



ANALYSIS OF CCRP'S RECORD BREAKING ENROLLMENT NSAC SPECIAL REPORTS

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ABSTRACT:

This post examines enrollment trends, including top practices and geographic variations, related to fiscal year (FY) 2016's record-breaking enrollment for the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program, a component of the Conservation Reserve Program. In FY 2016, the continuous sign-up was the largest on record, more than 1.3 million acres were enrolled.

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INTRODUCTION:

Across the country, farmers and ranchers are choosing to install riparian buffers, grassed waterways, contour grass strips, and other conservation practices to prevent sediment and nutrients from running off into and polluting waterways. In other cases, where soil quality is especially poor, producers are choosing to keep large blocks of agricultural land covered with grasses or trees as opposed to planting crops. For farmers and ranchers struggling with marginal and highly environmentally sensitive lands, the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's \(USDA\) Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\)](#) can provide payments to help defray the cost of keeping the soil covered year round with resource-conserving vegetation.

CRP, which is administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), helps farmers and ranchers conserve and improve soil, protect water quality, and provide wildlife habitat by establishing long-term cover (primarily grasses and trees) on highly erodible land or land in need of conservation buffers that has previously been in row crop production. In exchange for cost-share and rental payments, farmers remove environmentally sensitive land from production and plant resource-conserving land cover. These conservation efforts help farms protect water quality and animal habitats, and become more resilient to drought, flooding, and other climate fluctuations by improving their soil health.

CRP has multiple enrollment types, including a periodic "general sign-up" through which large blocks of land (often whole fields) are bid into the program on a competitive basis and ranked using an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). These general sign-ups occur at special times announced by USDA and are not always available each year. The program also has a continuous enrollment option, the [Continuous Conservation Reserve Program \(CCRP\)](#), which pays farmers to install targeted, partial field conservation practices on the most environmentally sensitive lands.

This report focuses on CCRP, which includes individual conservation practices as well as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Farmable Wetland Program (FWP), State Acreage for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative, and other initiatives. CREP facilitates agreements between states and USDA to pay farmers to address regionally targeted conservation concerns; SAFE is an initiative aimed at providing financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers who implement a variety of practices that conserve high-priority wildlife species; and FWP helps producers manage certain types of wetlands and install wetland buffer areas.

The following analysis explores the ways in which CCRP provides key conservation resources to farmers across the U.S., and pays particular attention to enrollment trends, including top practices and geographic variations in program usage.

CONTINUOUS ENROLLMENT – HISTORY AND BACKGROUND:

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) helped to create CRP's continuous sign-up option in 1990; the program had its first enrollment seven years later, in 1997. For many years CCRP's primary purpose was to help farmers install conservation buffers to reduce soil erosion and nutrient loss. The program has since expanded its scope, however, to include an emphasis on preserving critical wildlife habitat.

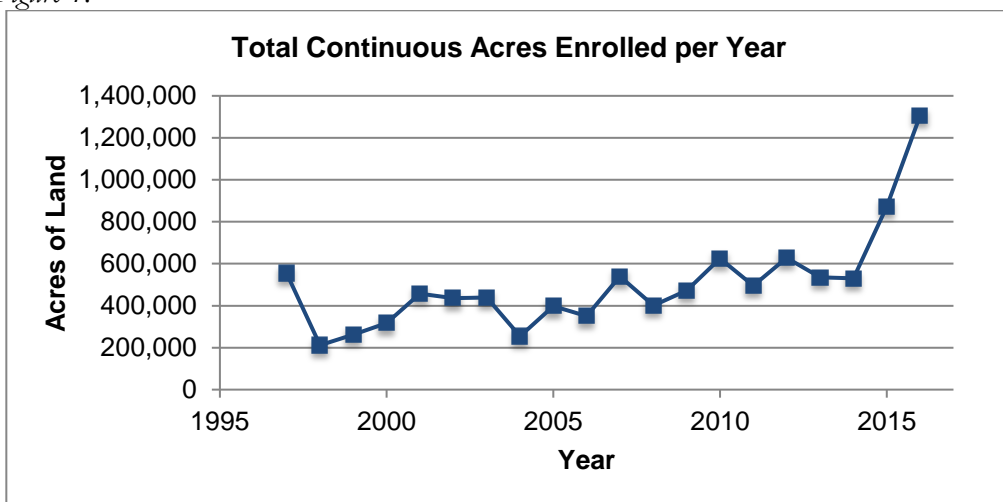
Unlike the CRP general sign-up, which was established in 1985, farmers and landowners may enroll land in CCRP at any time during the year. Once an applicant's land is deemed as eligible through meeting a set of criteria, the land is accepted into the program and automatically enrolled. CCRP's user-friendly application process encourages more farmers to enroll their land in the program and speeds up the process through which land can be conserved – this is especially important for lands in urgent need of buffer strips or wildlife habitat enhancement. Practices eligible under CCRP include:

