

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in Minnesota and Iowa: Conserving Birds in Agricultural Landscapes

What is CRP?

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a Farm Bill program that pays farmers to temporarily retire marginal cropland from production, replacing what would otherwise be row crops with grassland vegetation cover. Landowners voluntarily enroll tracts of land in 10 or 15 year contracts in exchange for annual payments and cost-sharing assistance to establish long-term perennial cover that provides wildlife habitat, clean water, clean air, and reduced flooding.

Minnesota and Iowa each have approximately 1.7 million acres of CRP currently enrolled, although nearly 65% of these CRP contracts will expire between 2011 and 2017. Depending on the availability of federal funding, farmers may opt to re-enroll, but record high commodity prices and declining federal budgets mean the future of CRP is highly uncertain.



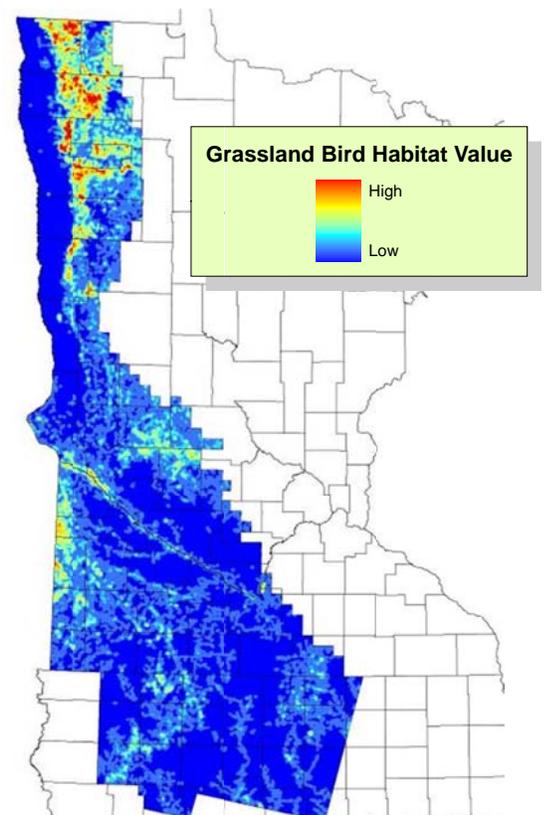
Why is CRP important?

CRP provides critical wildlife habitat and supports the connectivity of existing grasslands and wetlands. Native prairie and wetland landscapes throughout the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of Minnesota and Iowa—historically some of the most productive grasslands/wetlands on the continent—have been plowed and drained extensively for agriculture; less than 1% of native prairie remains and over 97% of wetlands have been drained throughout this region.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service, in collaboration with the University of Montana and Iowa State University, conducted an analysis to determine the importance of CRP on 6 species of grassland songbirds in the PPR (*Table 1*).

CRP and Bird Habitat in Minnesota and Iowa

The benefits of CRP for waterfowl have been well documented, including a major resurgence of duck



populations in the 1990s that has been widely attributed to CRP. In addition to providing critical breeding habitat for waterfowl, pheasants, and other important game species, CRP also supports populations of grassland songbirds that are dependent on relatively large tracts of grassland habitat. We used spatial habitat models to evaluate how grassland songbird populations would respond if all CRP grasslands were returned to row crop agriculture.

Table 1. A loss of 17.5% of grassland tracts (greater than 1 hectare) currently enrolled in CRP was predicted to result in dramatic declines of grassland songbirds (pairs), ranging from approximately 30% to greater than 50% of their respective total populations in the Prairie Pothole Region of Minnesota and Iowa.

	With CRP	Without CRP	% loss
Grass >1 hectare	2,133,169 acres	1,759,009 acres	17.5
Bobolink	888,863	626,152	29.6
Clay-colored Sparrow	247,717	153,462	38.1
Grasshopper Sparrow	198,298	128,308	35.3
Savannah Sparrow	559,044	366,324	34.5
Sedge Wren	730,540	502,674	31.2
Le Conte's Sparrow	261,169	123,973	52.5

This analysis underscores the importance of CRP throughout the Prairie Pothole Region of Minnesota and Iowa. Results indicate that termination of CRP would result in a loss of 17.5% of all grassland tracts over 1 hectare (2.5 acres) in size. However, due to the cumulative benefits of these tracts (in association with other public and private habitat) and the fragmented nature of the remaining habitat, predicted impacts on grassland songbirds were disproportionately large—ranging from a 29.6% reduction in Bobolink pairs to an estimated 52.5% reduction in Le Conte's Sparrow pairs.

The Future of CRP...

Grassland ecosystems continue to be one of the most threatened and rapidly declining ecosystems in the world and CRP plays a critical role in ensuring the prolonged viability of many species of concern. With record high commodity prices and declining federal and state budgets, CRP faces many challenges in the near future. Policy makers and the public should be aware of the many important services provided by CRP—and the often unrecognized ecological, economic, aesthetic, and ethical values associated with clean air, clean water, and healthy wildlife populations. The impending 2012 Farm Bill revisions will be critical to ensuring the continued success of CRP and its many resulting benefits for farmers, hunters, local communities, and the general public.



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