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ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM IN NORTH DAKOTA*

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Abstract:

Short-run economic impacts of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in North Dakota are estimated using an input-output model together with results from a statewide survey of CRP participants. Total business activity was reduced 0.5 percent at the state level and 0.9 percent for the most affected region, and employment was reduced by about 2,400 jobs statewide.

Key Words: Socioeconomic impact analysis
Conservation Reserve Program
North Dakota

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM IN NORTH DAKOTA

Long-term retirement of cropland has been utilized in the United States as a policy tool to achieve both agricultural supply control and conservation objectives. The first major federal program for long-term land retirement was the Conservation Reserve Program (better known as the Soil Bank) that was initiated in the mid-1950s. Enrollment in the Soil Bank peaked in 1960 at nearly 29 million acres nationwide, and the last contracts expired in 1970. More recently, long-term cropland retirement has been implemented as part of the 1985 Food Security Act (Public Law 99-198). The main objective of the current Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is to take highly erodible land out of production, thereby reducing wind and water erosion, protecting long-term food-producing capability, reducing sedimentation, improving water quality, creating wildlife habitat, curbing excess production, and providing income support for farmers. Nationally, this program had reached about one-half its goal (22,150,025 acres) through the fifth sign-up period (July 1987). North Dakota ranked seventh among the states, with 1.3 million contracted acres or about 4.8 percent of the state's total cropland (U.S. Bureau of Census 1982 and Dicks et al. 1988).

Examination of the new program's features and review of the effects of the Soil Bank program have stimulated interest concerning possible socioeconomic impacts of the CRP in areas with high concentrations of eligible land. Potential impacts include those arising from (1) reducing the use of agricultural inputs such as fuel, fertilizer, and chemicals; (2) reducing the use of farm labor and machinery; and (3) long-term changes in land use if CRP land is not returned to crop production at the end of the contract period. Also, the review of literature dealing with the effects of the Soil Bank program suggests that enrollment in the CRP could be associated with increased off-farm work by farm operators and could speed farm consolidation and rural-to-urban migration (Kaldor; McArthur; Christensen and Micka; Paulson et al.; Barr et al.; Schmid; Taylor et al.; and Butler and Lanham). This study was undertaken to determine key characteristics of CRP participants in North Dakota and to estimate the short-run economic impacts of the CRP in the state.

PROCEDURES

The study had two major phases. First, a statewide survey of CRP participants was conducted to determine selected characteristics of those individuals and their enrolled land that would be important for subsequent impact estimation. These characteristics included land attributes (such as comparison of costs and returns and soil productivity to those of non-CRP land in the area, comparison of CRP payments to local cash rents, cover option chosen, and cost of cover establishment) and landowner characteristics (such as age, residency, level of farm income, and use of CRP payments). A questionnaire was mailed to nearly 3,000 randomly selected landowners in North Dakota (approximately 40 percent of all participants) in early March 1988. Follow-up mailings resulted in 1,289 useable surveys for a response rate of 44 percent. Response rates were quite similar for each of the state's five pool groups (see Figure 1).

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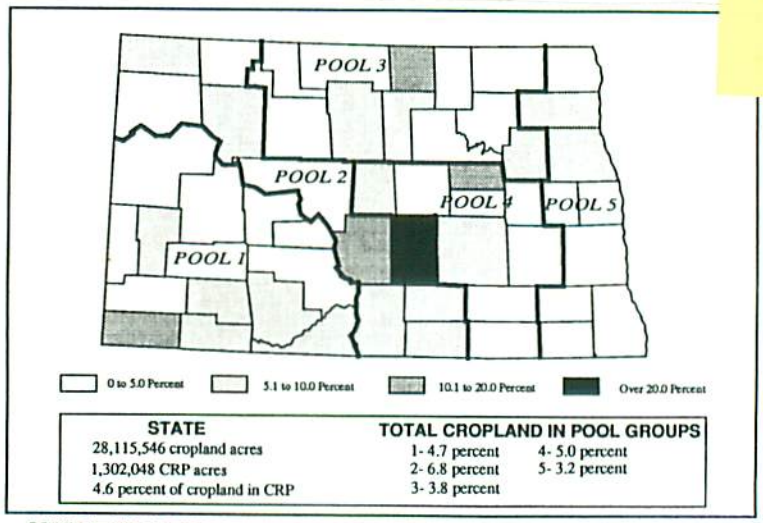

SOURCE: USDA Soil Conservation Service, 1988.

