project area streams and groundwater by 5,900,000 pounds annually, when fully enrolled, from the 2004 application rates.

Goal 6 Type: Water Quality**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 6:**

Under the terms of the program, lands included under contract must be replanted to native grasses and, therefore, would not be fertilized. The average amounts of application associated nitrogen when the program was initiated was 200 pounds per acre. Therefore, the amount of nitrogen that likely would have been applied to the contracted acres, had they remained as irrigated cropland is approximately 8,009,400 lbs. It is likely the goal has been met.

Difficulties – Goal 6:

As the Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) continue to focus upon education about and regulation of nitrogen use, the amount of reduction could decrease with successful nitrogen management programs. In other words, the baseline will probably go down over time.

Goal 7:

Seek to reduce the application of phosphate products by approximately 2,440,000 pounds annually, when fully enrolled, from 2004 application rates in the project area.

Goal 7 Type: Water Quality**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 7:**

Under the terms of the program, lands included under contract must be replanted to native grasses and, therefore, would not be fertilized. The original goal at a full program with 100,000 acres computes to 24.4 lbs. per acre. However, the average amount of application associated phosphate was estimated in the original program environmental review documents as 20 pounds per acre. Using the 20 lbs. per acre value, the amount of phosphate that likely would have been applied to the contracted acres, had they remained as irrigated cropland is approximately 800,940 lbs. The goal was not met and at 33% is one of the furthest from being met.

Difficulties – Goal 7:

It appears an error may have been made in the development of the MOA document, which was only recently noticed. If the original per acre estimate is used then the current level of participation (40%) is commensurate with the amount of progress toward a 2,000,000 lbs. reduction, which is 20 lbs. per acre multiplied by 100,000 acres.

Goal 8:

Assist community public water supplies (surface and groundwater) by reducing nitrogen and phosphorus levels from agricultural activities.

Goal 8 Type: Water Quality**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 8:**

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) are the primary regulator of nonpoint source pollution in groundwater. NRDs develop and implement groundwater quality management plans that describe monitoring, assessment, and thresholds triggering regulatory measures. There are many examples throughout the state of increased regulatory measures to protect and restore community public water supplies. NRDs partner with local communities, agricultural producers, and the private sector to leverage resources that protect water quality. Education and outreach are offered and cost-share is available for best management practices that help producers reduce water use and fertilizer application. Nitrate levels are annually measured and monitored and trigger levels for regulations have been implemented in several NRDs.

The Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE) administers the Wellhead Protection Program and state Nonpoint Source Management program. Together, these programs offer planning and financial assistance to public water systems interested in protecting and restoring their water supplies. Recently, NDEE is funding nonpoint source planning efforts specific to community water system wellhead (source water) protection areas. Once these community-based plans are approved by EPA, implementation is eligible for federal Clean Water Act Section 319 nonpoint source funds. Eight such plans are currently approved and in development.

Difficulties – Goal 8:

Phosphorus is not a drinking water human health concern and generally not monitored in groundwater. It does impact harmful algal blooms – surface water systems, particularly lakes. There are only 3 lake-water based public water systems in Nebraska, none of which are within the CREP program area. Phosphorus has not been identified as a significant problem for our state.

Goal 9:

Provide educational assistance to project area irrigators to develop a more efficient use of applied water, nutrients, and herbicides.

Goal 9 Type: Education

Progress Towards Meeting Goal 9:

The Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) have been successful in working with state and local partners including NeDNR, the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE), Universities, and University of Nebraska - Lincoln Extension service, to research groundbreaking technology, cropping strategies, and input practices that best address local management needs. This research has been used to engage producers and stakeholders and demonstrate both the economic and conservation impacts of best management practices.

Several NRDs have developed their own programs and networks that work to demonstrate efficiency impacts and offer producers real-time data and information to assist in making effective conservation-minded management decisions. While there are special Water Quality and Quantity Management Areas where certain practices are required, many of the most effective practices being implemented by producers across the state are done so voluntarily. Utilizing NRD funds to leverage state and federal dollars, local boards have been able to provide cost-share incentives to producers for innovative, research-driven advances in irrigation management.

