

Conservation Reserve Program: Evaluating your choices

The Conservation Reserve Program began in 1985 and many acres in Umatilla County have been enrolled over the years. Many CRP contracts are set to expire in the next 7 years in our county. The majority of CRP contracts begin and expire based on the federal government's fiscal year of October 1st through September 30th. Contracted acres can be "worked" 90 days prior to the contract expiration date. For additional information, check with our local Farm Service Agency office.

Land owners and managers have a number of alternatives to consider as they plan for the future, a future where renewing the contract may not be an option.

Some options are:

- Conversion back to cropland
- Conversion to grazing
- Preserving wildlife habitat
- Continue perennial plant cover.

Each option has its own set of considerations: costs, benefits, risks and potential ramifications. If land is returned to crop production for a commodity crop and one plans to participate in government programs, a conservation compliance plan approved by local NRCS field office is required. Other compliance plans such as a

grazing plan may also be involved, so planning ahead and gaining advice from many technical advisors is my advice.

If crop production is the choice for some of the higher production areas of the fields, remember that the organic matter gained over the past 10-20 years can positively contribute to the production system. Direct seed drills, depending on the type, can be used effectively in high residue environments. The use of an reduced tillage system utilizing an undercutter has also been shown to be an effective conservation system.

The "right" choices for your situation can only be made by you and your closest advisors, but remember that there are Extension agronomists, and researchers that are available over the coming months to help provide information about the newest methods and practices for your farming operations. In addition, we will be covering this topic in more depth during our Cereal Seminar on December 14, 2010.



One Tillage Pass Can Produce Highly Effective Tilled Summer Fallow

Stewart B. Wuest, William F. Schillinger, and Mary K. Corp (excerpts from 2010 CBARC Annual Report)

Our research focus is on millions of acres in the driest portions of the Inland Pacific Northwest where tilled fallow is generally considered necessary for profitable winter wheat production. Some data presented here are from completed, published research projects and the rest from recent data not yet published. The ideas and principles are a work-in-progress, but the evidence and conclusions are sound enough and important enough to begin an earnest discussion.

Tillage-based fallow generally retains adequate seed-zone moisture for early (late August – early September) establishment of winter wheat, whereas sufficient seed-zone moisture is generally not present in no-till fallow by late summer. Yet, historically, tillage has led to wind-related soil erosion.

While "trashy" fallow systems (leaving 30% cover or more) have reduced wind erosion, growers often have difficulty passing through high amounts of surface residue with existing deep-furrow drills. Still many people believe a "dust" mulch, ie. multiple tillage operations, is needed to provide a barrier to stop moisture loss during the summer months prior to seeding. A growing body of research has demonstrated that this is not true.

Extensive experiments at Lind, WA in the 1990s on a Shano-Ritzville soil (Schillinger, 2001) showed that undercutting with large V-bladed sweeps, plus nitrogen injection to a depth of five inches in the spring followed by rodweeding as needed provided a tillage mulch that consistently retained: (i) 30% surface residue cover, (ii) more

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