

# The National Conservation Buffer Initiative:

## A Qualitative Evaluation



Prepared for:

Natural Resources Conservation Service

**February 1999**

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## **Dedication**

*This report is dedicated to the forty eight farmers who participated in the discussions.*

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# Executive Summary

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This report presents the results of focus groups conducted with farmers across the United States. The focus groups were conducted to check on the progress of the National Conservation Buffer Initiative. Is the Initiative making progress? Do farmers know about the programs that support conservation buffers? What concerns, if any, do they have about buffers and the programs available to help them install buffers?

## The Study

The groups were designed and moderated by Applied Research, an independent consulting firm located in Madison, Wisconsin. A total of 48 farmers participated in the six focus group discussions. These discussions were held in November and December 1998 and January 1999.

## Principal Findings

Farmers are very familiar with conservation buffers and they use them. Most who participated in these groups have one or more types of buffers on their property. They are keenly aware of their advantages and disadvantages. They note that buffers reduce soil erosion but require maintenance and may harbor pests.

Those already using buffers often use them along with other, complementary practices including minimum tillage, integrated pest management, and nutrient management. Together these practices control erosion and reduce costs.

Though farmers are using buffer practices they are not generally familiar with the National Conservation Buffer Initiative and with the various buffer programs. In general, farmers pay attention only to those programs that apply to them. Thus, many were familiar with the continuous sign-up element of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and had at least passing awareness of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Few, however, had heard of the National Conservation Buffer Initiative, and no one could quite state its objective.

During the discussions farmers listed a number of their concerns they have about the buffer program. They find it difficult, for example, to install buffers on rented land. Landlords are reluctant to forgo the rent on that land yet tenants have no guarantee that they will benefit from proposed buffers. Farmers also voiced concerns about the program's low rental rates and about the restrictions it places on the use (haying, grazing) of buffers.

These are relatively minor concerns, however, compared to the widespread belief that the program suffers from a lack of "common sense." Farmers feel that the inflexible application of national rules to their areas results in poor conservation decisions. They cited examples where both program costs and erosion have increased as the result of such inflexibility. They strongly believe that local staff should be given latitude to adapt the program to local conditions. Some think that the buffer initiative should be an independent program not subject to the strictures of the CRP.

# Introduction

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative has the formal goal of installing two million miles of buffers by the year 2002. Over the past 20 months the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has worked to increase farmers' awareness of buffers and of programs to support their installation. This report examines the buffer initiative's progress to date. Drawing on six focus groups conducted in six states it details farmers' familiarity with conservation buffers and with specific programs. It also explores farmers' concerns about buffers and about the administration of programs to support buffer installation.

## Background

This is the second study to use focus groups to examine farmers' responses to conservation buffers. In 1996, an introductory round of five groups explored what farmers liked and disliked about buffers and tested names and slogans for the buffer initiative. As a result, the expression "Green Stripe" gave way to "Conservation Buffer," and the slogan "Common-Sense Conservation" was adopted. In late 1998, the leader of the buffer initiative contacted Applied Research to conduct a second round of focus groups. Applied Research, which specializes in issues related to natural resources management, had conducted the initial focus groups in 1996. Its staff developed the interview guide for the most recent groups, facilitated the discussions and prepared this report.

## Research Objectives

The goal of this study is to explore the progress made by the initiative over the past 20 months. In general terms, are farmers now more familiar with buffer practices and programs? Specific research issues included the following:

- Has farmers' awareness of buffers increased?
- Are farmers aware of the various conservation buffer programs?

- Have they seen the general conservation buffer brochure, and what is their response to it?
- Are farmers installing buffers as a result of the program?
- Are they hearing consistent messages from both the NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) about the program?
- What other concerns, if any, do they have about the administration of the program?
- What services do they receive from the NRCS, and how do they rate these services?

## Focus Group Methodology

Focus groups typically consist of eight to ten people sitting at a table discussing a topic under the guidance of a trained moderator. These groups last for about two hours. The discussions are relaxed, comfortable and often enjoyable for the participants. The format allows participants to describe their experiences, feelings and opinions using their own words. During these meetings they have a chance to listen to others talk, to compare their thoughts, and to interact.