Figure 1. Percent of Total Cropland Enrolled in CRP by Category, July 1987

Key survey results were tabulated, then a regional input-output model, previously developed from primary data and consisting of 17 sectors, was used to estimate the indirect effects of the CRP program for each of the state's five pool groups. (For a detailed description of the model, see Coon et al.) An important prerequisite to estimating these indirect effects was estimating the direct effects of program participation on farm expenditures and income. Sectors expected to experience direct effects were (1) the retail trade sector; (2) finance, insurance, and real estate; (3) business and personal services; and (4) the household sector. The procedures used to estimate these changes in expenditures are summarized in Figure 2. Three main sources of data were used to estimate expenditure changes: (1) county CRP survey data (Mortensen et al. 1988), (2) North Dakota agricultural statistics (NASS 1988), and (3) county data from the state Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS)[3]. Initially compiled on a county-by-county basis, the resulting estimates fall into three main categories: (1) reduced input expenditures, (2) reduced federal commodity payments, and (3) increased CRP contract payments and upkeep costs. (For a more detailed discussion of data sources and estimation procedures, see Mortensen et al. 1989.)

After the change in business activity resulting from the CRP program had been estimated for each sector, the resulting change in employment was estimated based on historic relationships between employment and gross business volume in each sector.

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[3]Impacts of the CRP were analyzed using 1987 data on farm prices and costs and CRP acres through the fifth sign-up due to availability of data and the abnormal nature of the 1988 drought. It should be recognized, however, that not all acres that were enrolled through July 1987 were taken out of production that year.

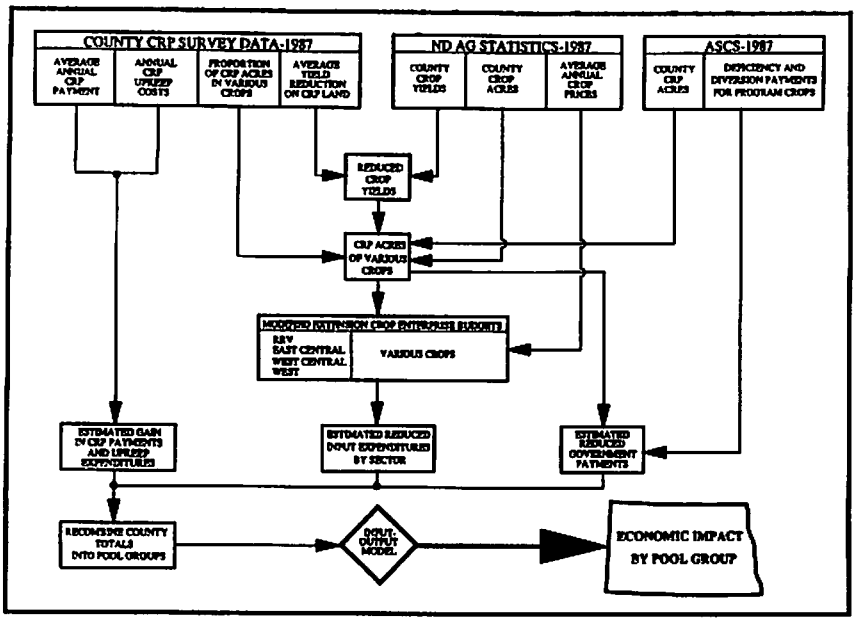

Figure 2. Procedure for Estimating Direct Impacts of CRP

SURVEY RESULTS

CRP participants generally felt their CRP land was less productive than other land in the area and that input costs were slightly higher (Table 1). (Unless otherwise noted, the values shown are the mean for all survey respondents.) CRP contract payments were felt to be 6.7 percent higher, on average, than prevailing cash rental rates in the area. The initial cost of establishing CRP cover averaged $37.20 per acre with more than 42.4 percent of responses falling between $30 and $40.

