

**The Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI)  
Final Report Executive Summary**

**March 31, 2015**

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This material is based upon work supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under number 68-3A75-11-268. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

# **CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM READINESS INITIATIVE (CRPRI)**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Program Background**

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is an easement program that provides wildlife habitat and water quality benefits in exchange for a financial payment to landowners who enroll cropland. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is responsible for development of the CRP Conservation Plan, while the Farm Services Agency (FSA) is responsible for the landowner payment portion of the program.

High enrollment in the early 2000s meant that NRCS was facing a significant CRP workload in 2012 and 2013 for landowners who wished to re-enroll CRP acres. In addition, the existing workload from mid-contract management and initial enrollments was seen as a challenge for the NRCS workforce, given reductions in staffing both with NRCS and local partner agencies.

To address the workload concerns, the Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative (CRPRI) program was created. CRPRI is a training program funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The purpose of the program is to build a pool of conservation professionals (from conservation agencies at the state level, NGOs, and private sector Technical Service Providers – TSPs) to assist NRCS state and field offices with the CRP workload.

CRPRI was designed and implemented under a contract with the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Conservation Professional Training Program (CPTP). The initial contract timeline spanned late September 2011 to December 31, 2012. Two no-cost extensions were awarded and the CRPRI project was extended to December 31, 2014.

### **CRPRI Approach**

The project was initiated in October of 2011. The project team, led by co-directors Kevin Erb and Rebecca Power of the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Conservation Professional Training Program, developed an implementation strategy designed to ensure stakeholder involvement, deliver high-quality training and integrate evaluation throughout the process to ensure that plans developed by the trained TSPs met or exceeded NRCS expectations.

To meet the nationwide scope of the project, CPTP partnered with four Land Grant Universities to create the project team. Each regional partner (Penn State University - Chesapeake/Northeast, University of Minnesota - Midwest, University of Montana - West, University of Georgia - Southeast) brought experts with CRP/Conservation Planning experience and experts in adult learning methods/education into the curriculum development and delivery teams.

## Training

The CRPRI team developed and delivered a suite of 13 classroom, online, and hybrid training offerings to prepare trainees to become TSPs and assist NRCS with the CRP workload. The training program drew from both an Advisory Team (a group of NGOs such as Pheasants Forever, Society for Range Management and others who were likely future CRP TSPs) and a Steering Team (a group of NRCS staff from the field, area and state offices in high CRP workload states) to create the KSAs (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities). Input from these groups and state NRCS offices determined where training sessions would be offered.

The first training developed was the CRP Core curriculum. This two-day course, built on the NRCS 9 Step Planning Process, covered the basics of writing a CRP plan, assessing resource concerns, completing the necessary CRP documentation and setting up their Level 2 e-Auth. 345 trainees participated in the training, and 322 completed all of the requirements. In 2012, training was delivered in five locations in each region (20 states) An additional two Core Curriculum courses focused on forestry CRP practices were added at the request of organizations with cooperative agreements with NRCS state offices. The Core training was converted to an interactive, online training, and 235 additional TSPs from across the country completed the online version in 2013 and 2014. Trainees in 2012 were provided with the option of an experienced conservation planner as a mentor to review the first plan developed and provide a quality assurance check of the TSP's work.

The team developed a suite of supplemental training offerings to strengthen TSP's ability to do CRP and non-CRP work for NRCS. Each state with a live Core session was offered three online courses and up to two in-person training sessions. Not every state chose two, so additional sessions were offered in high need states. The average trainee completed two supplemental courses.

**Supplemental courses by type and number of TSPs completing course requirements.**

| <b>Classroom /<br/>Field</b>               | <b>Online only</b>   | <b>Hybrid (online and field)</b>   | <b>Webinar /<br/>distance delivery</b>                           |
|--|--|--|--|
| CRP Plant ID-107<br>CRP Start to Finish-66 | Understanding Rusle2-33<br>CRP and Forestry-19<br>Conservation Web Tools-18<br>Understanding WEPS-10 | Mid-Contract Management-103<br>CRP Planning Start to Finish-70<br>NEPA/CPA 52 for CRP-42 | CRP Start to Finish-12<br>In-Field Technology-10<br>Comet Farm-2 |

Of the TSPs trained by CRPRI, 46 completed the TechReg process and became certified CRP Planners. A significant yet undetermined number of trainees are doing CRP work under an existing MOU or Cooperative Agreement with NRCS (typical in the states using Continuous CRP for waterways such as Illinois and Indiana) and chose not to become TechReg certified. In four states (Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, North Dakota), state forestry agency and wildlife agency staff participated in the CRPRI. Because their agency has an MOU or Cooperative Agreement, the majority of partner agency staff chose not to become TechReg certified.

## **TSP Assistance to NRCS**

Based on data provided to CRPRI, two states used CRPRI trained TSPs to assist with CRP workload in 2012-2013 on more than 500 contacts in each state. Another four states reported using CRPRI trained. Four states reported using CRPRI trained TSPs to assist with 300 and 499 CRP Contracts. Eight additional states reported assistance between 1 and 299 contacts.

The six-month post-training follow up survey showed that many trainees had placed certification on hold pending word from the state NRCS office on the availability of work. In the 2012 training six month follow up survey, 57% reported being interested in CRP planning if work was available. On the six-month follow-up survey 2013, online Core trainees were asked if there was a general CRP enrollment in 2014 or 2015, did they intend to be available for CRP planning. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the 67 respondents answered in the affirmative.

## **Workload Analysis**

CRPRI was charged with determining if sufficient capacity existed at the state level to complete the anticipated CRP workload and examine how state NRCS offices account for the time and workload involved in developing CRP plans. Surveys of State Office staff showed that while most states felt they had sufficient capacity to handle the CRP workload, it varied within each state, and states with the lowest workload reported the lowest concern with accomplishing the work. Examining the ways that states are able to accomplish the workload and meet program demands, the analysis' recommendations focus around three areas: 1) Increasing communication and strengthening the partnership between NRCS and FSA at both the national and state levels, 2) A closer examination of financial allocations to states to ensure adequate resources and increase flexibility and 3) Encouraging states to share experiences, methods and resources to improve efficiency and learn from each other's approaches.

## **Recommendations**

The CRPRI project produced a high quality workforce through a combination of sufficient resources to develop a high quality training, flexibility to innovate in online course delivery, and strong support from our NRCS national partner. Specific recommendations to improve similar training efforts in the future focus around 1) Enhancing the training development process, 2) Focusing on moving TSPs from training to full certification, 3) Moving TSPs from certification to action as a planner, and 4) Increased sharing of innovations and strategies between NRCS at the state level.