As a method of collecting data, focus groups have their limitations. They generate narrative rather than numerical data. Their purpose is to generate insights rather than statistical generalizations. The findings from these focus groups apply only to those present in the room; not to all farmers in the United States. This is the standard caution that should accompany any focus group report. As was noted in our last report, however, certain experiences and concerns recur in ways which suggest that they may well be widespread. For example, farmers across the United States demonstrate familiarity with buffer practices. They think that buffers control erosion but require a lot of maintenance. They also think that the buffer program lacks common sense and that more local flexibility is

needed. Given such consistent results, we detect a pattern common to buffer practices and to the program that invites serious consideration.

The report contains a number of charts with data based on questionnaires completed by participants at the close of the groups. While it may look like survey data based on a random sample, it applies only to those present in the groups. It is intended only to provide a summary of these participants' statements, experiences or opinions.

## Participant Selection

Participants for these groups were selected and invited by the local NRCS staff. An effort was made to provide a degree of diversity within the groups with respect to buffers and the buffer program. Half of the farmers in the group were participants in the continuous CRP, while half had land that would qualify but were not currently participating in the program. While most participants had buffers, not all the buffers were "program related." That is, farmers had installed them independently of the buffer program. A total of 48 farmers participated in these discussions. The following table shows the dates and locations of the groups.

Table 1: Location and date of focus groups.

Location	Date
Greencastle, Indiana	December 1, 1998
Beatrice, Nebraska	December 8, 1998
Paris, Texas	December 15, 1998
Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania	December 15, 1998
Barnesville, Georgia	December 17, 1998
The Dalles, Oregon	January 29, 1999

## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the help of numerous District Conservationists. These NRCS agents identified likely participants, made the personal contacts, and secured a meeting location convenient for everyone. In short, they found the right participants and got them into the room. The agents who worked with Applied Research took this responsibility and, though pressed for time, performed superbly. Thanks especially to Barry Fisher from Indiana, Carmen Westerfield from Georgia, Gary Smith from Pennsylvania, Pat McGrane and Wally Valasek from Nebraska, John "Dusty" Eddy and Gayle Norman from Oregon, and Norman Bade and Ronnie Tidwell from Texas.

# Principal Findings

## I. Program and Practice Awareness

### 1. Farmers are hearing more about buffers.

Farmers are familiar with conservation buffers. In fact, most of the farmers we met with have some type of buffer on their land. They reported, however, that they are reading much more about buffers now in farm magazines and newspapers than they used to. Some report that they are actually seeing more buffers in the areas where they live.

### 2. Farmers have only minimal to moderate knowledge of the conservation buffer program.

Few of the farmers we met with were familiar with the National Conservation Buffer Initiative or knew its goal. When it comes to specific buffer programs, farmers are familiar with and remember only those programs that apply directly to them. Thus, many associate buffers with the CRP and many have heard of the EQIP program. Very few are aware of the other buffer programs (Wildlife Incentives Program (WHIP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP). Table 2 provides an overview of farmers' awareness of the various programs and practices.

### 3. Sources of practice and program awareness.

Farmers learn about buffer programs primarily through their contacts with local NRCS agents and from reading the newsletters they get from the FSA and NRCS. A few also mention hearing about buffer programs from commodity groups, farm suppliers and chemical applicators, and from wildlife organizations. The local newsletter, however, is the principal source of program information. Farmers will skim the newsletter, decide whether or not a program is relevant to their situation, and then make a personal inquiry of the NRCS staff at the USDA service center.

### 4. Program promotion.

Farmers continue to believe that the best way to promote this program is through personal contacts and demonstrations.

### 5. The general buffer brochure.

Farmers are of two minds in their reactions to the general brochure that explains the buffer program. They praise its appearance and feel that it gave a good overview of the various buffer programs. They fault it for its emphasis on benefits to wildlife and its lack of attention to the program's economic benefits to farmers. Some think that it is better suited to a non-farm audience.

Table 2: Level of program and practice awareness.

	High	Moderate	Minimal
Conservation buffers	CRP and the continuous sign-up	Specific buffer programs: WRP, WHIP, etc.	National Conservation Buffer Initiative



## II. Conservation Issues and Conservation Buffers

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### 1. Farmers recognize that they have a problem with erosion.

Most of the farmers we met with felt that there were significant erosion problems both in their communities and on their farms.

### 2. Farmers see buffers as an effective means of controlling erosion.

Farmers regard buffers as an effective means of controlling erosion. They often use buffers in conjunction with other practices, such as minimum tillage and nutrient management. They also value them because they can make the land easier to farm and they benefit wildlife.

### 3. Farmers also recognize that buffers have certain drawbacks.

Farmers mention two main drawbacks to conservation buffers: they require maintenance, and they can harbor unwanted wildlife, weeds, and insects.

