

## Converting CRP Land To Grain Crop Production

Since 1986 more than 36 million acres of American cropland have been idled by farmers in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Recently, due to increased grain prices and a number of other reasons, many farmers are choosing not to enroll these acres and instead bring them back into production. Converting CRP land to grain crop production can present challenges not normally seen in a typical continuous grain production system. It is important to be prepared for these challenges when they come.

Much of the land that has been idled was done so because it was considered to be highly erodible. While this land has been idled under the CRP, very little soil erosion has taken place. If this land is tilled and brought back into production, it is likely to experience high erosion rates once again. Farmers should consider managing this formerly idled land under a no-till management system. No-till management is nearly as effective as CRP at controlling erosion. If a farmer is unable to manage a field under no-till, then it is important to leave waterways and field borders undisturbed. These undisturbed “buffer” zones will help limit erosion from the rest of the field.

The most difficult part of converting CRP land to grain crop production may well be vegetation management. While managed as CRP land, a field is basically left undisturbed for 10-15 years. This limited disturbance has allowed a thick layer of plant residue to develop on the surface of the soil. This thick layer of residue may increase soil moisture, decrease soil temperature, harbor diseases, or interfere with crop planting; all of which may significantly affect grain crop production. In addition, the majority of plant species in CRP land are perennials. These perennials will try to grow back even after a field has been planted with a grain crop, causing difficulties with weed management.

Prairie voles, also known as field mice, have a tendency to establish colonies in CRP fields. When a field is converted from CRP to corn production, these prairie voles have a tendency to stick around and feed on newly planted seed or small seedlings that have germinated, significantly affecting the corn stand. To force the vole colonies out of the field, one must remove cover and food prior to planting the first crop. Tillage is an excellent way to destroy vole habitat and food. For fields managed under a no-till system, vegetation must be removed with mowing, burning, or herbicide application.

Converting CRP land to grain crop production can be difficult, but it is not impossible if adequate planning takes place. Planning should begin at least a year before the grain crop is to be planted. This period of planning offers ample time for farmers to recognize and deal with potential issues that may affect grain crop production. University of Missouri Guide G1651 *Converting CRP Fields To Grain Crop Production* goes into more detail about these and other issues. To obtain a copy or for more information contact your local county extension office or Travis Harper by phone (660)885-5556 or e-mail [harpertw@missouri.edu](mailto:harpertw@missouri.edu).