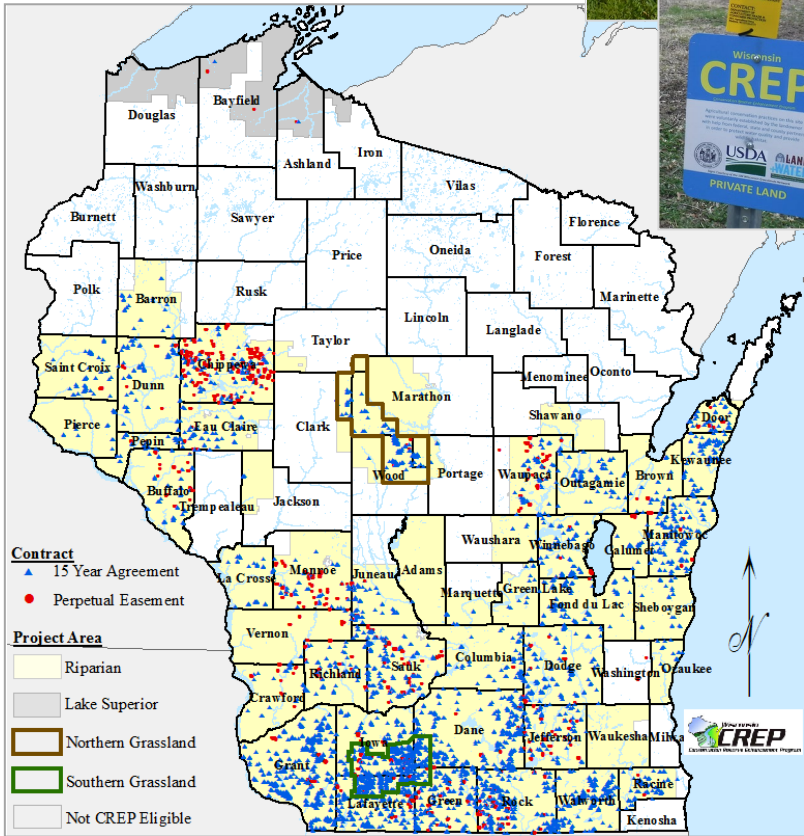


WISCONSIN Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program 2022 DATCP Annual Report



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Wisconsin Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) works with landowners to install long term agricultural conservation practices aimed at improving water quality and creating wildlife and pollinator habitat on existing production land. These practices reduce sediment and nutrient runoff from agricultural lands to waterbodies on the state's impaired waters (303d list). Wisconsin's CREP was established in 2001 and is a partnership between landowners and Federal, State and County governments.



Contract Options

- 15 Year Agreement
- Perpetual Easement

Project Areas:

- Riparian
- Southern grassland
- Northern grassland
- Lake Superior

Eligible Land (acres)

Estimated Eligible - 362,000

Approved - 100,000

- Riparian - 80,000
- Grassland - 15,000
- Lake Superior - 5,000

ENROLLMENT

State CREP Enrollment

- Acres Reenrolled: 468
- Acres New: 1,029
- Acres Total FFY: 1,497
- Acres Total: 41,224*
- Acres Easement: 6,884
- Contracts FFY: 160
- Contracts Total: 3,592
- Agreements Total: 3,063
- Easements Total: 529

FSA CREP Enrollment

- Acres Reenrolled: 641
- Acres New: 874
- Acres Total FFY: 1,515
- Acres Total: 35,938*

*Differences between agencies due to enrollment timing and State easements.

CREP sign-up 57 was authorized by the USDA- Farm Service Agency (FSA) for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2022 on October 1, 2021 and accepted new and reenrolled contracts until September 30, 2022.

