

ORGANIC FARMERS'  
GUIDE TO THE  
CONSERVATION  
RESERVE PROGRAM  
FIELD  
BORDER  
BUFFER  
INITIATIVE



National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

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## 1 BACKGROUND

On February 26, 2016, USDA announced the launch of a new conservation option for organic farmers—cost-share and land rental payments for field border buffers through the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP). The new organic buffer initiative aims to establish up to 20,000 acres of conservation field border buffers.

*Field border buffers* are any number of practices that a farmer might establish by using non-cropped vegetative cover (such as grasses, trees, or forbs) at the edges of fields.

Organic farming already provides multiple environmental benefits, including improving soil health, protecting water quality, and increasing biodiversity. The new organic buffers initiative will allow producers to further enhance positive environmental outcomes by removing nutrients, trapping sediment, creating habitat for pollinators, and reducing pesticide and genetic drift from neighboring farms. In addition, field border buffers can help organic producers meet National Organic Program (NOP) certification requirements for natural resource and biodiversity conservation.

## 2 ELIGIBILITY

To utilize this new opportunity for establishing field border buffers, a farm needs to be enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

To be eligible to enroll in CRP, including CCRP (which is a subset of CRP), a producer must have owned or operated the land for at least 12 months preceding the first year of the contract period, unless:

- The new owner acquired the land due to the previous owner's death;
- The ownership change occurred due to a foreclosure; or
- FSA is otherwise satisfied that the new owner did not acquire the land for the purpose of placing it in CRP.

To be eligible for CRP, land must be:

- Highly erodible cropland that is planted or considered planted in 4 of the previous 6 crop years, and that can be planted in a normal manner;
- Marginal pasture that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer or for similar habitat or water quality purposes;
- Ecologically significant grasslands that contain forbs or shrubs for grazing; or
- A farmable wetland and related buffers.

For CCRP, offers that meet eligibility requirements are automatically accepted into the program, without any competitive bidding.

No crops may be grown on the buffers, nor can they be used for roads or lanes. Managed haying and grazing is also not allowed on buffers. Incidental grazing of the buffer is permissible, but doing so reduces the rental rate being paid for the buffer by at least 25 percent. Recreational hunting is permitted in accordance with state law.

### 3 PROGRAM BASICS

USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) enrolls most CRP acres during periodic "general sign-ups," through which land is bid into the program on a competitive basis and ranked based on environmental benefits and cost. General sign-ups occur periodically, not necessarily every year, at special times announced by USDA.

However, CRP also has a continuous signup option, CCRP, which pays farmers to install partial field conservation practices, primarily conservation buffers or wildlife habitat.

Farmers and landowners may enroll in CCRP at any time rather than waiting for specific sign-up periods. Unlike general sign-ups, there is no bidding and ranking; the land is enrolled automatically if it meets the eligibility criteria (more on that above).

All types of CRP contracts are for either 10 or 15 years, with the longer 15-year agreements intended for tree plantings. At the end of a contract, landowners have the option of re-enrolling for another term.

FSA provides program participants with annual rental payments, including certain incentive payments, and cost-share assistance as follows:

- **Rental Payments:** FSA bases rental rates on the productivity of the soils within each county and the average dryland cash rent. The maximum rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment in the program. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted.
- **Cost-share Assistance:** Generally, FSA provides up to 50 percent cost-share to establish the appropriate cover on the land. FSA may also provide mid-contract management cost share, depending on the practice.

- **Incentive Payments:** For some practices, USDA also provides rental rate incentive payments, signing incentive payments (SIPs), and installation cost share, known as practice incentive payments (PIPs). See below for more information on practices and payments under the organic buffer initiative.

See below for a hypothetical example of a producer weighing financial considerations before installing a buffer practice.

### 4 PRACTICES AND EXTRA PAYMENTS

CCRP eligible practices include riparian buffers, wildlife habitat buffers, wetland buffers, filter strips, wetland restoration, grass waterways, shelterbelts, windbreaks, living snow fences, contour grass strips, salt tolerant vegetation, and shallow water areas for wildlife. To learn more about the full range of practices and what they look like on the land, visit the NRCS website.

Under the new organic initiative, farmers are free to use whichever CCRP eligible practice or suite of practices that best suits their particular needs. In most cases, we believe farmers will be most interested in the following practices:

- If a particular field borders a stream, either the filter strip or the riparian buffer practice will be best suited to that particular border.
- If a farm is located in an area where trees are well suited and high winds a consideration, the windbreak option may be suitable.
- In most other instances, the two practices that are likely to be adaptable as field borders are the pollinator habitat practice or the upland buffers practice.