The average age of CRP landowners was 57 years, and nearly 62 percent were over age 55 (Table 1). About 73 percent of the respondents had farmed either part-time or full-time in 1987, and there was no significant age difference between farmers and nonfarmers. In contrast, a 1988 longitudinal survey of a statewide farm panel indicated an average age of 47.2 years (Leistritz et al.). The finding that older farmers are more likely to participate in land retirement programs is consistent with those of several studies of Soil Bank participants (Schmid; Barr et al.; Christensen and Micka,; and Kaldor), although some studies of Soil Bank enrollees found no significant differences in ages (Butler and Lanham; McArthur).

The average 1987 gross farm income of the farmer participants was just over $94,000 or about 20 percent less than that reported for that year by a statewide longitudinal farm panel (Leistritz et al.). This is similar to the findings of Christensen and Micka, who reported that Soil Bank participants in Maine had smaller than average farms. On the other hand, Butler and Lanham reported that Soil Bank participants in South Carolina had larger farms than nonparticipants. The average net cash farm income of $16,259 was about 22 percent less than that for the farm

TABLE 1. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF CRP LAND AND PARTICIPANTS, NORTH DAKOTA, 1988

Item	Units	Value
Yields--CRP land compared to land not in CRP	Percent	-9.5
Input costs--CRP land compared to land not in CRP	Percent	0.5
CRP contract payment compared to cash rent	Percent	6.7
Costs per acre to establish CRP cover	Dollars	37.20
Costs per acre to maintain CRP cover	Dollars	6.92
Annual CRP contract payment	Dollars	36.98
Type of CRP cover:		
Grass and/or legumes	Percent	91.0
Trees (on part of area)	Percent	9.0
Landowner Age	Years	57.2
Landowner resides in:		
North Dakota	Percent	90.0
Landowner occupation:		
Farmer	Percent	73.0
Other	Percent	27.0
Gross farm income, 1987 (farmers only):		
Average	Dollars	92,440
Net Cash Farm Income, 1987 (farmers only):		
Average	Dollars	16,259
CRP payment as a percent of net farm income was over 100 percent or net farm income was negative	Percent	40.6
Did the CRP program enable you to continue farming?		
Yes	Percent	20.6

panel. For 41 percent of these producers, their CRP income exceeded their net cash farm income, and about 21 percent said that the program enabled them to continue farming. (For a more detailed description of CRP participants' attributes, see Mortensen et al. 1988.)

Ninety percent of the survey respondents lived in North Dakota. About 4 percent lived in the neighboring states of Montana, South Dakota, or Minnesota, and the balance lived in 22 other states. Although anecdotal information from areas with high rates of CRP enrollment had indicated that many participants used their payments as a means to vacation or retire out-of-state, only 3.5 percent of survey respondents indicated they had near-term plans to retire outside the state, and only 3.5 percent indicated out-of-state leisure activities as an intended use of their CRP income.

The CRP participants were also queried about their opinions regarding certain aspects of the program. Over 92 percent agreed that CRP provides wildlife habitat. In addition, nearly 90 percent felt that CRP offers protection for fragile land. About 80 percent agreed that eligibility for CRP entry should be based on soil characteristics rather than management and tillage practices. Over 77 percent of the landowners agreed that CRP benefits them financially. A majority (71.1 percent) also agreed that CRP reduces the sales of local agribusiness suppliers. Nearly 39 percent agreed and over 33 percent disagreed with the statement that land eligibility requirements should be eased. Nearly an equal percentage agreed and disagreed (37.4 percent and 38.4 percent, respectively) with the statement that counties should have the option of going beyond the 25 percent of total county cropland limit for enrolling CRP acreage. About 37 percent agreed with the statement that CRP rewards poor farming practices, and about 42 percent disagreed. Reaction was also mixed to the question of raising the 45 million acre national CRP limit with about 39 percent indicating a neutral response. Nearly 41 percent disagreed and only about 27 percent agreed with the notion that CPR is costing the federal government too much money.