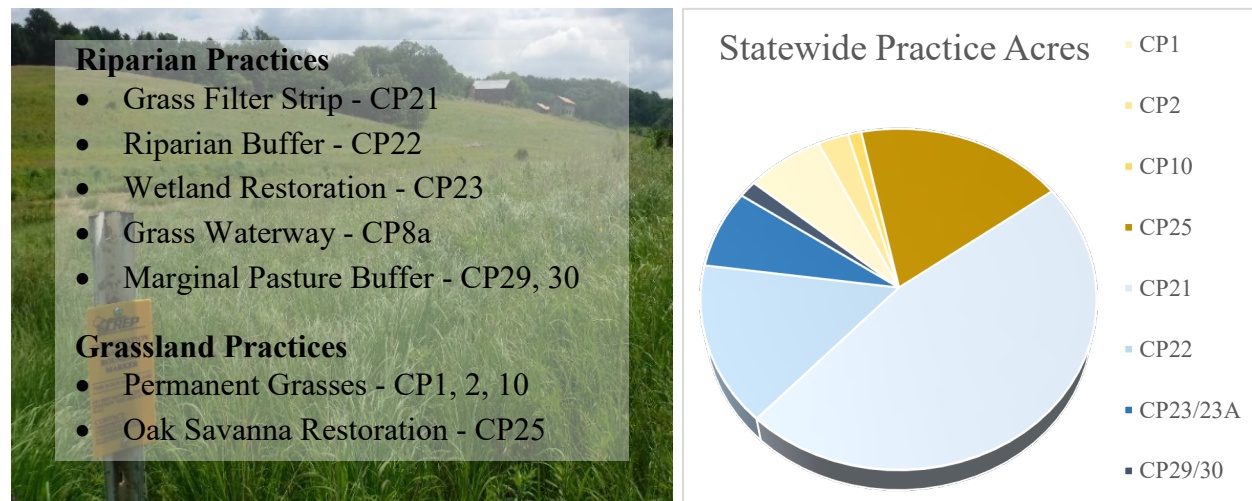
Wisconsin had 3,592 active CREP contracts on 41,224 acres as of October 1, 2022. During the 2022 federal fiscal year, the state processed 160 CREP contracts totaling 1,497 acres, including 159 15-year agreements and 1 easement across the CREP project areas. Of these, 99 were new CREP contracts on 1,029 acres.

In 2022, 182 15-year CREP agreements with 1,739 acres expired, along with voluntary termination and buyout of 22 contracts with 121 acres. As a result, the state saw a slight reduction of acres enrolled overall as new and reenrolled acres were less than acres under contracts that expired or terminated with the state. However, 194 acres of conservation practices remained on 25 CREP easements that had the federal CRP1 expire in 2022.

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

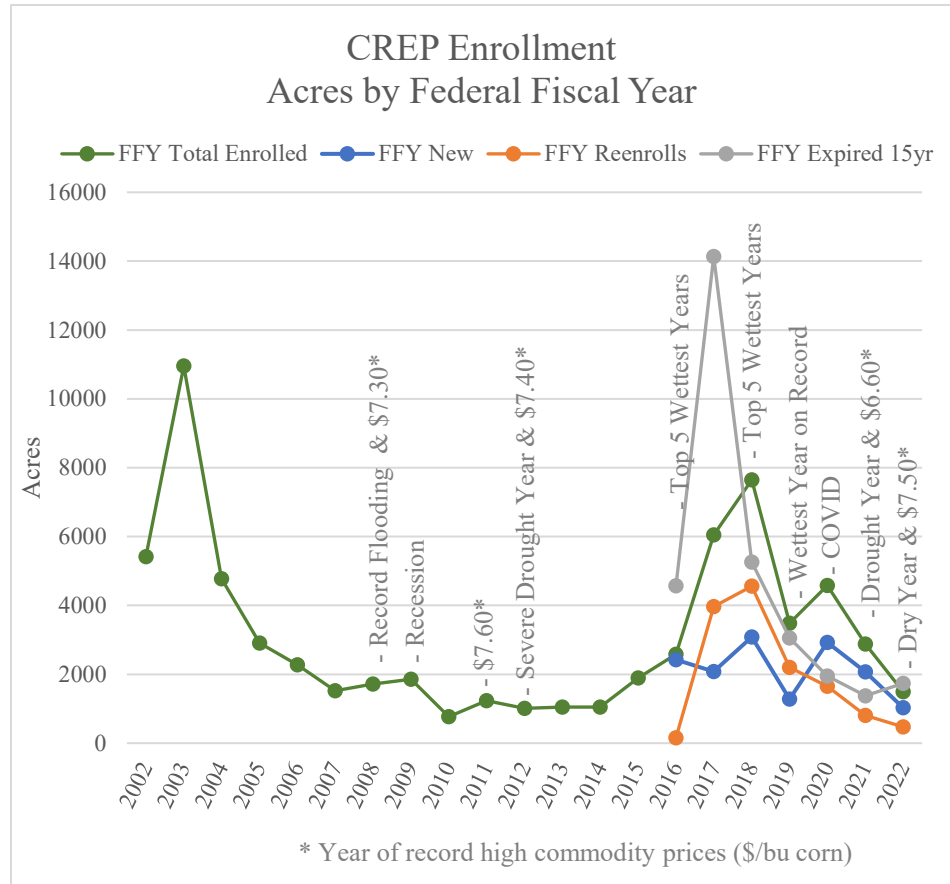
Riparian practices focusing on water quality comprise 71% of the CREP conservation cover installed through Wisconsin CREP. Filter strips (CP21) are the majority of the riparian practices.