Each state has specific guidelines and instructions for how to implement these practices. You should talk to your state FSA office to determine what exactly is required for each practice in your state. However, there are some basic criteria that must be followed regardless of where you are located.



photo credit: USDA

# PRACTICES 101: Definitions



## Filter Strips

Filter strips are areas of non-cropped vegetative cover (such as grass) between a farm field and a waterway. Used to slow water runoff from a field, they can intercept sediment, nutrients, and other pollutants before they reach a river, lake or stream.



## Riparian Buffers

Riparian buffers are strips of trees between a farm field and a waterway that can intercept pollutants from surface runoff and groundwater before they reach a river or stream. They also provide habitat for wildlife and enhance fish habitat.



## Windbreak

Windbreaks are rows of trees or shrubs surrounding a farm field to shelter the field from wind. Windbreaks reduce soil erosion, intercept chemical drift, and sequester carbon.



## Pollinator Habitat

Pollinator habitat provides nectar and shelter for pollinators such as bees and butterflies, as well as habitat for other beneficial insects. Pollinator habitat can also improve water quality and limit erosion.



## Upland Buffers

Upland buffers are installed as strips of non-cropped vegetative cover (such as grass, wildflowers, and forbs) along field borders to provide bird habitat. As with other buffer practices, they limit erosion and protect water quality.



## Shelterbelt Establishment, Non-Easement

A shelterbelt is one or more rows of trees and shrubs used to reduce wind erosion and protect farmsteads and livestock from wind.

photo credits: USDA NRCS (1-2), Rosmann Family Farm (3), USDA NRCS (4-6)

## Windbreak

*Practice Code: CP-5A*

Windbreaks should be installed according to the specifications outlined in your state's Field Office Technical Guide. Your local FSA and NRCS field staff will guide you through this process. Windbreaks must be devoted to trees or shrubs, and must reduce soil erosion below the NRCS soil loss tolerance level.

## Shelterbelt Establishment, Non-Easement

*Practice Code: CP-16A*

Shelterbelts should be installed according to the specifications outlined in your state's Field Office Technical Guide. Your local FSA and NRCS field staff will guide you through this process. A shelterbelt may be applied up to a maximum width of up to 2 times the design standard for protecting farmsteads or livestock areas, if requested by the producer to accomplish the purpose of protecting farmsteads or livestock areas.

## Pollinator Habitat

*Practice Code: CP-42*

This practice pays producers to establish and maintain pollinator habitat. Normally, if not planted in whole fields, block plantings of CP-42 are preferred over strips. However, for field border purposes, strips are the most likely choice. If planted in strips, each strip must be a minimum of 20 feet wide. Habitat areas of CP-42 must be at least 0.5 acres each.

Seeding mixes shall contain a minimum of nine species of pollinator-friendly wildflowers, legumes, and/or shrubs. More than nine species are encouraged. Trees are not an eligible component of CP-42 seed mixes. States with arid areas may submit alternative standards.

At least three species shall bloom during each period of April through June 15, June 15 through July, and August through October. The three species need not be in bloom for the entirety of a bloom period. States with arid areas may have alternative standards. Seeding mixes shall include no more than 25 percent grasses based on pure live seeds per square foot; however, grass is not required. Where allowed by NRCS Field Office Technical Guide, total seed mixes, including grass seeds, must be 15-30 pure live seeds per square foot. Seeding rates may be higher where required by your state's Field Office Technical Guide.

Grasses seeded in this practice must be native. Though wildflower, legume, and/or shrub species are encouraged to be native, beneficial introduced flowering plants (e.g., alfalfa and clover) may be part of the seeding mix. Each introduced species is encouraged to make up no more than 10 percent of the pure live seed mixture with a total of introduced flowering plants not to exceed 20 percent of the pure live seed mixture. Woody habitat created on CP-42 shall not exceed 1,500 square feet for every one-acre of CP-42, up to one acre in total woody habitat.

Management methods shall enhance or maintain flowering plant diversity, set back vegetative succession and woody encroachment, and expose soil for pollinator nesting sites.

## **Filter Strips**

*Practice Code: CP-21*

This will only be relevant for organic fields that abut a stream. It can be used in combination with one of the other options if, for instance, one field border was a stream and the other three were not waterways.

The minimum acceptable width of a filter strip is 20 feet. A filter strip may be applied up to a maximum average width of 120 feet, if needed to accomplish the purpose of the practice.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) must document the need for a minimum design specification in excess of 120 feet in writing. The filter strip must begin at the top of the stream bank. Fencing the buffer is an option and is eligible for cost share, as is establishing an alternative water source (well or tank) for livestock.

## **Riparian Buffers**

*Practice Code: CP-22*

This will only be relevant for organic fields that abut a stream. It can be used in combination with one of the other options if, for instance, one field border was a stream and the other three were not waterways.