A few examples of some of the programs offered or required by NRDs are: NRD-level cost-share programs offering technical assistance of 0-100% on purchase of soil moisture sensing equipment; required flow meters on groundwater wells over specified capacity; allocate a certain number of inches that can be pumped over a certain number of years; Require soil sampling for water quality indicators. In addition to support from extension offices, NRDs, and NRCS district conservationists, locally driven producer groups, such as the Nebraska Water Balance Alliance, have worked to provide producer seminars and education events on technologies and practices that can be adopted by producers to improve irrigation management.

A recent example of a creative program to engage producers in adoption of new technologies is the testing Ag Performance Solutions (TAPS) program (taps.unl.edu). This program provides opportunities for producers to virtually compete against each other as well as UNL scientists for (1) most profitable farm, (2) highest input (water and nitrogen) use efficiency, and (3) greatest grain yield. The goal of the competition is to promote efficiency and profitability while giving a chance to learn from those who grow corn profitably. The competition is supported by UNL Extension, NRDs, non-profit organizations, and agricultural industries, among others. The program has rapidly grown each year and has expanded to different farming scenarios. Other states are now conducting similar competitions. The farming community is taking note of the information gleaned from the competitions and this positively influences the culture of farming practices as they evolve to more efficient and lower input methods. The data gathered each year is being analyzed to provide better support and recommendations for agricultural producers.

Difficulties – Goal 9:

Agricultural producers in Nebraska play an important role in the overall economy of the State. Irrigation is more important for productivity of farms toward the western part of the state (CREP area), which is more arid than the eastern portion. It can be challenging to modify a system of production upon which so much depends.

Goal 10:

Monitor the aquatic communities and associated habitat parameters in project area reservoirs and rivers to determine biological relationships.

Goal 10 Type: Habitat**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 10:**

The fisheries program with Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC) has been involved in an on-going limnological assessment at Harlan County Reservoir during the entire Nebraska CREP program timeframe. NGPC has a consistent data base of abiotic, zooplankton and larval fish collection results. For the Platte River basin the NGPC conducts standardized annual fish monitoring surveys that on the reservoirs. The Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE) facilitates water quality sampling and management statewide through delegated programs from EPA through the Clean Water Act. During FFY 2023, monitoring within the CREP area was conducted through 3 monitoring programs. Monitoring results are used to produce the Integrated Report that combines the 303(d) list of Impaired Waters and the 305(b) Water Quality Report every two years. The report is used for future water quality management, particularly through the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (discharge permits for point sources) and the Section 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution grant program. Common lake impairments in the CREP area are for fish consumption, nutrients, pH, and chlorophyll, while stream impairments are predominantly for *E. coli* bacteria. Bacteria TMDLs have been established for numerous stream segments in the CREP area and more will be added. Bacteria TMDLs for 5 stream segments in the Republican River basin are in the final public comment period before being submitted to the EPA. In addition to these programs, the NDEE also administers Ambient Stream, Lake and Public Beach Monitoring programs.

Difficulties – Goal 10:

The CREP partners had proposed to develop a more detailed evaluation method, but that proposal was not supported by federal review because the acres signed-up were not in a concentrated area along any tributary stream that could reasonably expect to see a measurable aquatic community change. The sign-up area is very large, so the projects are spread apart.

Goal 11:

For irrigation purposes, reduce the total consumption of fossil fuels by 350,000 gallons and electricity use by 10 million kilowatt hours.

