

# Illinois Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): A Model for Watershed Restoration

Debbie Bruce

Debbie Bruce is with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702; e-mail: dbruce@dnrmail.state.il.us

In: Riley, L. E.; Dumroese, R. K.; Landis, T. D., tech coords. National proceedings: Forest and Conservation Nursery Associations—2003; 2003 June 9–12; Coeur d'Alene, ID; and 2003 July 14–17; Springfield, IL. Proc. RMRS-P-33. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

**Keywords:** wetland restoration, tree planting, native grasses, incentives

## CREP Overview

---

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is an offspring of the Federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CREP combines the CRP with state programs to meet specific state and national environmental objectives. It also provides for voluntary agreements with farmers to convert cropland to native vegetation.

Several differences exist between CREP and the original CRP. CREP is targeted to specific geographic areas. The program is a partnership between the Federal government and the states and other stakeholders; it is “results oriented” and requires annual monitoring. The main difference is that CREP is flexible enough to meet local conditions on the ground.

## CREP National Summary

To date, there are 24 states with approved CREP agreements, and 2 states (Indiana and New Jersey) with proposed agreements (Figure 1). These agreements include 30,422 contracts. A total of 489,248 ac (197,992 ha) have been enrolled; 115,901 ac (46,904 ha) have been planted to trees; another 121,500 ac (49,170 ha) have been restored to wetlands and declining habitats.

## Illinois Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

---

The Illinois CREP is the most successful federal/state/local partnership to ever implement a voluntary, incentive-based conservation program. This program was the model for the Illinois Rivers 2020 program. There are currently 110,000 ac (44,515 ha) enrolled into 15-year CRP contracts on the federal side of the program. The state side of the program has enrolled 67,044 ac (27,132 ha) into conservation easements; the average size of tracts for state enrollment is 66 ac (27 ha). Approximately 90%, or 62,032 ac (25,104 ha), are in perpetual easements, with many of these easements in large, contiguous tracts (Figure 2). The Illinois CREP has the ability to target areas around critical habitats, state and federal areas, and many other sites.

## Goals

The goals of the Illinois CREP include: 1) reduce sedimentation in the Illinois River by 20% (Figures 3 and 4); 2) reduce nutrients in the river by 10%; 3) increase populations of waterfowl, shorebirds, and nongame grassland birds by 15%; and 4) increase native fish and mussel stocks in the Lower Reaches by 10%.

## Components

The Illinois CREP targets riparian areas defined in the 100-year floodplain (Figure 5). The program also targets highly erodible land (HEL = 12), which is adjacent to the floodplain. It targets wetland restorations throughout the eligible area, and focuses on native vegetation.



