

Cash incentives for salmon habitat can help fish and landowners

In recent years, the public has developed a heightened interest in the health of America's rivers, streams and wetlands. The wish to have clean water suitable for humans, fish and wildlife is shared by everyone.

A large portion of Columbia County, however, is privately owned. Most landowners find it difficult to justify spending money on stream improvements that have public value, but little private benefits.

The state of Oregon has tried to address this dilemma by partnering with the US Department of Agriculture through a voluntary program called the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). This program, offered to private landowners, provides annual payments and cash incentives to those interested in planting buffers of trees and shrubs and, if needed, installing fence to limit livestock access on potential salmon streams. (Another program with similar benefits, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) may apply on

non-salmon streams.)

Land is eligible for CREP if it borders streams in cropped or grazed fields. Buffer widths usually range from 35 to 180 feet, depending on the topography and the owner's preference.

Landowners must plant buffers and fence any livestock out of the streamside zone during the first year. CREP will pay 75 percent of the cost of installation, as well as assisting with water developments for stock, if necessary. Property owners agree to maintain the practices for 10 to 15 year periods so that the plantings have sufficient time to establish.

Since the American public supports clean water initiatives, the federal government and state of Oregon have made CREP worthwhile financially. For landowners willing to install stream buffers, a variety of payments are extended.

Landowners receive rental payments based on the leasing value of the land. In Columbia County, for example, marginal

pastureland is currently set at a rate of \$66/acre along a perennial stream. Landowners who put 10 acres of pasture, or a 150-foot-wide buffer along 2900 feet of stream, into CREP receive \$660/year in rent. (Cropland rates vary based upon the soil types of the offered acres.)

CREP pays an extra 50% annual rental payments to landowners who install tree and shrub buffers next to salmon streams. Referring to the above example, the incentive would be \$330 (50% of the \$660) to total \$990 in annual rent.

Property owners also receive up to \$10/acre for maintaining plantings, fencing and water developments installed through the program. Using the above 10 acres example, this total would add an additional \$100/year.

Landowners will also receive a one time payment for signing a CREP contract. This is calculated by taking \$10 per acre times the contract length. On 10 acres with a 15 year

contract, the incentive is \$1,500.

Also available is a one time payment incentive providing an additional 40 percent cost-share payable after the practices are installed. For example, if it costs \$5,000 to install fencing and tree plantings, when complete, the enrollee receives \$2,000 beyond the normal cost-share of 75 percent.

In some rare cases, the enrollee may also be eligible for a cumulative bonus impact incentive. This incentive is designed to encourage owners, and possibly adjoining landowners, to enter larger stretches of streams into CREP. Larger stretches have a greater impact than small lengths of stream. If landowners apply buffers on a least 50 percent of a five-mile stretch of river, they qualify for this incentive. This is calculated by multiplying the rental payment by four, then by the acreage. In this example: \$66 x 4 x 10 acres = \$2,640.

The Conservation Reserve

Enhancement Program can provide the best of both worlds. While giving private landowners some economic incentive for installing costly stream buffers, it, in turn, provides the public with environmental values needed to improve the health of Oregon's streams and rivers.

For more information about CREP or other conservation programs, contact the Columbia Soil and Water Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service in St. Helens at 503-397-4555.

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