Goal 11 Type: Environmental**Progress Towards Meeting Goal 11:**

At the inception of the program, the Nebraska Department of Energy's data indicated that approximately 55 percent of all irrigation pumps are powered by electricity, and 45 percent are powered by fossil fuels. Nebraska Public Power District, one of the Nebraska Platte/Republican CREP partners, provided information from a 2001 Report – "Estimated Irrigation Costs" by Roger Selley, University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Using assumptions based upon that report, the following method has been employed each year to estimate the energy savings from the CREP program in Nebraska. The representative distribution system is a 135 acre center pivot pumping

800 gallons per minute and applying 9.5 acre-inches per acre with a lift of 100 feet at 60 percent efficiency, the annual electric usage is 45,966 kilowatt hours, and fossil fuels (diesel, propane and gasoline) average 4,600 gallons. The formulas used below are (electric consumption = acres x .55 x (46,000 kilowatt hours/135 acres)) and (fossil fuel consumption = acres x .45 x (4,600 gallons/135 acres)). Using this method, the 2023 estimated electrical energy savings would have been 7,505,104 kilowatt hours. The estimated fossil fuels savings would have been 614,054 gallons. It appears the fossil fuel goal is likely met. The electrical energy savings was about 75% met.

Difficulties – Goal 11:

Hard data on site-specific energy sources for irrigation projects is not readily available.

CREP Field Reviews

Field Review Description:

The Department of Natural Resources and the local natural resources districts cooperated in a monitoring program to assure non-use of water under contract. This monitoring is in addition to monitoring done by the FSA under their CREP requirements. Ten percent of all contracts having surface water appropriations, and ten percent of all contracts with lands served by groundwater were reviewed. The Department's review consisted of field investigations to determine whether lands had been irrigated and whether it was planted to a cover crop. The natural resources districts reported on whether there was any use of water from the wells included under the water use contracts. No water use was reported this year.

Field Review Findings:

None of the field reviews conducted by Department or Natural Resources or District staff found a violation of the contract with the landowners.

Were Field Review Findings Reported to FSA: No

CREP Outreach Activities

Outreach Activity 1:

FSA and NeDNR independently reached out to expiring contractors to encourage re-enrollment.

Outreach Activity 2:

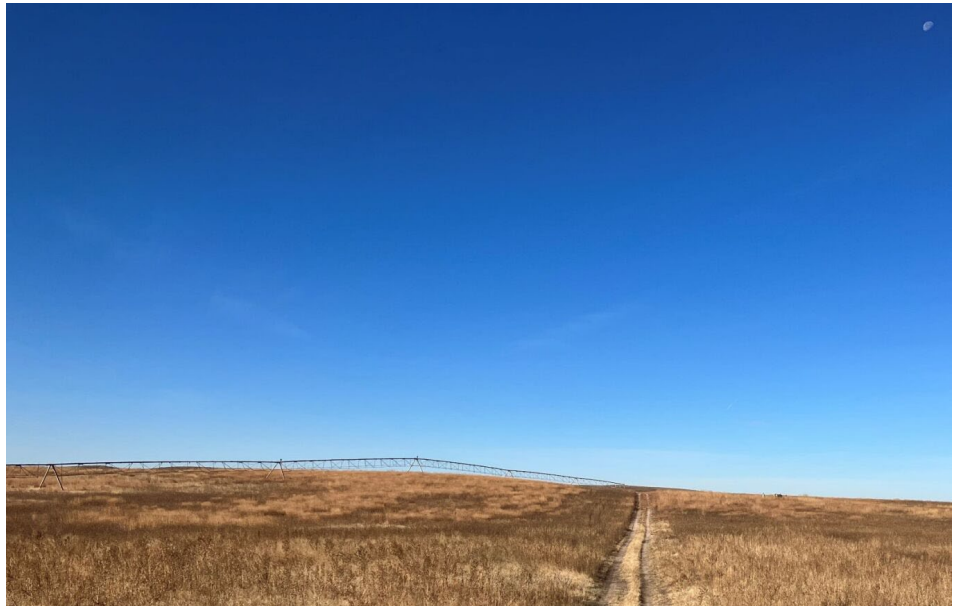
Program documents and presentations are made available and prominently featured on our website at <https://dnr.nebraska.gov/surface-water/crep> .