Over 11,000 acres of grassland conservation practices are established in the CREP grassland project areas. The southern grassland project area reached its maximum allowable grassland practice acres (10,000 acres) in 2016 and has remained at its cap since. Rare and declining habitat: prairie and oak savanna restoration practice (CP25) makes up the majority of the acres in this project area.

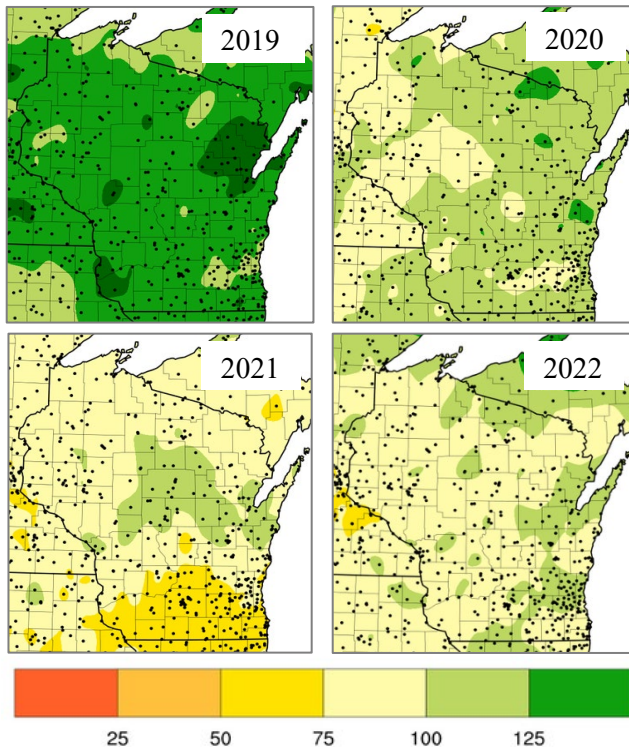


TRENDS

Although there is ongoing landowner interest to enroll land in the CREP program, new enrollment activity is back to the level it maintained for a decade prior to reenrollment initiating in 2016. A 60-70% reenrollment rate has also continued since that year, which maintains conservation practices on the ground but adds to the total number of contracts and acres processed each year.



Accumulated Precipitation: % of Normals



Source: *Midwestern Regional Climate Center*

Weather and commodity price changes appear to influence enrollment interest as well as overall acres in the program from year to year. In drought years or when commodity prices are higher CREP sees lower enrollment rates and higher buyout requests. Wet growing seasons with flooding and when commodity prices are normal or low tend to highlight areas on the landscape that would benefit landowners if they were enrolled in CREP.

