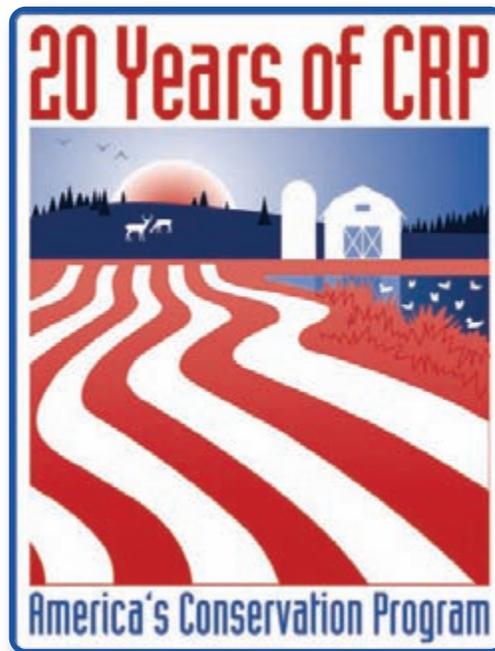


# CRP Still Popular, Enhanced by New Voluntary Public Access Program

If you are a long-time reader of *The Kansas Lifeline*, you have likely read at least one article, and probably more, that made a mention of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Searching for “CRP” at the Kansas Rural Water Association Web site [www.krwa.net](http://www.krwa.net) yields fifty-seven different occurrences, and twelve of those are in *The Kansas Lifeline* articles. To the casual observer, that may seem like a large number for a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program. But water is as important to agriculture as anything else, and CRP still carries great potential to make positive impacts in water quality and quantity in Kansas.

Ask anyone in Kansas about CRP and most of the answers supplied will probably show some recognition that it has something to do with large fields of presumably native grass. While it is not important for everyone to know why these fields of grass exist, persons responsible for water systems should be familiar with the program. Before going deeper, let’s review the basics of the CRP program, how it is managed and where it is going.

The Conservation Reserve Program was created by the Food Security Act (aka Farm Bill) of 1985. The purpose of CRP is to provide additional incentives to agricultural producers to safeguard environmentally desirable and sensitive lands by planting long-term vegetation which will enhance wildlife habitat, control erosion and improve water quality. New farm bills in 1990, 1996, 2002 and 2008 tweaked various eligibility requirements and acceptable practices, but the original desired outcomes remain in place. To accomplish these outcomes, owners of agricultural land



**The USDA recognized the 25th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program in December 2010. Although they didn't release a new logo, they credit the program with helping reduce soil erosion by 622 million tons since inception of the program.**

can receive an annual rental payment and funding for implementation from the USDA, to suspend traditional agricultural production over a multiple year period.

In the past, there have been times when participation in the program has been very popular. Year to year, participation may be influenced by actual or forecasted weather trends, commodity prices, the rental rates proposed for payment by the USDA, producers' retirements, suburban development, etc. Because it is a goal of the program to enroll the most desirable tracts of land, a scoring system has been established. To properly identify the most desirable and effective offers among the offered tracts, it has been necessary to have specific enrollment periods to bring them together at one time for concurrent evaluation. After scores are computed, applications are approved with an eye on the maximum county and maximum

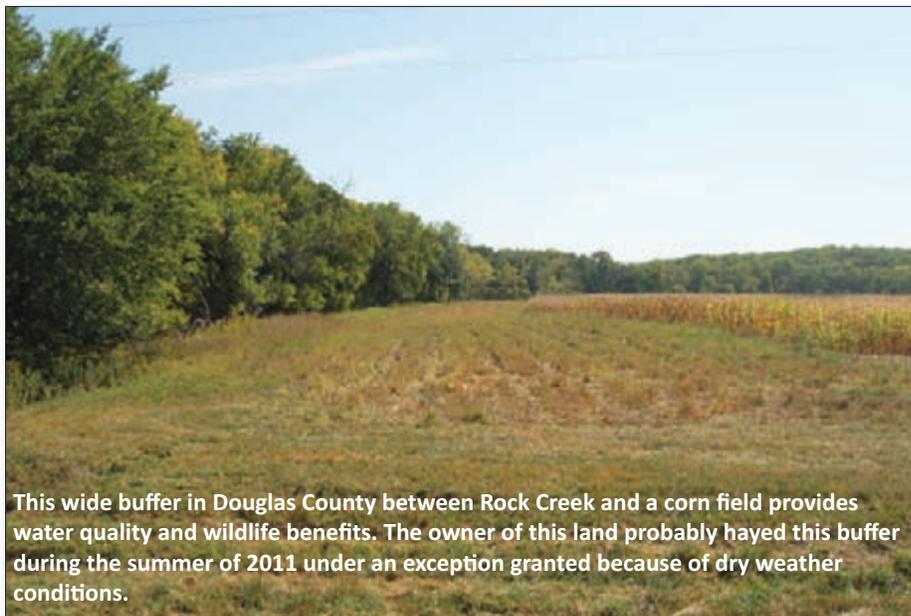
state limits for acres of land enrolled. This process starts at the county offices of USDA, where the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) provides the technical evaluation of the proposed project and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) that provides the financial evaluation.