- Riparian buffers;
- Wildlife habitat buffers;
- Saturated buffers;
- Wetland buffers;
- Filter strips;
- Wildlife habitat restoration (State Areas for Wildlife Enhancement initiative);
- Wetland restoration;
- Grass waterways;
- Shelterbelts;
- Living snow fences;
- Contour grass strips;
- Constructed wetlands; and
- Shallow water areas for wildlife, among others.

FY 2016 SUMMARY:

In FY 2016 farmers enrolled a record-breaking 1.3 million acres in CCRP, bringing total enrollment to 7.3 million acres nationwide. In fact, continuously enrolled acres represented roughly 30 percent of the total CRP enrollment as of November 2016. Figure 1 below highlights the steady growth of CCRP enrollment over the last 20 years.

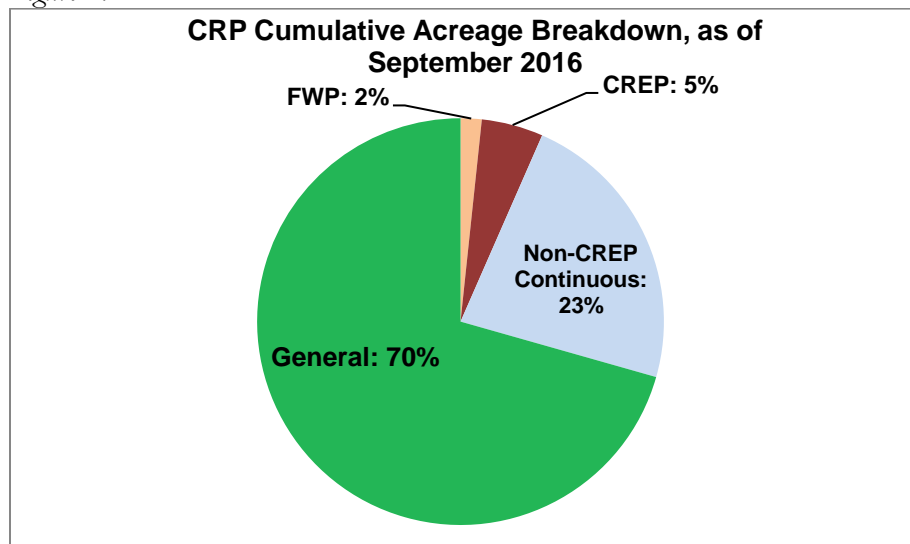
Figure 1.



From 2015 to 2017 program enrollment spiked dramatically. This is likely due to the confluence of several factors, including low commodity prices, the fact that there was no general sign-up in 2015, and FSA’s efforts to use CCRP to help farmers keep resource-conserving cover on the most environmentally sensitive lands expiring from previous CRP enrollment period

As Figure 2 below shows, the vast majority of CRP acres have been enrolled through the general sign-up, which focuses on larger, often whole farm field enrollments. Amongst the acres enrolled through the continuous sign-up, only 5 percent are enrolled through CREP agreements, while just 2 percent are enrolled through FWP. The remaining 23 percent of CCRP acres are enrolled through the basic continuous sign up and are treated with a variety of conservation activities, including conservation buffers and wildlife enhancement practices.

Figure 2.



GEOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN:

CRP is widely used across the United States, however the majority of contracts and acres are located in the Midwest and Plains states. The top ten states in terms of cumulative CCRP acreage (Figure 3) are Iowa, South Dakota, Minnesota, North Dakota, Illinois, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas. The top ten states in terms of the number of continuous contracts (represented in Figure 4) are Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, South Dakota, Missouri, Kansas, North Dakota and Nebraska.

Figure 3.

