Converting to Pasture or Hay—Evaluating Current Vegetation

How good is your CRP land after 10 or more years of non-use? Some CRP fields were established hurriedly with minimal cost and effort. Some were sown with second or third choice seed mixtures due to seed shortages in the early years of the CRP period. Renewal of contracts required legume or warm-season species establishment on some sites. As a result, there is a wide range of stand condition. Some CRP fields have thin grass sods, undesired grass species, or weeds and brush present, while some have developed into dense, weed-free stands of the species that were planted.

Don’t make a hasty decision and destroy your current CRP vegetation until you have seriously evaluated what you now have. In some cases it will be adequate, as is, to begin grazing or harvesting for hay or may need only minor improvements or management steps to upgrade it to an acceptable condition. In some situations however, major changes or renovation will be necessary before the site can be used successfully in a forage/livestock enterprise. Use table 1 to help you evaluate the adequacy of vegetation on your CRP site. It offers alternatives if improvements are needed.

Table 1 shows some forage management practices that can improve the productivity or quality of the existing types of forage (remove weeds or include legumes). Various seeding and renovation methods allow you to add more desirable grasses and legumes to what you already have. Examples follow.

Table 1. Checklist for Evaluating and Improving Vegetation on CRP Land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVALUATING VEGETATION</th>
<th>IMPROVING VEGETATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desirable legumes</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeds and brush</td>
<td>P&amp;K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirable grasses</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Existing grass species are acceptable.

Existing grass species are undesirable.

* Legume
+ Frost seeding and interseeding of legumes frequently are not successful when grass sod is dense, particularly when nitrogen is being used to further stimulate grass growth.

o optional practice
Examples

- Rather than a broadcast herbicide treatment that might harm legumes, use clipping and “spot treating” with herbicide for weed or brush control where desirable legumes exist.

- Use phosphorus and potassium with no or only low rates of nitrogen on grass/legume stands to keep the grasses less competitive and to favor the maintenance of the legumes.

- Use moderate to high rates of nitrogen on all-grass stands to stimulate grass production and improve vigor and stand density.

- Where grass stands are thin and you wish to include more grass or legumes, use interseeding (no-till, sod seeding) or “frost seeding” to introduce the legume component without destroying the existing grass.

- Where grass that is present is not necessarily the desired grass, complete renovation either with tillage or by no-till means may be the best and quickest way to return to a desired forage production condition.

For More Information

To learn more about management and decisions regarding land being removed from CRP, see the following:

CRP-1 Life After CRP—Decisions, Decisions!
CRP-2 Lease Alternatives for CRP Land
CRP-3 Tillage Options After CRP
CRP-5 Applying Fertilizer and Lime to CRP Land
CRP-6 Resource Inventory Guide
CRP-9 Evaluating Resources and Setting Goals
CRP-11 Converting CRP Land to Pasture — Managing Weeds and Fertility
CRP-12 Converting to Pasture or Hay — Repairing, Replanting CRP Land
CRP-13 Converting to Pasture or Hay Forage Seeding Mixtures
CRP-15 Insect Management for Corn and Soybeans
CRP-17 Strip Intercropping: A CRP Conversion Option
CRP-18 Planting Corn or Soybeans into CRP Sod Ground
CRP-21 Interseeding Small-Seeded Forages into Sod with Conventional Corn/ Soybean Planters
PM-1713 Pasture Management Guide