

CMR Community Working Group Meeting Summary

Where: Zoom Virtual Meeting

When: February 24, 2021 @ 1PM

Attendance: 26

Topic: Available Resources for Expiring CRP and Grassland Retention

Self-Introduction: Bill Milton, acting facilitator, had everyone introduce themselves and share why they were interested in the meeting topic.

The Issue of Expiring CRP in your County

Steve Wanderaas, McCone County Conservation District Chairman, reported that 75% of their county is comprised of rangeland, and that the issue of expiring CRP was brought up during a Local Working Group Meeting a few years ago. Shortly after, they realized that they had a whopping 65,000 acres expiring in the next few years. They began to receive a lot of traffic in the office from folks seeking ways to keep these lands as well as to put the area's marginal farmlands in grass. At this point, they realized they did not have the funds or capacity to handle these requests. Thanks to NRCS, their capacity will be increasing shortly with a new staff person in the office. They've also been in contact with the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture and have written a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP). However, they still don't have a solidified plan to address the extensive amount of acreage and will likely utilize the resources shared about today.

Expiring CRP Contracts

Shanan Smiley, Conservation Program Specialist at the Montana FSA Office, delivered a presentation on the CRP program via PowerPoint. CRP became an FSA program in 1985 and has the objective of cost-effectively assisting owners and operators in conserving and improving the nation's natural resource base. She shared the different types of CRP Contracts and the various Conservation Practices, requirements, and goals for each type of contract. She also noted that there is a good chance that landowners can be re-enrolled in CRP by participating in SAFE practices, State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement, which focus on wildlife habitat. She also discussed the Transition Incentive Program, which provides expiring contract holders up to 2 additional years of annual rental payments for the voluntary transition (5-year lease or sale) of land under an expiring CRP contract to a veteran, beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher to return the land to production for sustainable grazing or crop production. She also noted that most contracts are 10 years long.

Les Rispens, FSA, noted that the new administration has paused the current CRP enrollment to re-evaluate the program, specifically the rental rates and whether there is room to incorporate carbon sequestration.

One participant requested additional information on infrastructure funding. Shanan responded that some practices and areas allow for funding of fence installation and alternative water source infrastructure, such as pipelines, stock tanks, and wells. These cost-share funds are site and practice-specific.

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Resource Panel

- **Ranchers Stewardship Alliance:** Martin Townsend, RSA Conservation Committee Coordinator, gave an overview of the work they do to implement their mission, “Ranching, Communities, Conservation – A Winning Team” via a PowerPoint presentation. He noted that the Committee exists to find funding for conservation efforts relevant to their area, primarily in Phillips, Blaine and Valley Counties. He shared a few of the accomplishments this Committee has had in the last year, which sums to a collective commitment of more than \$194,000 to local ranches for on-the-ground conservation projects in North-Central Montana. This Committee serves as a hub for area ranchers with a vast group of partner organizations and agencies. Since RSA’s first grant in 2017, they have worked with 38 family ranches to impact more than 50,000 acres via restoration or enhancement of grazing lands. They have leveraged the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation funding they received more than 5:1 with total project costs exceeding \$3.3 million to date spent into rural communities and impacting grasslands.

He reported that a large focus of their funding points toward returning CRP acreage to productive grazing lands. They have found that when CRP returns to cropland, it is often due to the lack of infrastructure to sustain grazing, such as stockwater and fencing. Many of their projects will address this specific limitation, such as border-fencing and water development.

- **Winnett ACES:** Brent Smith, ACES coordinator, gave a brief background of how Winnett ACES began and its goal of conserving the ranching tradition and way of life in their local community. Like RSA, ACES has been funded through NFWF dollars. Their Conservation Committee has hosted three phases of funding for producers which has included money for grass seeding, water infrastructure, and fencing. He noted that projects in the \$10-15,000 range that often don’t qualify for EQUIP or CRP fit really well into their program’s funding. While they have allocated all of their remaining funds toward current projects, they are applying for additional NFWF dollars that can be utilized for these same practices. WWF does have funds available that ACES can assist in distributing for producers. For example, putting marginal cropland back into a native grass mix.

Question: Can FSA be a partner in efforts of NGOs such as RSA and ACES?

FSA: The programs FSA offers are all national in scope, so the ability to build them at the local-level is quite limited and most of those decisions are made in conjunction with NRCS. Our ability to flex programs to local situations is constrained. However, we can point producers to these local efforts. For example, with the declining grasslands birds SAFE project, we point to Winnett ACES for potential cost-share assistance.

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- **World Wildlife Fund:** Alexis Bonogofsky, Program Manager for the Sustainable Ranching Initiative, provided an overview of WWF's Ranching Systems and Viability Planning (RSVP) program via a Powerpoint presentation. The program provides ranches with technical assistance, trainings and educational opportunities, cost-share to implement ranch plans, monitoring to adapt management over time and facilitation of peer-to-peer learning network. In return, the ranch agrees to keep grasslands intact for 10 years, develop a grazing a management plan, monitor at baseline and years 2 and 3, and receive training in four main categories: monitoring, ranching for wildlife, financial planning, and grazing management. She noted that producers will likely work through partner positions, such as RSA or ACES, as opposed to working directly with WWF. However, this program is flexible and will look different for each producer. She stated that they hope to fund projects and practices that may not be covered by federal funding, such as temporary fencing. 2021 RSVP enrollment will begin in March, and they hope to work with 150 producers within in the next few years.

Question: How can communities that don't have an RSA or Winnett ACES get involved?

RSA: We have a long-term goal to create systems that are replicable. If RSA can assist other communities achieve similar goals, we would love to do so.

- **Northern Great Plains Joint-Venture:** Steve Riley shared that NGPJV's work area exists south of the Missouri River and east of the Mountains. These joint ventures essentially intervene in a geographic space that is somewhat similar; assisting in efforts within each ecosystem. They have received three NFWF grants to fund projects that fall within their Grassland Restoration Incentives Program. Through this program, they seek to address some of the weak links in conservation delivery, many of which he notes have been discussed already. He pointed to the connection of healthy working ranches and the management of native grasslands that are conducive to the lifecycle of birds. NGPJV having a focus on birds can assist in fostering conservation efforts specific to this connection.
- **Natural Resource Conservation Service:** Veronica Grigaltchik with the Circle Field Office reported that she is working with McCone County Conservation District to address the 65,000+ acres of CRP that are expiring within the next few years. She discussed working under the Montana Focused Conservation model which is implemented through the development of Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs). Southern McCone County has an ongoing TIP in place called *Improving Grazingland Health and Ranch Viability* for approximately 50,000 total acres with an emphasis on CRP. She noted that they intend to apply for another TIP in response to the increased interest in this issue as CRP acres continue to expire beyond southern McCone County. This TIP, *Maximizing Conversion of Expired CRP to Healthy Productive Grazingland*, will have an emphasis on an estimated 25,000 acres. Practices in both of these TIPS include new fencing, fence removal, water development and grazing management opportunities.

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Veronica is the only fulltime staff-person in McCone County so increased capacity will be critical to future efforts. As Steve mentioned, they will be hiring a new employee in June.

The meeting ended after a few final thoughts from Dick Iversen, Bill Milton and Liv Holt at 3:00PM.

All presentations mentioned in the meeting notes can be found on the meeting summaries page of our website.

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