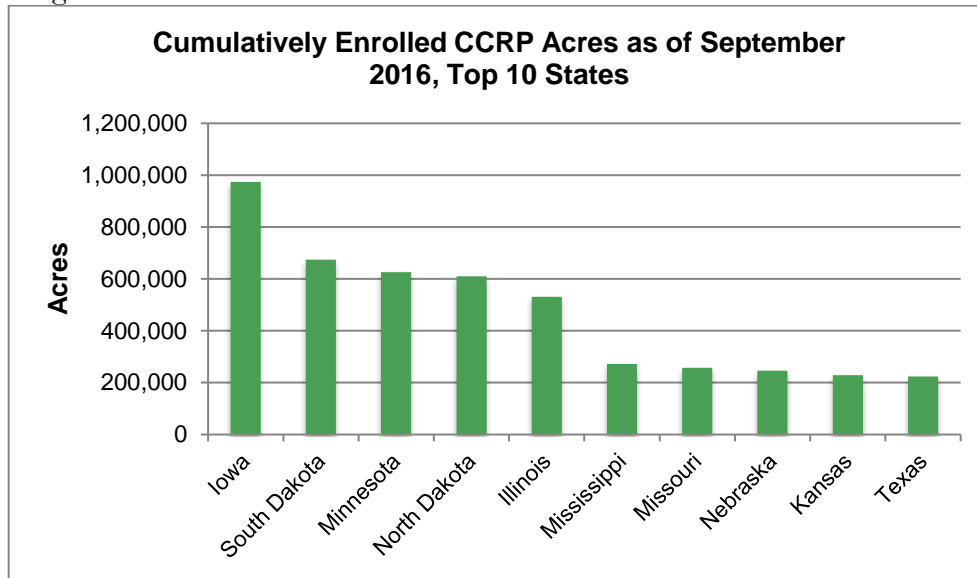
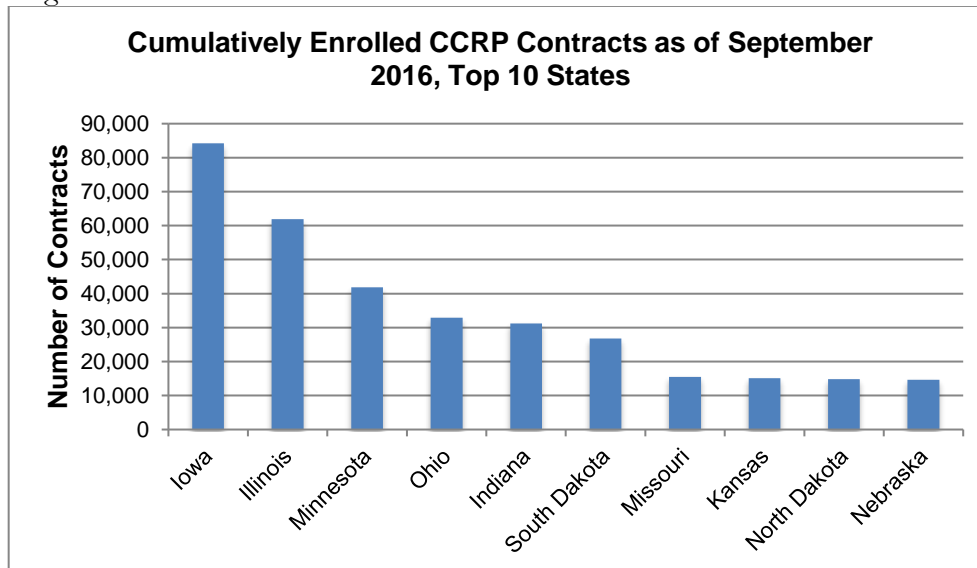


Figure 4.