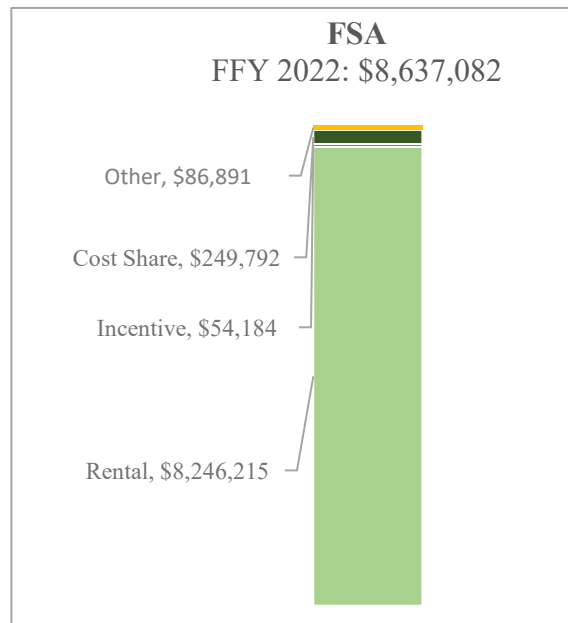
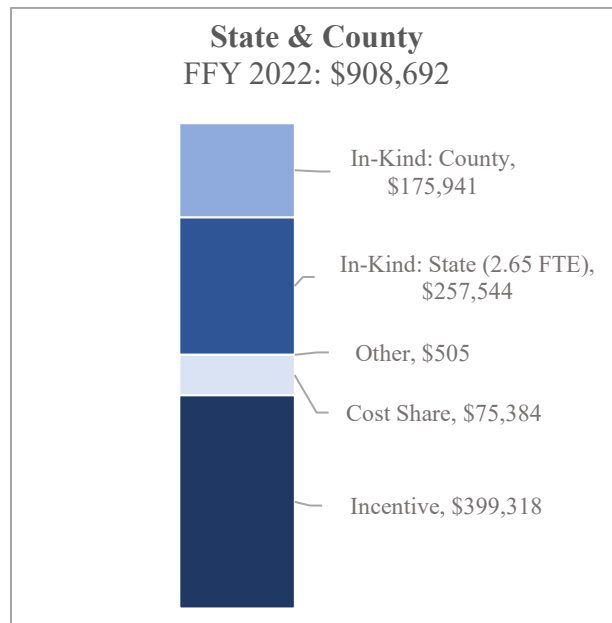
During years of severe drought, such as in 2012 and 2021, CREP acres often dry up temporarily. These areas have been opened for haying or grazing under CRP emergency provisions in order to help provide forage.

PAYMENTS AND COSTS

Wisconsin authorized \$28 million in funding for CREP. As of October 1, 2022 the state has made 12,900 CREP incentive and cost share payments to 7,000 landowners on about 74,000 acres totaling \$21.3 million. In addition, counties reported they spent \$4.3 million in non-federal staff and other costs to administer CREP. Since inception, state and local costs for CREP total \$25.6 million. If current enrollment trends along with steady increases in rental rates continue, the WI –Dept. of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) estimates there are sufficient funds for a few years.

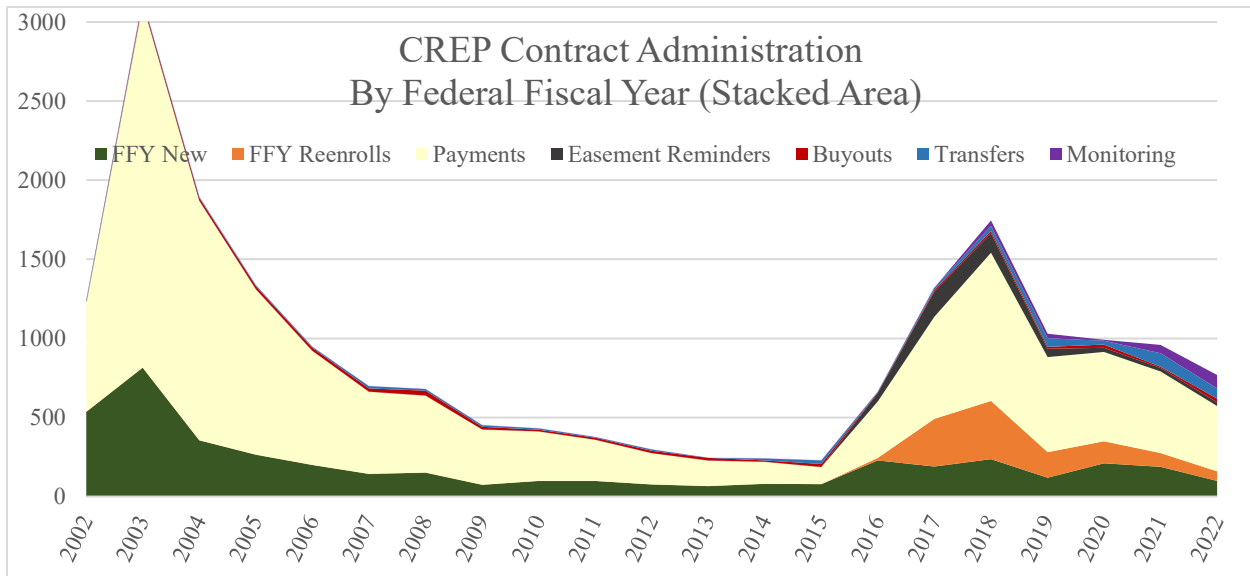
State Payments 2001 - Oct 1 2022	
Payment Type	Total
Easement Incentive	\$6,763,905
15-yr Agr Incentive	\$12,684,945
Total Incentive	\$19,448,850
Total Cost Share	\$2,592,627
Total Materials	\$82,559
Buyouts Received	-\$726,131
TOTAL	\$21,397,905