Economic Impact Assessment

Reduced direct expenditures caused by taking CRP land out of production total $56 million for the state with nearly 62 percent of this effect occurring in the retail sector (Table 2). Pool groups two, four, and five have the highest net impact at about $12 million each. However, the household sector is positively affected in pool groups one, two, and three primarily because the CRP rental payments exceeded the farm income and government program payments that were foregone.

The direct effects were applied to the input-output model to estimate the total impact of the CRP program. The $56 million in direct effects resulting from the CRP result in about $141 million in reduced business activity for the state--an overall multiplier of 2.56 (Table 2). This total is spread among 13 sectors of the state's economy with the retail sector absorbing the greatest impact--about 40 percent of the state total. (For a detailed discussion of sectoral impacts, see Mortensen et al. 1989.)

Among the county groupings, pool group five has the largest absolute impact from the CRP, reflecting the more intensive nature of agriculture in eastern North Dakota (Table 2). Pool group four, on the other hand, has the greatest percentage

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF CRP ACRES, CRP-RELATED CHANGE IN DIRECT EXPENDITURES, TOTAL CRP IMPACT, CRP IMPACT AS A PERCENT OF BASELINE, AND CRP-RELATED EMPLOYMENT CHANGE

Pool Group	CRP Acres	CRP-Related Change in Direct Expenditures and Household Income	Total CRP Impact	CRP Impact as a Percentage of Pool Baseline	CRP-Related Employment Change
	(%)	(million $)	(million $)	(%)	(number)
1	18.8	-8,336	-21.2	-0.33	-371
2	29.3	-12,229	-30.0	-0.68	-552
3	20.0	-10,175	-25.5	-0.52	-453
4	18.5	-12,569	-31.6	-0.91	-523
5	13.4	-12,594	-32.2	-0.39	-517
TOTAL	100.0	-55,903	-140.5	-0.54	-2,416

impact. In no case, however, does the CRP impact exceed 1 percent of the area's baseline business volume. Employment effects of CRP are distributed somewhat differently than effects on business volume; pool group two has the largest total impact. Although the total CRP-related potential employment reduction is estimated to be only 2,416 jobs statewide, or about 0.77 percent of average annual employment in 1987, it should be noted that much of this employment loss may be concentrated in the state's most agriculturally dependent rural areas--areas already hard-hit by reductions in retail trade volume and employment stemming from the depressed state of the agricultural economy.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this analysis of the impact of the Conservation Reserve Program on the North Dakota economy indicate that impacts of the program to date have been modest at the state and substate regional levels; total business activity was reduced by only 0.54 percent for the state and 0.91 percent for the most substantially affected region. However, it should be noted that the impacts are not distributed uniformly among sectors or communities. Rather, the retail sector accounted for more than 40 percent of the total impact of the program. Further, within the retail sector, businesses that rely on farm supplies or machinery for much of their volume are likely to be affected much more than others. Similarly, because the CRP enrollment varies substantially among counties, those with higher percentages of their cropland enrolled will obviously experience greater impacts. In North Dakota, five counties had more than 10 percent of their land enrolled through the fifth sign-up (July 1987), and in one county about 22 percent was enrolled. Finally, because substantial acreages have been enrolled in the program in subsequent sign-ups (statewide about 800,000 more acres were added in the

sixth and seventh enrollments), the effects of the fully implemented CRP program will be greater than those shown here.

In addition to the negative effects resulting from initial reductions in agricultural activities, the program has a number of positive aspects. A short-run impact has been to sharply increase the demand for grass seed used in establishing vegetative cover. Other, longer-run effects could stem from achieving the program's conservation objectives, particularly if much of the land remains in noncrop uses after the contracts expire. Estimating possible economic consequences of such effects as reduced soil erosion, increased water quality, and enhanced wildlife habitat was beyond the scope of this study. Such impacts should be addressed in future analyses, however, and input-output analysis would be a very appropriate tool for quantifying some of these effects.

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