In addition to the traditional CRP, the state offices of USDA and their technical committees have identified certain management practices (with national USDA approval) that can achieve a variety of conservation goals for their specific states. Nationwide, suspension of cultivation near municipal water supply wells is recognized as a practice that automatically qualifies for approval. There is no need to compare the offer to enroll land near a public

water supply well with any other offers because the offer with a source water protection component gets, in effect, an automatic top score. The scores of any other applications can only be equal or less. As proposals to enroll land for source water protection, specific wildlife protection and enhancement benefits, etc., automatically get a top score, there is no need for a specific sign-up period to make comparisons to other applications. These kinds of applications are considered to be in the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP), because the applications can be filed, accepted and approved at any time, or continuously.

The 2002 Farm Bill allowed up to 39.2 million acres to be enrolled nationwide. Unfortunately, from a conservation standpoint, the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (a new Farm Bill) reduced the number of acres to be authorized to approximately 32 million acres in 2010 through 2012. Because Kansas had a large number of acres in the program whose contracts expired after 2008, some lands proposed for re-enrollment might not make the cut. Adding more pressure on owners to cultivate the previously “idle” land again is the high price being paid for corn recently. As of September of last year, however, the USDA reports that 7,526 offers were received from Kansas producers (the most in the nation) and of those, 98 percent were accepted. Kansas was third in the nation with 618,905 accepted acres, with only Texas and Colorado having more.

While it appears that the program is not as large as it once was, and the current popular sentiment is that more money can be made by growing corn than renting the land to the government, public water systems should not dismiss this ongoing opportunity. Situations are continuously changing for agricultural producers and water systems alike. The answer of “No, I’m not interested in participating in CRP,” given twenty



This wide buffer in Douglas County between Rock Creek and a corn field provides water quality and wildlife benefits. The owner of this land probably hayed this buffer during the summer of 2011 under an exception granted because of dry weather conditions.

**Because Kansas had a large number of acres in the program whose contracts expired after 2008, some lands proposed for re-enrollment might not make the cut.**

years ago may have been based on different factors than those that exist today. In a recent county conservation district newsletter I received, owners of land with expiring CRP acres were asked to consider enrolling a smaller portion of the former CRP tract in a CCRP conservation practice. Suggestions

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## CRP still popular

included buffers along an adjacent stream, buffers on the field edges or even “islands” in the middle of a field that are “bird friendly.” These islands of native grass for bird habitat or field edge buffers could easily incorporate public water supply wells where they exist close to cultivated farmland, resulting in multiple benefits.

## State program provides indirect source water protection

Speaking of birds, this article is going to make a sharp turn and present information about a completely different state program. The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) established the Walk-In Hunting Program (WIHP) in 1995. Often piggybacking on CRP acreage, this voluntary program allows land to be leased to the Department for public hunting purposes, allowing the public access to private land. It's not limited to CRP land, because



Properties leased for Walk-In Hunting have multiple signs installed at multiple locations to show the boundaries of the property and the restrictions on the use of the property by the public.

cropped and harvested fields can make good hunting locations too.

Most people probably have a difficult time believing that source water protection can include a program with the goal of bringing total strangers to the public water system's well field. Since it is impossible to keep everybody away from the well field, the risk of vandalism might actually be reduced by having responsible people visit the area on a regular basis. Having private land available to the public should help bring local law enforcement to the area more often, whether it's the county sheriff department or state conservation officers. The success of the Walk-In Hunting Program would not be possible if it attracted unwelcome behaviors.

Walk-in hunting areas are clearly marked with standard signs installed by the Department. The signage is placed on the perimeter of the property where public hunting is allowed. Additional signage is available to designate safety zones where hunting is prohibited. The typical safety zone is a farmstead or other area where people may be working and not hunting. It can also mean any facility that includes water system infrastructure. Access is nearly always limited to foot traffic only.

