



December 2, 2011

## CRP GROUND CONVERSION

We have entered a period of time where more CRP ground is being converted to cropland. Six dollar corn prices have spurred this trend on. Never forget why CRP ground was placed into CRP to begin with. It was lower producing, highly erodible or sensitive land prone to soil erosion.

With 10-plus years of undisturbed soil building, CRP acres are primed for no-till production. Plan ahead and start in August of the contract year. Obtain permission from FSA to kill a CRP native grass before the contract expires. Level and fix rough areas and maintain the advantage of a ten-year head start on no-till. Cut trees and treat all stumps within 10 minutes of cutting. Pile all trees, especially locust and hedge while they are green. They will start dropping the thorns out within a few days. Soil sample and plan your fertilizer program for slightly below your crop average on-like soil type fields. Yields of corn and soybeans have been from 70-100% in the vast majority of fields.

With soybeans, use double inoculation. Use the seed dealer inoculant treatment and inoculate the soybeans again with a seedbox treatment. Plant slow with the proper planter or drill weight to get seed to the proper seeding depth. I can't over-emphasize this issue. These fields will plant different from other fields, so set the planting equipment to achieve the proper setting seed depth is very important.

Corn planted too shallow will have weak legs in CRP grass and you might visually see spot tillage outperform. Many will incorrectly interpret this as a tillage response but it is a nutrient/seeding depth issue.

If CRP is returned to pasture, that contains warm-season grasses like switchgrass, we may have areas that need thicker stands plus weed and brush control before returning to pasture. Excessive dead litter, thistles, and cedar trees are three of the worst problems.

The fastest and most effective way to stimulate warm-season grass stands to thicken and to control cedar trees is with prescribed burning in the spring. Obviously, only use fire, though, where it can be handled safely and legally, and where it won't cause other potential problems like wind erosion. In Saline County, we have some producers that joined the Tri-County Burn Association, producers helping each other with this practice.

Another way to improve conditions is to remove old growth by haying. This can be challenging, however, especially if the terrain is rough or the amount of dead material is great or if pocket gophers have built many mounds that can plug equipment or if many small trees have invaded your grassland. In addition, the hay removed will need both protein and energy supplements to feed it to livestock.

UNL specialist Bruce Anderson especially likes another technique that breaks down old growth and opens stands up to induce thickening – winter grazing with high animal density. Feeding hay or grazing all your cows on just a couple acres at a time each week will trample dead litter into the ground and open up the soil for new seedlings and tillers. Move to a fresh area each week until you've beaten down all your CRP acres. You also get a similar result by using CRP as a calving pasture, getting the trampling, the nutrient recycling, and excellent bedding all at the same time.

If someone tells you CRP has to be tilled to be successful, that notion has already been proven wrong. No-till producers that planned ahead and used the proper management will have the most success in reducing soil erosion and maintaining dryland yields and soil carbon levels over the long haul. The reason why is because of the long-term soil structure and high organic matter levels.



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