CP-22 buffers must be devoted to trees. The buffer must be at least 35 feet in width, and not more than the lesser of 100 feet or 30 percent of the geomorphic floodplain, or up to a maximum average width of 180 feet, if needed to accomplish the purpose of the practice. Excessive sheet-rill and concentrated flow must be controlled. An area of native grasses and forbs may be added, if otherwise eligible, only for concentrated flow conditions dependent on the site. The riparian buffer must begin at the top of the stream bank. Fencing the buffer is an option and is eligible for cost share, as is establishing an alternative water source (well or tank) for livestock.

## **Upland Buffers (also known as Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds)**

*Practice Code: CP-33*

To be eligible for CP-33, the land must be suitably located and adaptable to the establishment of wildlife habitat for primarily quail and upland bird species. The buffer must be installed on the field edges, and must improve or create upland bird habitat.

Producers using CP-33 should either establish buffers to adapted species of native, warm-season grass, legumes, wildflowers, and forbs, or allow buffers to re-vegetate by natural succession, according to an approved conservation plan. Trees and shrubs shall not exceed 10 percent coverage of the buffers. Alfalfa fields used for pasture or for hay and marginal pastureland do not qualify for enrollment. The minimum average width of an upland bird habitat buffer is 30 feet, with a maximum average width of 120 feet.

## 4 PRACTICES AND EXTRA PAYMENTS (CONTINUED)

Each of the five practices profiled earlier is well suited for field borders; each also receives CCRP incentive payments on top of standard rental rates, as shown in the chart below. Rental rates vary greatly by state and county, so we do not display those rates in the chart below.

Practice (CP) Number	Practice Name	Basic Cost Share	Practice Incentive Payment	Signup Incentive Payment	Rental Rate Incentive	Maintenance Incentive
CP-5A	Windbreaks	50 percent	40 percent	\$100/acre	120 percent	≤\$2/acre
CP-21	Filter Strips	50 percent	40 percent	\$100/acre	120 percent	\$0-\$10/acre
CP-22	Riparian Buffer	50 percent	40 percent	\$100/acre	120 percent	\$2-\$10/acre
CP-33	Upland Buffer	50 percent	40 percent	\$150/acre	none	none
CP-42	Pollinator Hab.	50 percent	none	\$150/acre	none	none
CP-16A	Shelterbelt	50 percent	40 percent	\$100/acre	none	≤\$2/acre

To help you weigh various financial considerations, we provide a hypothetical enrollment example below, using actual cost and payment information.

*Scenario: An organic dryland corn farmer in Jefferson County, Iowa enrolls 10 acres in a CP 21 filter strip. The farmer uses no tillage and seeds a native species. The average rental rate for CP 21 in Jefferson County is \$243.06 per acre, though the actual rate ranges depending on soil type.*

- Income foregone: \$522.95 per acre
- Cost (basic costs such as seeding and material): \$91.94 per acre
- FSA Average County Rental Rate, including Rental Rate Incentive: \$291.67 per acre
- FSA Cost Share, incl. Practice Incentive Payment: \$82.75 per acre (90 percent of \$91.94 per acre)
- Signup Incentive Payment: \$100 per acre

**Total payment to producer: \$4,744.20 for 10 acres**

### Cost to Producer:

- Total cost (\$919.40)
- Income foregone (\$5,229.50)
- = \$1,404.90 for 10 acres of filter strip

Note: Each state has a State Technical Committee, made up of producers, practitioners and other experts, which determines the cost of conservation practices in that particular state. It is up to the State Technical Committee, working with NRCS, to determine whether to consider the cost of organic seed (versus the cost of conventional seed) when calculating cost-share for producers who are installing buffer practices. We therefore encourage farmers to join their state's NRCS State Technical Committee to help ensure that organic costs are taken into account. Regardless of how costs are calculated, producers will need to keep and present receipts in order to receive cost share.

1. The Practice Incentive Payment (PIP) is a one-time additional cost-share payment equal to 40 percent of the eligible installation costs of the practice. The basic cost share rate for all CCRP practices is 50 percent. With the PIP, it therefore is increased to 90 percent.

2. The Signup Incentive Payment (SIP) is a one-time bonus payment.

3. The land rental rate for CCRP practices is normally based on soil type and average cash rent in the county. For practices with a rental rate incentive, that underlying rate is increased by 20 percent.

4. Producers using CP21 will receive no maintenance incentive payment if there is no fencing or water facility development; however, they may receive a maintenance payment of ≤\$5 if the practice includes permanent fencing (but no water facility development), and ≤\$10 if the practice includes both permanent fencing and water facility development.

5. Producers using CP22 may receive \$2 per acre if there is no fencing or water facility development, ≤\$5 if the practice includes either permanent fencing or water facility development, and ≤\$10 if the practice includes both permanent fencing and water facility development.