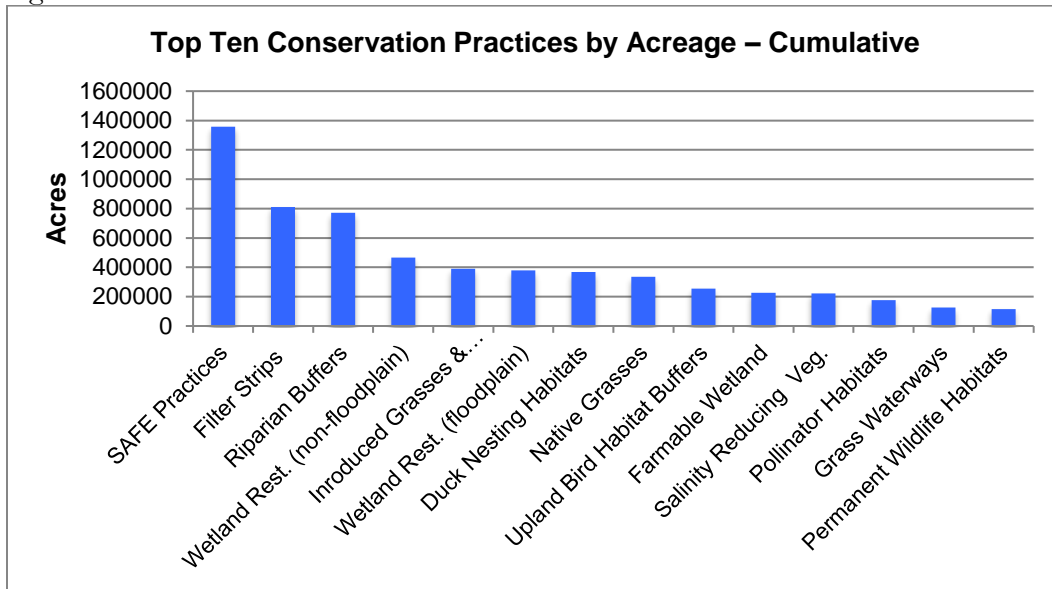
The ten states shown in Figure 4 represent 66 percent of all CCRP acres; similarly, the ten states in Figure 4 represent nearly 78 percent of all CCRP contracts. These lists are largely similar to past years.

Iowa is the top state in terms of both number of contracts and total acres enrolled. One factor that may account for the strong demand for the program here is Iowa’s in-state annual rental payment for continuous CRP acres, of \$228.12 per acre (as of September 2016). This rental payment, which is the highest of all states and nearly doubles the U.S. average of \$123.90 per acre, provides a significant incentive for farmers to enroll marginal land in the program.

CRP PRACTICES, PAST AND PRESENT TRENDS:

Of all acres currently enrolled in CRP contracts, the most popular conservation practices (by total enrolled acreage) include: State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) practices; filter strips and riparian buffers, which reduce erosion and improve water quality; wetland restoration; introducing legumes and native grasses to improve soil quality; and duck nesting, upland bird, pollinator and other permanent wildlife habitats. Total acreage for these practices is detailed in Figure 5, below.

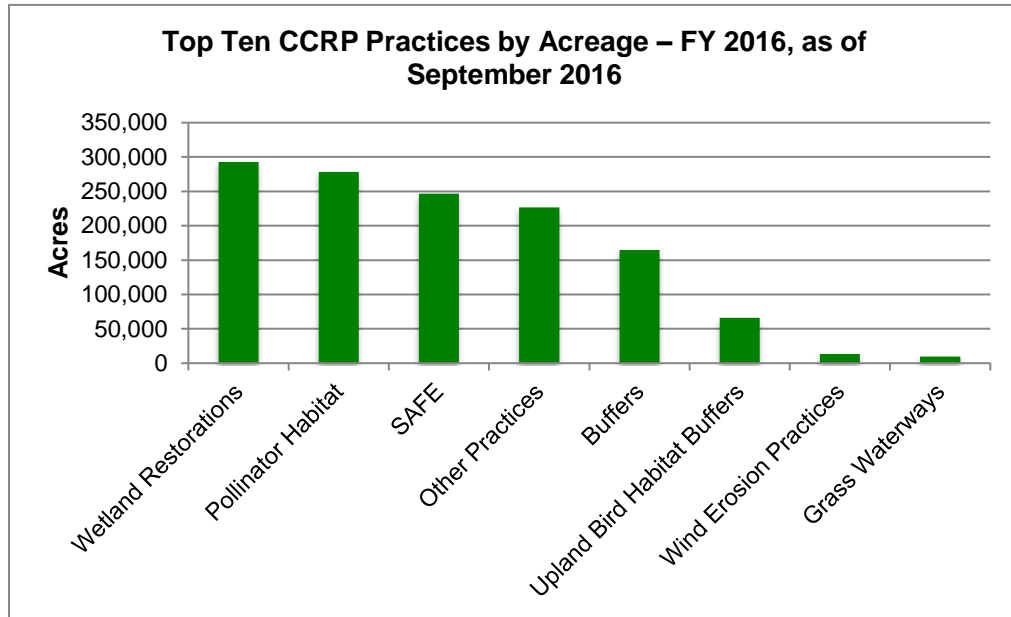
Figure 5.



