

Legislation would complete state CREP III commitment to funding

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by Tim Spielman

Editor

St. Paul — Bills in the state House and Senate would provide \$15.5 million in bonding for the state's Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve program, thus completing the state's financial share of the current and ongoing Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

Those dollars would enable the state to reach its share of the state-federal program — \$175 million. The federal portion — via the Conservation Reserve Program — will total \$350 million, according to John Jaschke, executive director of BWSR.

Gov. Tim Walz's original budget proposal provided \$14.1 million in bonding for CREP.

With that state bonding amount approved, Jaschke said, "We would have (the RIM funding) in hand."

The bipartisan bill is sponsored by Rep. Rick Hansen, DFL-S. St. Paul, and Sen. Carrie Ruud, R-Breezy Point. There are several co-sponsors. Bonding dollars would go to BWSR, which is charged with acquiring the permanent conservation easements from landowners "to preserve, restore, create, and enhance wetlands and associated uplands of prairie and grasslands, and to restore and enhance rivers and streams, riparian lands, and associated uplands of prairie and grasslands, in order to protect soil and water quality, support fish and wildlife habitat, reduce flood damage, and provide other public benefits," according to the legislation.

CREP III, as it's known, is available to landowners in a 54-acre swath of mostly southern and western Minnesota. The original enrollment target was 60,000 acres, but Jaschke expects the end result will be in the neighborhood of about 40,000. Currently, he said, lands enrolled in the program total "somewhere north of 30,000 acres."

The agreement was signed between the state and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2005, with three conservation focuses: wetland restoration, grass filter strips, and wellhead protection areas.

So far, according to Jaschke, the wetlands component has been the most popular with landowners. Given the program's overlap with former Gov. Mark Dayton's Buffer Initiative which directed vegetative buffers to protect waters, Jaschke said he expected more of the CREP acres to be enrolled in buffer strips.

"In the end," he said, "there were a lot more wetland proposals. That's really good, because there are all kinds of benefits" — including water quality, wildlife habitat, and more, he added.



Wetland restoration work can be time-consuming and expensive. In the case above, sediment was removed from a former wetland, and existing tile was removed.

Photo by Tim Spielman

Jaschke said 60,000 acres was more of a cap than a goal, and with the funding available, it likely will cover the expected two-thirds of the cap.

It's also worth noting that there's currently a general CRP signup period. That signup was due to end several weeks ago, but the process and various aspects — including rental rates and incentives — are under review by Biden administration officials. Jaschke said that

matters little to the CREP program; landowners enrolling in CREP receive a higher payment in return for a permanent conservation easement.

Is there a CREP sunset? According to an email from Jaschke, "CREP will be available via quarterly signups until all funding in hand is committed. That could happen later in 2021 or 2022 depending on legislation passed this session."

The current CREP program demonstrates how land prices have increased in southern and western Minnesota. Nearly 20 years ago, CREP I occurred. That program enrolled about 100,000 acres in the Minnesota River basin at a cost of about \$245 million – \$163 million from the USDA; about \$82 million from RIM. Contracts were complete by 2002. Those contract acres includes some large tracts of grasslands.

A second CREP, initiated in 2005, failed to generate interest or gain traction.

By comparison, enrollment in CREP III will be about 60% fewer acres than CREP I, but its price tag will be approximately 40% more.

Jaschke said that's due in part to the fact that CREP III acres are more targeted, smaller tracts and often – especially in the case of wetland – require more restoration work.

Thus, the payments to landowners varies greatly

"It's still too early to tell (what the per-acre cost will be) because the costs of wetland restorations – which comprise most of the enrollments so far – are greater with engineering and earthwork components as compared to the buffer strips and wellhead protection projects which are mostly ecological (native grasses and forbs) practices," he said.

Landowners who enroll in CREP III are paid a certain sum via the RIM program. They are then paid through CRP for 14 to 15 years, according to BWSR. Private ownership continues, and the land is permanently restored and enhanced for conservation benefits.

The program is intended to restore hydrology, increase infiltration, and provide flood mitigation. It also provides habitat for wildlife, non-game species, and pollinators, and reduces nitrate loading in drinking water supplies. All restoration costs are covered by RIM and CRP.

Enrollment in CREP III began in 2017.

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