The USDA - FSA provides direct annual rental, incentive and cost share payments to landowners. WI CREP landowners receive signing incentive and practice incentive payments at contract initiation followed by annual rental payments for 15 years. FSA cost-shares 50% of installing conservation practices. FFY 2022 spending by agency is shown in the graphs below. State and county funds combined leverage federal funds paid directly to landowners by approximately 7:1 and estimated at over \$200 million over the life of existing CREP contracts.



ADMINISTRATION AND CONTRACT MANAGEMENT

Contracts for CREP continue to be submitted by landowners through the county land conservation offices and processed by DATCP. New contract enrollment continues, and reenrolls have added to the level of contract work load since 2016. State practice reimbursement payment requests remain high but lag a year or more behind enrollment since installation and maintenance activities typically occur years after initial enrollment. As the CREP program has matured, additional resources have needed to be directed toward maintaining existing contracts. For 15 year agreements this includes reenrolls, landowner transfers, buyouts and tracking federal partner



adjustments. More long term and time consuming tasks including monitoring, landowner transfers, violation resolution, enforcement and conservation plan amendments are becoming more common as perpetual easements age. The chart above breaks down the annual number of contracts by administrative task.

Additionally, FSA, State and County CREP partners worked together to track CREP landowners who requested to voluntarily terminate their contract a year early in 2022. This policy was implemented to help mitigate global food supply challenges caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Terminations were allowed following the primary nesting season for fiscal year 2022. Landowners approved for this one-time, voluntary termination did not have to repay rental payments. State records indicate about 100 acres of CREP practices had their contracts terminated early in this effort.

ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS

The state expects installing CREP conservation practices will result in annual environmental benefits to water quality and wildlife habitat. The table below lists the 2022 estimates of the amount of stream or shoreline adequately buffered, the annual reduction in phosphorus, nitrogen and sediment runoff, and the grassland habitat established.



	Program Goal	Annual Benefit 10/1/2022
Shoreline Buffered (Miles)	3,700	678
Phosphorus (Pounds)	610,000	77,887
Nitrogen (Pounds)	305,000	41,921
Sediment (Tons)	335,000	38,521
Grassland Habitat (Acres)	15,000	11,000

TRAINING AND OUTREACH

The state offered several half day CREP trainings in 2022, both virtual and in-person, for all agency staff at local offices working on CREP. These provide an overview of program requirements, agreement processing and logistics, partner relationships and discussion of local CREP issues. Trainings are vital to ensuring staff at local offices have sufficient knowledge of the program to identify eligible sites, discuss benefits with landowners and assist landowners with enrollment. The two virtual CREP trainings offered were well attended from staff from the partner agency offices across the state. Virtual trainings have been an effective tool for reaching a wide audience and will continue to be used as a training option in the future. The first in person CREP training since the COVID pandemic was also offered in 2022. This training was hosted by the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department and included both classroom and in field sessions focused on the CREP Northern Grasslands Project Area region. It was great once again to have an in person training with professional staff from County, FSA and NRCS offices in that region.



The state was part of the New Conservation Employee Trainings held in 2022 by the Wisconsin Land & Water Association. These roundtable discussions introduced new county and partner staff to CREP and gave them an opportunity to ask questions one-on-one.

In addition, several new state CREP staff were hired by DATCP in 2022 to replace vacated positions. These included a contract specialist, intern, legal counsel and management. Much time was spent with these staff introducing CREP and training on their specific roles.