If a landowner is interested in leasing his or her land, the first requirement that must be met is the size of the tract. The minimum size that KDWPT will consider is 80 acres. Before an agreement is signed, a department biologist determines that the tract is



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suitable for hunting. Depending on the biologist's findings and the desire of the landowner, different periods of the time of the year that public access is granted are available. Hunting options can include all species of wildlife with periods of either September 1 - March 31 (long period), September 1 through January 31 (medium-length period) or November 1 through January 31 (short period). A special youth dove hunting period is also available only during the month of

September. Deer hunting can be limited to archery only. There is also an option for spring turkey hunting from April 1 to May 31. Lease payments are higher for longer periods of access and if multi-year leases are signed. Many counties in the eastern third of Kansas are eligible for a fifty percent incentive payment above the typical state-wide payments, which start at \$150 per year on small (80- to 150-acre) tracts with short access periods. Also, it is important to know that state law provides for a waiver of liability to owners who lease land to the state for recreational purposes. The land eligible for lease under this program is not limited to CRP, which likely provides the source water protection benefits public water systems want.

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Think this program is not popular? In less than ten years since its introduction, more than one million acres in Kansas have been leased, and the number of acres enrolled has never decreased year to year. This secondary source of funding may provide the necessary total financial incentive to a landowner to enroll or re-enroll his or her property, with public water supply wells nearby, in a conservation program. Funds for this program are generated by license fees paid by sportsmen.

## Fact Sheets & Web Pages

### Source Water Protection

[www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/source\\_water\\_prot.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/source_water_prot.pdf)  
[www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=swp](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=swp)

### Conservation Reserve Program

[www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/crp\\_prog\\_0726.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/crp_prog_0726.pdf)  
[www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/crp\\_contsignup\\_072610.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/crp_contsignup_072610.pdf)  
[www.fsa.usda.gov/crp](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/crp)

### Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA- HIP)3

[www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/vpahip\\_states\\_and\\_tribe.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/vpahip_states_and_tribe.pdf)  
[www.fsa.usda.gov/vpa](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/vpa)

### Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism

[kdwpt.state.ks.us/news/Services/Private-Landowner-Assistance/Wildlife/Walk-in-Hunting](http://kdwpt.state.ks.us/news/Services/Private-Landowner-Assistance/Wildlife/Walk-in-Hunting)

### Kansas Hunting Atlas

[kdwp.state.ks.us/news/content/download/7499/37499/file/2011%20Fall%20Hunting%20Atlas.pdf](http://kdwp.state.ks.us/news/content/download/7499/37499/file/2011%20Fall%20Hunting%20Atlas.pdf)

## CRP / CCRP + WIHP = VPA-HIP

Just announced last fall is a new program that brings the two programs together in a more formal, and potentially more lucrative, way. The State of Kansas was one of seventeen states awarded a competitive grant to initiate the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program, or VPA-HIP. Kansas is receiving \$1.5 million in the first year of a three-year program, that could have as much as \$2.0 million per year in the remaining two years, depending

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### KDWPT Contact Information for VPA-HIP

- Hays Regional Office:**  
Brad Odle, 785/628-8614
- Topeka Regional Office:**  
Roger Wolfe, 785/273-6740
- Wichita Regional Office:**  
Craig Curtis, 316/683-8069

on fund availability. Only one state of the other 16 received this much funding. Kansas likely did so well due to the number of acres in CRP and CCRP and because of its very successful existing state program. In a second round of funding, another eight states and one Indian nation joined the previous seventeen grant-winning states.

With this additional funding, CCRP programs have become more attractive to landowners. It's also more attractive to wildlife officials because practices that are more permanent can be installed and maintained for a greater amount of time over the life of the

CRP or CCRP contract. KDWPT will pay for one hundred percent of the cost of habitat improvement with a three-year hunting access lease, up to \$3000. Another year under lease is required for every \$1,000 in excess of \$3,000 of habitat improvement costs. In one example provided, KDWPT claims that a landowner can receive more than \$20,000 on a ten-year contract by enrolling the twenty-eight acres in the corners of a 160-acre quarter section irrigated by a center pivot sprinkler. Many other scenarios exist across Kansas, so it is important to speak to one of the three VPA-HIP experts at KDWPT to see if it fits with your source water protection goals.

*Douglas S. Helmke has been the Water Rights Tech at KRWA since June 2000, and also a Wellhead / Sourcewater Protection Tech since 2003. He holds professional geologist certification in Kansas and Missouri. Doug*

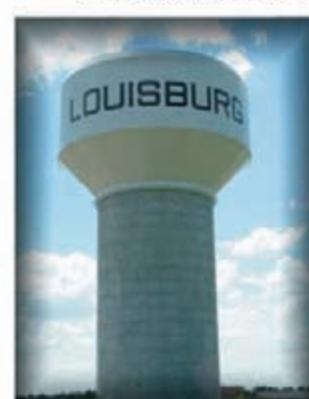


*received a B.S. degree in geology from Kansas State University.*



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