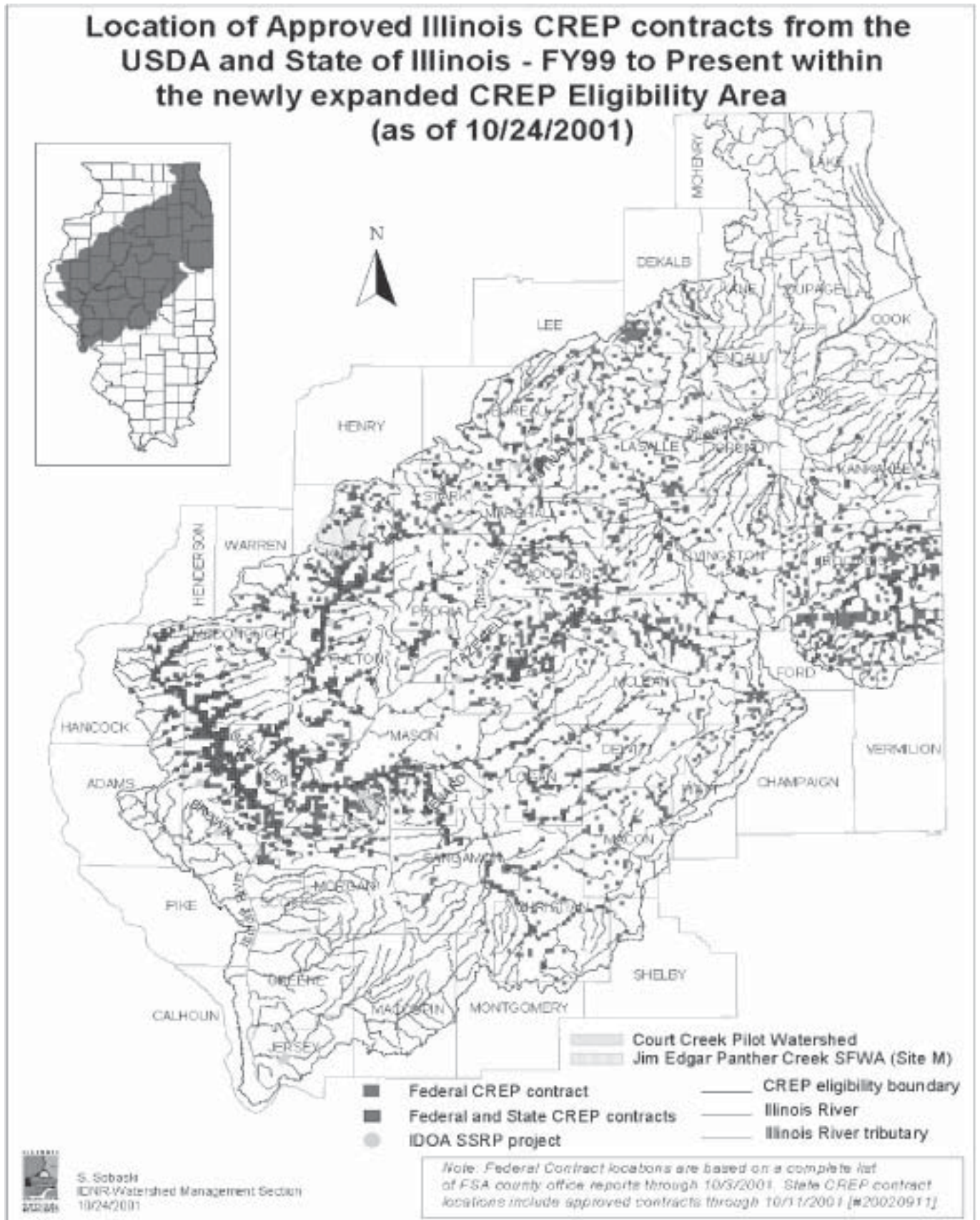


Figure 2—State and federal CREP contracts in Illinois.



**Figure 3**—Sedimentation impacts can be easily seen, but some impacts are below the surface of the water in critical habitat.



**Figure 4**—Approximately 90% of the volume in the 54 backwater lakes along the Illinois River has been lost to sedimentation.



**Figure 5**—Illinois River floodplain.

Contracts under the federal CRP program include 46% in native grasses, 32% in wetlands, and 22% in tree planting. Enrollments in the state program include 64% in wetlands, 26% in tree planting, and 10% in native grasses.

## Eligible Practices for Riparian Areas

Eligible practices for riparian areas (100-year floodplain) fall into 8 categories under CREP: 1) CP3A for hardwood tree planting; 2) CP4D for permanent wildlife habitats; 3) CP9 for shallow water areas for wildlife; 4) CP12 for wildlife food plots; 5) CP21 for filter strips; 6) CP22 for riparian buffers; 7) CP23 for wetland restoration; and 8) CP25 for rare and declining habitats.

## Administration of CREP

A number of agencies are involved in the implementation of CREP. The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers all CRP contracts. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) determines landowner eligibility and provides technical assistance for Conservation Police Officers (CPO) and the implementation of practices. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) provides technical assistance for CPO and the implementation of practices, determines eligibility for additional acres, and administers state funding. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) hold easements, market the program for state options, and administer enrollments and permanent easement execution. The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) monitors assistance, provides assistance to SWCD, and assists with program policy. The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) also monitors assistance, provides marketing assistance, works with 319 grants, and assists with program policy.

## CREP Advisory Committee

The CREP Advisory Committee is a subcommittee of the State Technical Committee. The Advisory Committee provides guidance to the implementing agencies. In addition, it aids in the review and development of procedures, develops program outreach and marketing, reviews monitoring results, and reviews the annual report.

The Advisory Committee members include the implementing agencies, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, The Nature Conservancy, and Pheasants Forever.

## Importance of the Illinois CREP

The Illinois CREP is an extremely successful program. It leads all CREP programs in the nation with the greatest number of total acres enrolled, the greatest number of permanent easements, the greatest number of wetland restorations, and tremendous local support. It is important for both economic and environmental reasons. The Illinois River Basin contains such critical resources as 10 million ac (4,047,000 ha) of prime farmland, a vital transportation

system, drinking water for a million people, a variety of industries, and habitat for fish and wildlife.

Illinois has appropriated US \$46.7 million to date for 132,000 ac (53,400 ha). The USDA has committed US \$262 million to the program. The next 100,000 ac (40,500 ha) will cost an estimated US \$250 million, with every state dollar leveraged by approximately 4 federal dollars.

Illinois CREP has been successful for a number of reasons. Easements are held at the local level by SWCD. There are a number of options available to the landowner, and there is tremendous local support because money flows to the local level for implementation. A large number of older producers are enrolled in the program. And finally, the

program provides for high soil rental rates with relatively low land prices.

## **Current Status of Illinois CREP \_\_\_\_\_**

The last open enrollment for CREP ended in November 2001 when the federal acreage cap was reached and state dollars were expended. In December 2002, a new memorandum of agreement (MOA) provided for 100,000 additional acres through December 31, 2007. Based on this MOA, a reopening of enrollment is anticipated in February or March 2004.