Conervation buffers are a simple way to help you stay profitable and protect your most valuable asset – your land. Buffers are also a great way to demonstrate your commitment to conservation.

**WHAT IS A BUFFER?**

Conservation buffers are best described as strips or other areas of land in permanent vegetative that help control pollution and manage other environmental concerns. Filter strips, riparian buffers (predominantly trees and shrubs) to water courses, field borders, grassed waterways, field windbreaks, shelterbelts, and even grass strips are all examples of conservation buffers.

Buffers can be especially helpful to you in maintaining a productive, profitable, and responsible farming or ranching operation. Today, America’s farms and ranches do more than produce crops and livestock. They play an important role in maintaining the environmental quality enjoyed by all citizens. Conservation buffers can help you protect soil, air, and water quality and improve fish and wildlife habitat, while you demonstrate your commitment to land stewardship.

**WHERE ARE BUFFERS NEEDED?**

You can use conservation buffers along streams and around lakes or wetlands. They can also be installed within fields or at field edges. Buffers are most effective when they are combined with other practices, such as conservation tillage, nutrient management, and integrated pest management. Together, these practices can provide you with an effective, profitable conservation program.

**WHY DO BUFFERS WORK ECONOMICALLY?**

Conservation buffers work economically because they are generally less expensive to install than practices that require extensive engineering and costly construction methods. Buffers also tend to be more economical to install than practices that require a significant amount of time and labor. Buffers can be especially helpful to you in maintaining a profitable, productive, and responsible farming or ranching operation. Today, America’s farms and ranches do more than produce crops and livestock. They play an important role in maintaining the environmental quality enjoyed by all citizens. Conservation buffers can help you protect soil, air, and water quality and improve fish and wildlife habitat, while you demonstrate your commitment to land stewardship.

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BUFFERS PROTECT YOUR LAND AND VISUALLY DEMONSTRATE YOUR COMMITMENT TO CONSERVATION.

CONTINUOUS CRP SIGN-UP

The continuous CRP sign-up makes it easy for you to install conservation buffers on your farmlands or rangelands. The program allows you to enroll your eligible land in the CRP at any time without having to submit a competitive offer. If you have land covered by an existing CRP contract, you don’t have to make an “all-or-nothing” choice about bringing the land out of CRP. You can decide whether you want to establish buffers on land determined suitable and enrolled into the program. The remaining land can be kept in crop production.

The staff at your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district office can help you identify the buffer practices available under the continuous CRP sign-up that are suitable for your land. There are several lands available to you through your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Your offer will be accepted automatically if it meets certain eligibility requirements.

To be eligible, you must have owned the land for a year. Cropsplained is if it was planted or considered planted on an agricultural commodity in two of the last five crop years and is physically and legally capable of being cropped. Your land does not have to be highly suitable to qualify for the program.

Marginal pasture land is land that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer. Other buffer practices are eligible. Marginal pasture land includes any land along permanent or seasonal streams and around other permanent streamside ecosystems, including wetlands, that are previously used to grow crops.

That’s it! Your local USDA Service Center staff will know what specific subsidies and financial assistance is available to help you install and maintain conservation buffers, including assistance from state and local programs.

ELIGIBLE BUFFER PRACTICES

Not all buffer practices are eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up. Those that are include:

- Riparian Buffers
- Filter Strips
- Grassed Waterways
- Waterfowl Habitat
- Field Windbreaks
- Living Fence Paddocks
- Cover Crops

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES FOR BUFFERS

New and higher financial incentives under the continuous CRP sign-up make conservation buffers economically attractive in most areas of the country. There is the new sign-up incentive payment of $100 to $150 per acre for selected practices and the 40 percent incentive payment for practice installation, along with adjusted rental rates for marginal pasture land and higher annual maintenance payments per acre for certain practices. While buffers are now possible as well. There also exist a 20 percent incentive, which is added to your annual CRP rental rate for land within designated windbreak, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffer. A 10 percent incentive is added to your annual CRP rental rate for land within designated windbreak, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffer. These incentives are designed to encourage farmers and ranchers to establish and maintain conservation buffers, but they do not replace the cost of establishing a permanent cover on buffers.

The activities eligible for cost-sharing are site preparation, temporary cover until permanent cover is established, grading or shaping, grass seed, trees or shrubs, plastic mesh, supplemental irrigation, fencing, livestock crossings, and development of supplemental water supplies outside a riparian buffer.

A contract under the continuous CRP sign-up is 10 to 15 years in length, depending on the buffer type and your preference. You receive your annual rental payment on October 1 each year. The sign-up incentive payment, practice incentive payment, and cost-share payments are made once your contract is approved or when you have completed installation of the approved buffers.

OTHER PROGRAMS CAN HELP

If the continuous CRP sign-up does not work for you, there are other USDA programs that can help you install conservation buffers. They include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – This program provides technical, financial, and educational assistance to producers who want to improve and improve fish and wildlife habitat on private land. It provides both technical assistance and cost-sharing for practice installation.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – The wetlands reserve program helps landowners protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on private property. It provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore wetlands in exchange for enrolling marginal agricultural land.

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There are also state and local governments and private organizations that provide financial assistance for buffer installations, particularly buffer that control soil erosion, improve water quality, and enhance fish and wildlife habitat.

Your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office can provide many services and financial assistance programs available in your area. Local Extension Service offices and others can help you determine the economics of a conservation buffer system in your operation. And your state forester’s office, county foresters, and others can offer advice on what trees and shrubs are appropriate for use in buffers in your area.

You can also speak with agricultural consultants and representatives of agricultural firms to find out more about conservation buffers and their use on your farm or ranch.