The SAFE initiative, which targets particularly sensitive wildlife species, is extremely popular and makes up the largest portion of CCRP acres. Additional details on the SAFE initiative are provided in the following section. Filter strips, which rank second on the list of most-used conservation practices, are areas of non-cropped vegetative cover (such as grass) between a farm field and a waterway that are used to slow water runoff from a field. Farmers use filter strips to intercept sediment, nutrients, and other pollutants before they reach waterways. Practices like introducing filter strips have made CCRP very successful at limiting erosion and protecting water quality in a way that allows farmers to keep most of their land in production.

Much like the 2015 enrollment, the most used CCRP conservation practices in 2016, as highlighted in Figure 6 below, were wetland restoration practices, establishment of pollinator habitat, SAFE practices, and buffer practices. This demonstrates the program’s success at meeting a multitude of diverse needs.

Figure 6.



TRENDS IN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PRACTICES:

The SAFE initiative – which covers a range of conservation efforts with the ultimate goal of improving conditions for threatened, endangered, and generally sensitive wildlife species – remained the single most popular CCRP initiative in FY 2016.

SAFE has a cumulative enrollment cap of 1.75 million acres, though each state also receives its own enrollment cap, known as an “allocation.” Between September 2015 and September 2016, the total SAFE enrollment increased from 1.1 million acres to roughly 1.5 million acres.

Table 1 lists those states with the largest number of acres enrolled in CCRP through SAFE in 2016.

Table 1. States with largest number of acres enrolled through SAFE in FY 2016

State	Acres
Kansas	48,144
Iowa	38,255
Texas	34,047
Washington	15,410
South Dakota	14,899

Looking next at cumulative acreage for SAFE, we see many of the same states topping the list for enrollment (See: Table 2). In Iowa, Kansas, the Dakotas and Texas, 94 percent of all allocated acres have been used, highlighting strong demand by farmers and ranchers as well as proactive outreach by state FSA offices.

Table 2. Top Obligated Acres versus Enrolled Acres under SAFE – Cumulative

State	Allocated Acres	Enrolled Acres
Iowa	184,550	181,574
Kansas	164,000	146,110
South Dakota	137,500	136,997
North Dakota	133,571	133,167
Texas	152,500	130,252

As noted, the SAFE initiative includes a host of conservation practices that all go towards enhancing wildlife habitat and safety. This includes buffer practices (CP38A), wetlands preservation (CP38B), tree (CP38C) and longleaf pine (CP38D) conservation efforts, and grass conservation (CP38E). Cumulatively, 98 percent of SAFE contracts (1.41 million acres) utilize grass-based conservation. Grassland enhancement and preservation efforts generate widespread benefits for priority wildlife species, and also in terms of water filtration, flood mitigation, soil health, and carbon sequestration. Grasslands are also critically important for livestock farmers and ranchers. Buffers, wetlands, trees and longleaf pine made up the remaining SAFE-designated acres (more than 35,000 acres).

In recognition of the importance of grasslands, NSAC worked with Congress to create a new grasslands enrollment initiative within CRP to help grass-based livestock operations conserve and enhance their land. The initiative was created in the 2014 Farm Bill but did not see its first enrollment period until FY 2016 when FSA enrolled 101,000 acres. Following this inaugural enrollment, FSA established two additional “batching” periods in late 2016. FSA enrolled nearly 505,000 acres during the second batching period. Within these first two batching periods, 97 percent (first grasslands enrollment period) and 70 percent (second grasslands enrollment period) of CRP grassland acres went to beginning farmers and ranchers. In November of 2016, FSA opened up the third grasslands enrollment period, during which FSA accepted offers for over 300,000 acres. Small, grass-based dairy operations with 100 or fewer head of dairy cows accounted for roughly 200,000 of these acres.

TRENDS IN THE CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM:

Farmers and ranchers whose operations are located within a [CREP project area](#) can enter into a contract at any point as part of the continuous CRP sign-up. Under a CREP agreement states work with USDA and producers to address locally targeted conservation concerns.