Outreach Activity 3:

The Department teamed up with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC) who in turn worked with Pheasants Forever to offer an \$8 per acre sing-up incentive which is available to landowners willing to allow walk-in hunting access through the NGPC Open Fields and Waters program. Funding for management may also be available within certain areas, local NGPC or Pheasants Forever biologists are available with relevant information. There was a press release by NGPC to launch this incentive and a direct mailing to landowners within the targeted CREP program area. This program continues to be available to interested landowners.

Outreach Activity 4:

The Nebraska Water Resources Association and Nebraska State Irrigation Association have an annual conference where irrigation leaders from across the State meet to discuss water quality and quantity issues. The CREP was featured at the booth staffed by Nebraska Department of Natural Resources CREP Coordinator. In various functions, the conference attendees represent all the surface water and groundwater irrigators in the State.



Outreach Activity 5:

Social media was used to promote CREP, which is helpful during the limitations of with direct public in such a large geographic area. The following platforms were used: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter (X).

CREP Success Stories

Currently, CREP fields are providing high quality wildlife habitat with a diverse mix of grasses, forbs, and legumes. These fields are providing key grassland habitats, which are required for strong pheasant populations. Landowners, hunters, and natural resource enthusiasts continue to report good wildlife use of CREP fields. CREP enrollments are contributing to success of these populations, and with appropriate management will continue to do so throughout the life of the CREP contracts.



Wildlife populations are faring better on CREP ground than the statewide average.

The overall enrollment rate was good in 2023. The re-enrollment rate was a little over fifty percent. Since the largest year of expiring contracts in 2020, the program has maintained over fifty percent re-enrollment. The pressure of commodity prices has not significantly eroded the level of participation. A recent announcement of increasing FY 2024 irrigated rental rates in many of the participating counties is welcome news and will enhance the perception of the program. There appears to be continued interest in new contracts since the 2024 fiscal year began, so we are working toward increasing the level of participation. In the past we received feedback from producers that increases such as this have made a difference in their decision to make an offer.



Challenges

The reduction of non-CREP CRP acres may be having a negative effect on wildlife indices. Extreme weather events such as exceptional drought and heavy rainfall events appear to be happening more frequently which may have a long-term detrimental effect on many of the surveyed species. This emphasizes the importance of programs like CREP.

This CREP program is now in its nineteenth year. In recent years new contracts have basically balanced out the expiring contract in terms of acres. The commodity prices have remained good, so that likely suppresses the rate of renewal offers coming in, but we have not

lost much ground. Hopefully the FSA will be able to continue to make future upward adjustments to the soil rental rates as market conditions warrant.

Future Actions

We will convene local, state, and federal partner meetings as needed to seek input for process improvements and look to increase interest in the program.



Suggestions for Improvement

It would be helpful if we could share our GIS layer with natural resources districts who offer other irrigation curtailment programs in the CREP area. They need to be sure they aren't inadvertently signing up land that is already enrolled in CREP. It would be effective to have a more controlled way to share documents between FSA service offices and NeDNR rather than e-mail attachments with generic PDF file names that don't distinguish one type of document from another. A file sharing service with a processing workflow would be very helpful.

Additional Information

There is another significant contribution to improving water quantity that is sponsored by partnering Natural Resources Districts. These CREP partners have executed CREP-like agreements to place permanent conservation easements on hundreds of irrigated

acres in both basins in the vicinity of the CREP-eligible areas of each basin. This is done to reduce demand on groundwater and surface water sources in fully and over-appropriated areas, within the CREP area. One of the results is less streamflow depletion from irrigation. In 2023 the Central Platte NRD expended \$237,882.38 for conservation easements for non-CREP irrigated farmland within the CREP program area.

Annual CREP Report Submission Information

Date Report Completed: 12/21/2023

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