EASEMENT MANAGEMENT

Over 500 CREP perpetual easements have been established around Wisconsin. The easements have a coinciding FSA CRP contract for the first 15 years, after which the state and counties hold responsibility for administering the easement. In September 2022 an additional 24 CREP easements had their CRP contract expire. Currently 448 easements in 35 counties covering 5,758 acres are administered by DATCP and the county.

In order to maintain water quality protections paid for by the taxpayers to establish the conservation easements, DATCP and county conservation department staff work jointly with landowners to ensure the practices on the easement sites remain in compliance. This begins by DATCP sending a letter, easement map and easement guidance document out to easement landowners when the FSA contract expires to remind them of the easement and required provisions.

Monitoring

The goal of monitoring is to work with landowners to maintain compliance with the conservation plan on the 448 easements under DATCP and county administration. Monitoring visits aim to assess easement boundaries, get a benchmark on the conservation cover condition and address areas that need maintenance and identify potential violations. The effort focuses on identifying potential compliance issues and communicating those issues to the landowner along with management options.



Status Category	2022 - Monitoring Visits			Total - Monitoring Visits		
	DATCP	County	Total	DATCP	County	Total
In Compliance	19	6	25	51	32	83
Maintenance Needed	27	2	29	45	8	53
Violation	17	4	21	30	16	46
Total:	63	12	75	126	56	182

The state developed official CREP easement monitoring protocols in 2018 with a 5 year revisit schedule along with standardized forms in order to provide consistency in monitoring activities and reported results across counties. This schedule is frequent enough to address concerns that arise before they are unmanageable, feasible for State and LCD staff resources and mimics FSA practices of scheduled maintenance checks. Each site reviewed is given one of the following status categories: In Compliance, In Compliance – Maintenance Needed or Violation. Following monitoring, letters are sent to landowners with the easement status and those with a violation or needing maintenance are requested to follow up with state or county representatives. The table above shows the current progress and results of monitoring both by DATCP and County staff.



Monitoring is performed by both state and county conservation staff. The majority of the sites reviewed have been either by DATCP or with DATCP assistance to counties. So far, only about 40% of the required monitoring has been completed. This is the second year an intern was hired through the State of Wisconsin Student Diversity Internship Program to aid with monitoring CREP perpetual easements with expired CRP1s. The intern, Payton Lolwing, along with state CREP staff worked with LCD staff to perform both in-office and field assessments of CREP easements across Wisconsin.

In 2022, there were 75 CREP perpetual easement sites monitored in 15 counties. Monitoring work was performed by both state and county conservation staff. Of the sites visited, the DATCP intern, with state and county staff assistance, completed monitoring for 58 of the 75 perpetual easements from June through August. This effort required 30 full field days and 5,193 miles of travel, with the average field day involving 162 miles of travel.

This year 72 percent of easements were found in compliance. However, about a half of those had a concern that will require maintenance activity or the issue could evolve into a violation. These concerns include slight encroachment along edges by neighboring cropland, presence of patches of woody invasive species or low stocking of desirable tree and shrub species. The rate of sites in compliance is consistent with prior years of monitoring findings.

Violations

State and county CREP staff work together with landowners to find resolution within the allowable uses defined by the easement provisions. Depending on the severity of the violation, a compliance agreement may be developed between the landowner and DATCP as a guide to resolving the violation. Resolving easement violations has been time intensive.



Violations commonly found were: non-compliant Land Use, significant encroachment, building and/or driveway and noxious species. The majority of violations were found to have non-compliant land uses within them. This includes activities such as grazing, complete conversion to row crops, construction of buildings and storage of debris or equipment. Significant encroachment was the next most common issue found to impact the integrity of the easements.



There are currently 46 easements with active violations that have not yet begun a resolution. To date, about a dozen more have been resolved and brought back into compliance.

Amendments

Once under DATCP and county administration, perpetual CREP easements allow landowners to request amendments to the conservation practice. Amendments can allow limited agricultural use such as annual haying, grazing or timber harvest as well as change the conservation practice type but must be approved by the county land conservation committee and DATCP.

Conservation plan amendments provide an opportunity to revisit guidelines of the conservation practice to ensure they remain suitable for the site. Amendments on easements cover the next 15 years and mimic FSA requirements to develop an updated conservation plan when reenrolling 15 year agreements. DATCP offers 50% cost sharing for management practices included as part of an approved amended conservation plan as an incentive to landowners for updating their plan.