## III. Concerns About the Buffer Program

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### 1. Farmers voice numerous concerns about the buffer program.

Farmers are concerned about a number of specific aspects of the buffer program. Some feel that the rental rates are too low for certain types of land. Others criticize inter-state disparities in rental rates. Many would like to be able to hay or graze the land that they have in buffers. They also question the requirement to plant “native grasses” which they regard as costly, hard to establish and maintain, and less effective in controlling erosion than what they have now.

### 2. It’s hard to install buffers on rented land.

Rented land is a barrier to the installation of buffers. Farmers say that many landlords are interested only in monetary return and unwilling to incur the costs of installing buffers. Tenants won’t install buffers because they don’t know if they will be farming that land in the future.

### 3. The rules governing the buffer program don’t make “common sense.”

The forgoing concerns about the program pale beside farmers’ overall conclusion that the inflexible application of national rules to local areas results in decisions that lack common sense. This was their most serious and widespread criticism of the program. They pointed out numerous examples where program rules dictated actions that drove up program costs while failing to control, or even increasing, soil erosion.

### 4. Farmers want more flexibility in the program.

Farmers believe that the buffer program should cede more control to local offices. This would allow conservationists to use their professional judgment to tailor the buffer program to local conditions. The result of such a step: a program that would make more common sense to the farmer.

### 5. Consistency of messages from the NRCS and the FSA.

The consistency of the messages from the two agencies appears to vary. In some parts of the country farmers report receiving consistent information and interpretations from the two agencies. In other areas, however, farmers note inconsistent messages from them.

## IV. Overall Assessment

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### 1. The buffer program is working.

Despite all the difficulties noted in this report the National Conservation Buffer Initiative is making progress. Farmers are installing buffers. They first read about the programs, they then contact conservationists at the Service Centers, and they install appropriate conservation buffers on their land. The cost-sharing, rental payments and technical assistance make this program attractive to farmers.

## Supporting and Restraining Forces

The graphic on the following page presents what's called a forcefield analysis. It illustrates how various factors contribute to a farmer's decision to install a buffer strip under the continuous CRP sign-up. In a forcefield analysis a farmer's behavior is seen as the result of supporting and restraining forces. Changes can occur when the supporting forces are strengthened and/or the restraining forces are weakened. The FSA could, for example, increase the likelihood of farmer participation by allowing farmers to hay/graze the buffers or by otherwise adapting the program to local conditions.

# Installing Conservation Buffer Strips

## Supporting and Restraining Forces

### Supporting

### Restraining

#### Land Tenure

- ← Landowners are unwilling to forgo rental payments on cropland in favor of buffers
- ← Landowners unaware of the program
- ← Tenant farmers are reluctant to invest in buffers

#### Buffer Practices

- |  |   |   |                                     |
|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| Buffers viewed as effective means of erosion control | → | ← | Buffers require maintenance         |
| Buffers benefit wildlife                             | → | ← | Buffers harbor pests and weeds      |
| Buffers have aesthetic value                         | → | ← | Buffers take land out of production |
| Buffers protect water quality                        | → | ← | Buffers can be hard to farm around  |

#### Problem Recognition

- Soil erosion is a problem buffers can cure

#### Buffer Program

- |  |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|--|
| Cost-sharing   | → | ← | Rigid applications of rules unsuited to local conditions   |
| Rental payments  | → | ← | Inadequate rental rates for certain types of ground        |
| Low grain prices make program attractive                 | → | ← | Fear loss of individual property rights                    |
| Consistent information/interpretations from FSA and NRCS | → | ← | Inconsistent information/interpretations from FSA and NRCS |
| Forestall local conservation mandates                    | → | ← | Fear that program will become mandatory                    |
|  |   | ← | Lack of staff to implement the program                     |
|  |   | ← | Limits on how buffers can be used                          |
|  |   | ← | Lack of local control in program implementation            |
|  |   | ← | Requirement to use native grasses                          |

#### Communication Effort

- |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| FSA/NRCS newsletter                     | → | ← | Limited staff time to promote program      |
| National publications featuring buffers | → | ← | No systematic strategy based on watersheds |
| Intermediary groups supporting buffers  | → |   |  |

