

# Maryland Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

## What is CREP?

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) grew out of increasing recognition that wetlands and lands adjacent to streams (riparian areas) and other water bodies have a tremendous impact on water quality and provide critical wildlife habitat. These important conservation areas can be protected and restored in many ways.

In 1997, the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined forces with the State of Maryland to improve upon USDA's long standing Conservation Reserve Program by focusing on buffer establishment, wetland restoration, and retiring highly erodible agricultural lands adjacent to water bodies that drain into the Chesapeake Bay.

The CREP provides attractive annual cash rental payments to farm landowners willing to voluntarily take sensitive land out of agricultural production and restore and protect these buffer areas.

Under CREP, landowners contract with USDA through their local Farm Service Agency (FSA) to receive annual rental payments, plus bonuses, for taking land out of production and installing conservation practices adjacent to waterways. With the additional support of the Maryland Dept. Of Agriculture, landowners can also receive up to 87.5% reimbursement for cost of installation of conservation practices, such as riparian forest or vegetative buffer planting, or retirement of highly erodible lands and 50% reimbursement for wetlands. The contract agreement lasts for 10 to 15 years. In addition, landowners can sign a conservation easement and receive an additional bonus payment in exchange for an agreement to retain the conservation practices in perpetuity.

## How can landowners participate in this program?

First, landowners should contact their local FSA or Soil Conservation District (SCD) Office to find out if their land meets CREP contract eligibility requirements. Generally, agricultural land (crop land or pasture) adjacent to perennial or intermittent waterways, certain highly erodible lands within 1,000 feet of a waterway, and prior converted wetlands qualify for the program. Local DNR foresters and wildlife biologists can also help enroll participants.

Once a landowner has signed up for the contract, he or she can also choose to begin working with a local partner to execute the CREP easement and receive an additional one-time payment. Information about the easement is available through the local SCD office or local land trust. Partnerships to deliver the easement component of the CREP have been developed between DNR and a number of local land trust organizations.

Participants can also enter the CREP program in conjunction with Rural Legacy, Maryland Agricultural and Preservation Foundation (MALPF) or donated easement programs such as Maryland Environmental Trust (MET). In this case, the landowner can initiate easement discussions, then be referred by the land trust organization or local sponsor to the SCD to concurrently execute a CREP contract.

### **Eligible Lands**

- Cropland that has been planted to an agricultural commodity for two of the last five years, hayland, and marginal pastureland adjacent to a stream or waterbody.
- Highly erodible lands (erodibility index greater than 15) within 1,000 feet of a stream or water body.
- Prior converted wetlands or areas capable of supporting wetland hydrology.

### **Planting & Maintenance Requirements**

All lands enrolled in CREP must be planted in approved mixes of trees and/or grasses and maintained as permanent cover for the life of the contract. Haying or grazing of CREP lands will not be prohibited.

- Marginal pastureland can only be planted in trees.
- Cropland can be planted in trees or grasses.
- Wetlands can be managed as shallow water areas or restored as a natural wetland.
- An upland buffer around the wetland can be included in the wetland boundary.

Maintenance practices, such as mowing, may be required. Control of noxious weeds will be required.

### **How do I benefit from CREP?**

Landowners enrolled in CREP are paid an annual soil rental rate plus an annual bonus, as a percent of the soil rental rate. Participants can choose to plant a streamside forest (100% bonus) or a grass buffer or wetland (80% bonus). Higher incentives are paid for streamside forests because of the broad array of habitat and water quality benefits they provide. Payments are made yearly for the life of the contract. Landowners will be reimbursed 85.7% for planting a streamside forest and or for planting a grass buffer, and 50% for restoring a wetland through a cooperative agreement with the Farm Service Agency and the Maryland Department of Agriculture. Below is an example of an annual soil rental rate.

Average rental rate of \$70/acre + Streamside forest bonus of 100%  
Equals  
A total annual rental rate of \$140/acre

Used in conjunction with nutrient management and sediment and erosion control practices, streamside forests can benefit you and your stream through the following:

- Providing a dependable income to the owner
- Removing nutrients and sediment from shallow groundwater and surface water
- Reducing pesticide and herbicide spray drift and runoff to streams
- Providing important habitat for aquatic life, birds, and small game
- Supporting recreational hunting and fishing opportunities

### **What about an easement?**

Landowners enrolled in CREP can sell an easement on their land directly to the state or through local land trusts. Easement payments are based on the fair market value of foregone development and agricultural productivity costs.

### **CREP Easement Example**

If you choose to sell an easement you will receive a one-time payment on top of annual rental rates at the time of sign-up. Easement payments range from \$765/acre in Garrett County to \$6,431/acre in Harford County. The average rate is \$2,340/acre.

**Example:** 10 acres of streamside forest in Frederick County with an easement.

- Annual rental payment for 15 years: \$1,105
- Bonus at sign-up for easement: \$19,080
- Total Payments over 15 years: \$35,655