In 2022, DATCP fielded several requests to amend conservation plans. One request approved in Richland County changed the conservation practice from forest riparian buffer (CP22) to marginal pastureland wildlife habitat buffer (CP29) as well as allowing for annual haying to help control encroaching brush. The amendment to convert the conservation practice prescribed a cover that was more suited for the site and helped the landowner address a violation on the easement. Periodically, DATCP receives requests that are inconsistent with the provisions of the easement. A request in Rock County to install a water and sediment control basin (WASCOB) plus associated pipes within an established CREP wetland restoration (CP23) was reviewed and not approved this year. DATCP staff and engineers reviewed the design plan provided by the landowner and found the proposed WASCOB was not consistent with provisions of the easement. Local NRCS and LCD staff, however, are working with the landowner to adjust the proposal based on DATCP comments and plan to resubmit for approval in the future.

Amendment Success Story – Managed Grazing Sauk County

A landowner with a CREP easement who is a genetic breeder of Scottish Highland had a conservation plan amendment approved in 2019 that allowed managed grazing within the easement. The amendment specified the conservation cover must continue as a grass filter strip (CP21), but added a plan for grazing of up to 18 head of cattle with five grazing rotations per paddock during the growing season as a method to help maintain the filter grass strip.



In July 2022, CREP representatives met with the landowner on site. The boundaries and conservation cover remained in place and the perennial grass was well established with a mix of cool and warm season grasses and forbs that meet guideline for a grass filter strip. Only small patches of invasive woody species were present along the edge of the easement areas and some thistle was scattered sporadically throughout.

There were eight head of cattle, mainly Scottish Highland, actively grazing a one-acre paddock at the time of the site visit. Also recent grazing activity in other parts of the easement was apparent. Areas with grazing activity looked to be rotationally grazed using smaller paddocks which gave the conservation cover a period to rest and reestablish. In those areas woody invasive plants had been browsed by the cattle as well. Additionally, both permanent and temporary fencing were located as planned and remained in good condition along with the watering system.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT - STATE/FEDERAL AGREEMENT UPDATES

Lake Superior Project Area Considerations

The objective of CREP in the Lake Superior Project Area is to reduce the peak channel flow in streams within critical areas of the Lake Superior Basin. CREP practices aim to reduce the hydrologic runoff curve number in agricultural fields. According to the agreement, CREP riparian buffers will reduce the rate of runoff due to roughness of the vegetation and the reduction in raindrop energy. Planting trees on slumping banks will stabilize the bank and reduce sediment loss to the stream along with preventing small channels from becoming further incised.

This project area has the same conservation practice options as the riparian project area. Required widths of buffer practices, however, are higher in order to target reduction in runoff flow rate. Incentive and annual rental payments are also higher. Two of the four counties in the project area had landowners enroll in the program for a total of five contracts covering 132 acres with riparian forest buffers (CP22). Three of the contracts are perpetual easements on 43.1 acres.

Local partners are key to success in establishing CREP, however, partners in this region have been reluctant to promote CREP. Early attempts resulted in some initial CREP sign up and conservation practices installed at that time are now successfully established. While research indicates that wider buffers are necessary to be effective at slowing flow rate, the feeling expressed in recent years by local partners is that few landowners are willing to place the large area required into conservation practices. This has resulted in a sentiment by local partners that the effort to administer CREP does not result in much landowner buy in. The state made attempts to work with local offices and explain how the program relates to the overall conservation goals of that region. However, there may be a need to revisit guidelines of the project area.

CREP Expansion and Guideline Adjustment Request

Multiple counties expressed a desire to expand the CREP riparian project area in order to coincide with new impaired waters. Land conservation committees in each of the following counties have submitted request letters to the state indicating a desire to expand CREP: Chippewa, Clark, Eau Claire, Jackson, Langlade, Monroe, Rusk, Taylor and Trempealeau.

Conservation practice guideline changes recommended by county staff include: wider buffer width (300 ft) for CP21/22, increased acreage cap and expanded southern grassland project area, increased state easement incentive payment and allow CP23 without associated CP21 or CP22.