## 5 PRODUCER PROFILES



photo credit: Rosmann Family Farm

### **Ron and Maria Rosmann**

#### **Rosmann Family Farm**

*Harlan, Iowa*

At the Rosmann Family Farm, Ron and Maria Rosmann farm 700 acres of certified organic corn, oats, soybeans, barley, popcorn, turnips, pasture and hay. They also have an organic cow-calf operation (90 cows), a 60-sow certified organic hog operation, and raise organic chickens annually.

The Rosmanns use CRP buffer strips along each side of their creek to limit nutrient runoff and erosion and provide other conservation benefits. They continue to put more of their field border acreages into prairie, trees, shrubs, and habitat for wildlife, bees, and beneficial insects.

The new field border buffer initiative will have a significant impact because, in Ron Rosmann's words, "field borders are viewed by many organic farmers as a necessary but not financially productive resource."

The Rosmanns have taken the extra step of diversifying the makeup of their buffers. "In general, I like to try to get as many different benefits out of required organic field borders as possible," Ron says. "Field borders along non-organic borders that were only brome and legumes are now becoming multi-species trees and shrubs, which serve various purposes such as windbreak protection, pollinator habitat enhancement, native grass establishment."

The Rosmanns have a primary field border that is about 1500 ft. long and includes native trees like white pine, red oak, black cherry, hackberry and others. They also have a 1250 ft. field border along a non-organic neighbor that so far has been used for wind and pesticide drift protection.



photo credit: Vilicus Farms

## **Doug and Anna Crabtree**

### **Vilicus Farms**

*Northern Hill County, Montana*

At Vilicus Farms, Doug Crabtree and Anna Jones-Crabtree have 3,600 acres of land under annual and cover crop rotation and an additional 1,400 acres under non-crop conservation — farming a total of over 5,000 certified organic acres. They use two different rotations for their annual and cover crops: for fields that are within ten miles of a manure source, they use a five-year rotation of grain, cover crop, and spring legumes. On fields that are further than ten miles from a manure source, they use a seven-year rotation that includes grains, legumes-based cover crops, one season of oats or other broadleaved oilseeds, one season of broadleaf as green manure, and one season of spring legumes, such as lentils, peas, vetch or other pulses.

The Crabtrees use 20-30 foot buffer strips of perennial grass/forb sod within and around fields to generate multiple conservation benefits. The buffer strips, or field borders, contribute to nearly half of the 1,400 acres of their land that is under non-crop conservation.

Other conservation practices they employ include pollinator and wildlife habitat, native rangeland, herbaceous windbreaks and perennial sod enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Their goal is to maintain at least 25 percent of their land under non-crop conservation practices.

“The ability to (more easily) enroll field borders, used as organic buffers, in CRP will be very beneficial to many organic producers. It will allow farmers to derive some income from acres that have been largely ‘sacrificed’ in the past.

“For us, protection from drift is only one of a myriad of reasons for having field borders. I encourage other (organic) producers to consider the multiple benefits derived from field borders for conservation, biodiversity, etc. There are other organic standards that can be met through use of field borders, including 205.200 and 205.206 [the natural resource standard and the crop, pest, and disease management standard].”

## 6 APPLICATION PROCESS

Farmers can apply to CRP through the continuous sign up at any time. To sign up, you will need to contact their local FSA office.

If you are applying as a business entity as opposed to an individual or sole proprietor, you must have a Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number, which you can easily obtain for free online, and must also be registered with the System for Award Management (SAM). If you are applying as an individual rather than a business and use your social security number as your Employer Identification Number (EIN), then you do not need to obtain a DUNS number or register with SAM.

For producers applying as a business, the process to apply for a DUNS number takes about one business day. When you apply you will need to be able to provide contact information, the number of employees, the legal structure of your operation, the year it was established, and the SIC code, which is a US Department of Labor business classification that can be looked up online. When you have this information ready you can apply for a DUNS number online at <http://fedgov.dnb.com/webform>.

After obtaining a DUNS number, you can register with SAM, which is a government-wide registry for anyone doing business with the federal government. You can begin the SAM process at [www.sam.gov](http://www.sam.gov), and should have the following information ready: your DUNS number, EIN number, statistical information about your business, and information for electronic transfer of payments. You should plan ahead for the SAM application, because a newly assigned EIN number can take up to 2 to 5 weeks before it is active and valid for the SAM application.

Landowners accepted into CRP will work with NRCS to draft a conservation plan based on the practices that the landowner will be implementing, using the state NRCS FOTG specifications approved for the particular practice.

## 7 MORE INFORMATION

For more information and resources:

- FSA's national CRP webpage: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index>
- Your state FSA webpage: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/stateOffices>
- National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's CRP webpage: <http://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/grassrootsguide/conservation-environment/conservation-reserve-program/>
- FSA's organic farming webpage: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/outreach-and-education/help-for-organic-farming/index>



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**NATIONAL  
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COALITION**

*The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is an alliance of over 100 grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and rural communities.*

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