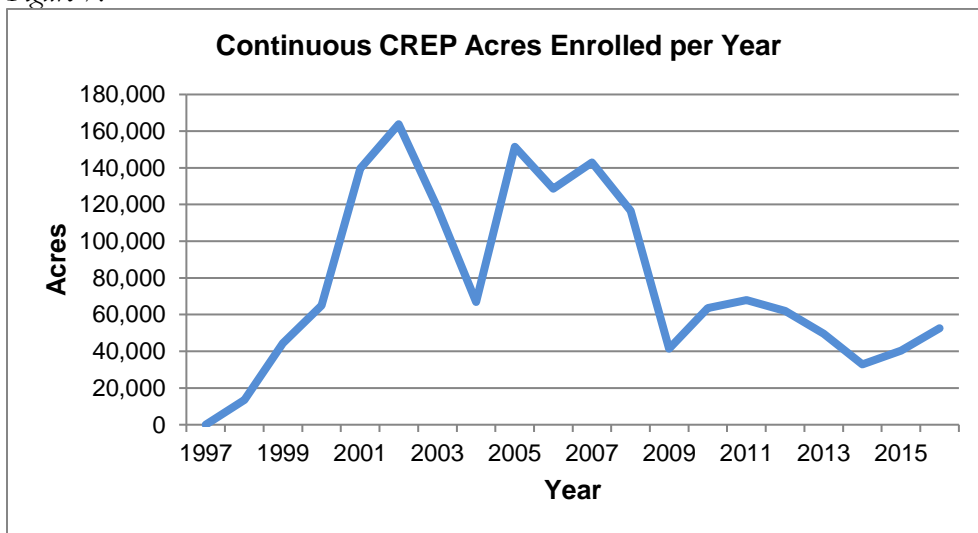
States with the largest number of acres enrolled in CRP through CREP are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Top States Enrolled in CREP by Acres Planted as of September 2016 – Cumulative

State	Acres	Contracts
Pennsylvania	146,836	9,067
Ohio	118,890	15,001
Kentucky	97,952	3,064
South Dakota	79,694	1,001
Illinois	104,146	5,914

As noted in Figure 2, CREP makes up only a small portion of continuous enrollment CRP contracts. In fact, over time, CREP sign-ups have significantly declined.

Figure 7.



CREP grew during CRP’s early years, peaking in 2002 with 163,784 acres enrolled. The number of acres has fluctuated greatly since then, eventually falling to 32,829 acres in 2014. In FY 2016, there were 52,503 acres enrolled through CREP, a 12,000-acre increase from FY 2015.

EXPIRATIONS AND EXITS IN FY 2016:

While continuous enrollment is at an all-time high and FSA is succeeding in engaging farmers in these conservation practices, land continues to expire from the program at a steady rate. This does not point to disinterest in the program, but rather to the fact that a new class of 10- to 15-year contracts expire from the program each year.

In FY 2016, roughly 1.7 million acres expired from CRP; 500,000 of these acres expired from the continuous sign-up and roughly 1.2 million acres expired from the general sign-up.

If a farmer or landowner’s contract has expired from CRP they have the option to re-enroll through a general sign-up, if one is offered. However, when crop prices are good, farmers often choose to return the bulk of their land to production instead of re-enrolling in the program. Given this possibility, NSAC has worked closely with FSA to encourage producers to re-enroll critical acres (e.g. riparian areas and prime wildlife habitat) through the

continuous sign-up. Going into FY 2017 and FY 2018, it is imperative that FSA continues to help farmers re-enroll sensitive acres through CCRP.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES:

For more background information on CRP and its various components, including eligibility criteria, details on the ranking process, and how to apply, visit our [Grassroots Guide to Federal Farm and Food Programs](#). CRP data throughout the years can be found on [FSA's website](#), where [monthly summaries](#) are available beginning with 2012. This report primarily utilizes [September 2016 data](#) in order to capture FY 2016 data.

NSAC Blogs, Comments, and Releases on CCRP:

Release: <http://bit.ly/2kKphxu>

2015 Release: <http://bit.ly/2ky0KdW>

Comment: <http://bit.ly/2IPNgML>

2015 CCRP Analysis: <http://bit.ly/2kKq5SO>