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ENHANCED COST SHARE AVAILABLE FOR PRAIRIE STRIPS

ENROLL IN CONTINUOUS CRP SIGN-UP.

By [Megan Vollstedt](#)
3/23/2020

In December 2019, continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up kicked off with a goal of reaching 8.6 million acres enrolled by 2023.

mature-prairie-strip

Omar de Kok-Mercado

The 2018 Farm Bill prioritized Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) practices and added a new conservation practice – prairie strips – to the list.

Omar de Kok-Mercado, project coordinator and communications lead of the Iowa State University STRIPS team, says the prairie strips practice is like a Swiss Army knife for a farmer.

“The whole idea behind prairie strips is to make it as easy to farm the cropland as possible, with the strips incorporated,” explains de Kok-Mercado. “Strips are designed on a field-by-field basis, taking into account what kind and size of equipment farmers have so the crop intervals are spaced according to their management.”

A prairie strip is a strip of land seeded with diverse native prairie plants. Prairie strips are oriented linearly within a crop field and range 30’ and 120’ in width. Prairie strips improve water quality, reduce soil loss, increase bird abundance twofold, and increase pollinator habitat threefold. “Our research has demonstrated that just a minimum of 10% of land dedicated to prairie strips can gain those disproportional benefits,” says de Kok-Mercado.

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COST SHARE UNDER CONTINUOUS CRP

One of the major economic advantages of planting prairie strips on cropland is

turning low-yielding acres into profitable ones by reducing inputs otherwise spent on low-yielding or subprofitable acres. Taking advantage of the cost share available to implement prairie strips is a no-brainer.

“There is a different cost-share allocation with continuous sign-up vs. general CRP sign-up,” says de Kok-Mercado. “The maximum annual rental payment in general sign-up is 85% of the National Ag Statistical Survey county average plus 50% cost share for establishment. In continuous sign-up, the max payment is 90%, there is still a 50% cost share for establishment.”

In addition, there is a signing incentive payment (SIP) at 32.5% of your annual rental payment for the first year and a 5% practice incentive payment (PIP) cost share on top of that.

Prairie strips can be established on cropland anywhere in the U.S., but may offer the most benefit in the Corn Belt. The ISU team and partners have worked with 66 collaborators in six different states: Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. Those collaborators currently have 600 acres in prairie strips, protecting about 6,000 acres total. The Sand County Foundation in Wisconsin and the University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center have also done extensive work on the prairie strips practice.

WHY PRAIRIE STRIPS IS THE SWISS ARMY KNIFE

“Prairie strips can target a lot of different resource concerns depending on what the objective of the landowner is, whereas a lot of other conservation practices are one-sided,” says de Kok-Mercado.

The following demonstrates the flexibility:

- 1 Prairie strips must be a minimum of 30’ wide and a maximum of 120’ wide, allowing conservation planners to adapt to a farmer’s field.
- 2 Prairie strips can have variable width. Instead of strips intercepting the fields, they can be planted at water’s exit point in a field. That area of land can be planted as a triangle with variable width, instead of only in a rectangular shape.
- 3 Prairie strips can be partially planted in field borders and are not required to encircle a field, as some practices are.
- 4 They can be planted alongside waterways or in conjunction with waterways either perpendicular or parallel.
- 5 They can be put in a gradient terrace channel.
- 6 Prairie strips can also be planted on end rows. You can turn around on end rows planted with prairie strips and not face repercussions.
- 7 Prairie strips can comprise up to 25% of a field area.

prairie-strips-poster

Omar de Kok-Mercado and Katrina Ruff

Prairie strips practice doesn't differ from any other prairie establishment. There is an upfront investment, which the CRP cost-share eases, and technical assistance from USDA service centers on establishment and maintenance.

As for what to expect when starting out, de Kok-Mercado explains, “In the first year, you may be mowing the strips one to three times in order to out-compete annual weeds. That allows the rooting system of the prairie to establish. Then in the second year, you might only mow once or twice. Really, the only difference between prairie strips and larger areas of prairie is design and placement, rather than management.”

ADDITIONAL CLEAR PRACTICES UNDER CONTINUOUS CRP ENROLLMENT

Cropland Only

- 1 Grass waterway
- 2 Riparian buffers
- 3 Bioreactor on riparian buffers
- 4 Saturated riparian buffer

Marginal Pastureland Only

- 1 Wildlife habitat buffer
- 2 Wetland buffer

Cropland or Marginal Pastureland

- 1 Duck nesting habitat
- 2 Bottomland hardwood
- 3 Wetland restoration, non-floodplain
- 4 Wetland restoration, floodplain
- 5 Saturated filter strips
- 6 Bioreactors
- 7 Filter strips
- 8 Contour grass strips, terraces
- 9 Contour grass strips

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