



Converting to Pasture or Hay—Evaluating Current Vegetation

SUMMARY

Evaluate current CRP vegetation. It may be adequate, be easily upgraded, or need major renovation.

How good is your CRP land after 10 or more years of non-use? Some CRP fields were established hurriedly with minimal cost and effort. Some were sown with second or third choice seed mixtures due to seed shortages in the early years of the CRP period. Renewal of contracts required legume or warm-season species establishment on some sites. As a result, there is a wide range of stand condition. Some CRP fields have thin grass sods, undesired grass species, or weeds and brush present, while some have developed into dense, weed-free stands of the species that were planted.

Don't make a hasty decision and destroy your current CRP vegetation until you have seriously evaluated what you now have. In some cases it will be adequate, as is, to begin grazing or harvesting for hay or may need only minor improvements or management steps to upgrade it to an acceptable condition. In some situations however, major changes or renovation will be necessary before the site can be used successfully in a forage/livestock enterprise. Use table 1 to help you evaluate the adequacy of vegetation on your CRP site. It offers alternatives if improvements are needed.

Table 1 shows some forage management practices that can improve the productivity or quality of the existing types of forage (remove weeds or include legumes). Various seeding and renovation methods allow you to add more desirable grasses and legumes to what you already have. Examples follow.

Table 1. Checklist for Evaluating and Improving Vegetation on CRP Land

EVALUATING VEGETATION							IMPROVING VEGETATION								
Desireable legumes		Weeds and brush		Desireable grasses			N	P&K	Frostseed legume	Interseed		Total Renovation	Weed control ₁		
Yes	No	Yes	No	Dense	Thin uniform	Thin patchy				Grass	Legume		Clip weeds and grass	Spot spray	Broadcast spray/weeds
Existing grass species are acceptable.															
x		x		x				x		+	+		o	o	
x		x			x			x	x	x	x		o	o	
x		x				x		x	x	x	x	o	o	o	
	x		x	x			x	x	+		+				
	x		x		x		x	x	+	x	+		o		
	x		x			x	x	x	+	x	+	o	o		
	x	x		x			x	x	+		+		x	x	x
	x	x			x		x	x	+	x	+		x	x	x
	x	x				x	x	x	+	x	+		x	x	x
Existing grass species are undesirable.															
	x		x	x						x	x	x	x		
	x		x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		
	x	x		x						x	x	x	x	x	
	x	x			x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	

* Legume
 + Frost seeding and interseeding of legumes frequently are not successful when grass sod is dense, particularly when nitrogen is being used to further stimulate grass growth.
 o optional practice

Examples

- Rather than a broadcast herbicide treatment that might harm legumes, use clipping and “spot treating” with herbicide for weed or brush control where desirable legumes exist.
- Use phosphorus and potassium with no or only low rates of nitrogen on grass/legume stands to keep the grasses less competitive and to favor the maintenance of the legumes.
- Use moderate to high rates of nitrogen on all-grass stands to stimulate grass production and improve vigor and stand density.
- Where grass stands are thin and you wish to include more grass or legumes, use interseeding (no-till, sod seeding) or “frost seeding” to introduce the legume component without destroying the existing grass.
- Where grass that is present is not necessarily the desired grass, complete renovation either with tillage or by no-till means may be the best and quickest way to return to a desired forage production condition.

For More Information

To learn more about management and decisions regarding land being removed from CRP, see the following:

- CRP-1 Life After CRP—Decisions, Decisions!
 - CRP-2 Lease Alternatives for CRP Land
 - CRP-3 Tillage Options After CRP
 - CRP-5 Applying Fertilizer and Lime to CRP Land
 - CRP-6 Resource Inventory Guide
 - CRP-9 Evaluating Resources and Setting Goals
 - CRP-11 Converting CRP Land to Pasture — Managing Weeds and Fertility
 - CRP-12 Converting to Pasture or Hay — Repairing, Replanting CRP Land
 - CRP-13 Converting to Pasture or Hay Forage Seeding Mixtures
 - CRP-15 Insect Management for Corn and Soybeans
 - CRP-17 Strip Intercropping: A CRP Conversion Option
 - CRP-18 Planting Corn or Soybeans into CRP Sod Ground
 - CRP-21 Interseeding Small-Seeded Forages into Sod with Conventional Corn/Soybean Planters
- PM-1713 Pasture Management Guide

Prepared by Stephen K. Barnhart, Iowa State University forage agronomist, and Laura Sternweis, Iowa State University Extension communication specialist.

... and justice for all. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gerald A. Miller, interim director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.



This bulletin is part of a series to help CRP contract holders assess the land-use options available to them when the contracts expire. The series is funded in part by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Other bulletins in the series and additional information are available at county ISU Extension offices.