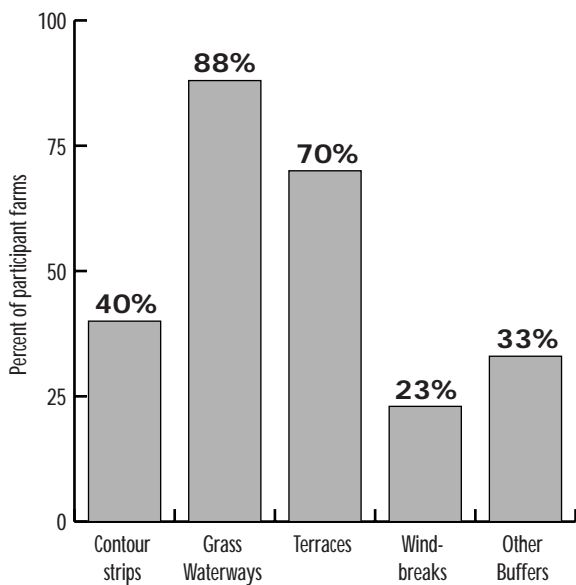
# Farmers' Awareness of Conservation Buffers

## Farmers are very familiar with the various types of buffers.

Farmers understand the types of buffers that are appropriate to the land that they farm. Early on in the discussions, moderators distributed the general buffer brochure and asked farmers which buffers they knew about and which ones they had on their lands. They readily identified grass waterways, terraces, filter strips, and riparian buffers. This is consistent with the findings from the 1996 focus groups. As one farmer commented, "Everyone in the neighborhood has grass waterways. That's just common life in farming."

The following chart shows the types of buffer strips focus group participants had on their operations. They most commonly reported that they had grass waterways. The "other" category most commonly comprises filter strips and riparian buffers.

Chart 1: Buffer practices on participant farms.



## Farmers describe their buffers.

At the start of the focus groups farmers were asked to describe some of the buffers they had on their operations. Virtually everyone could describe at least one type of buffer and could explain how they benefited from it.

### Grass waterways:

*Grass waterways is all I've got right now.*

*We just have grass waterways. Anything else we have we don't mean for it to be there.*

*The only thing we have is waterways and I didn't consider a waterway a buffer. That's the only thing we have with our terraces and everything. As long as I've been farming we've had terraces. They've just been there forever. They didn't come from the CRP at all.*

NOTE: In Nebraska, farmers reported that they were taking out their grass waterways and replacing them with terraces with tile outlets.

### Filter strips:

*I have filter strips and, if it ever rains, we'll have a shallow water wildlife area.*

*I do have a filter strip that I planted two years ago along a creek. It's doing what it's supposed to, all except in one place where it's basically bottom ground.*

### Riparian buffers:

*I have grass waterways and filter strips. I suppose you'd call them riparian buffers. They have a lot of trees in them.*

*We've got some grass waterways and some riparian buffers – unplanned.*

### Hedgerows:

*We have hedgerows which would be considered as field windbreaks.*

*We have hedgerows, like he said.*

One farmer pointed out that the National Conservation Buffer Initiative was simply building on what farmers had already been doing.

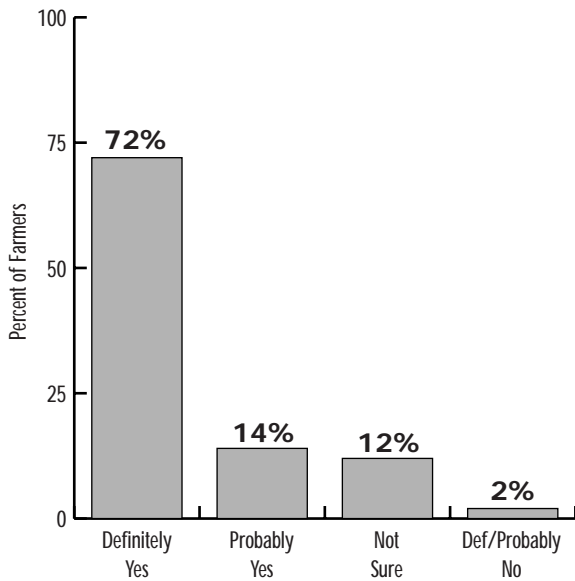
*I think it's a mistake to think that we do these just because the NRCS approaches us. I think it makes sense to do a lot of these things. I think it's things that we knew. I'm not so sure it wasn't a grassroots movement to begin with. We think about these things, too.*

# Changes in Conservation Buffer Awareness

## Farmers report that they are hearing more about buffers.

Although they are already well acquainted with buffers, farmers say that they are now reading a lot more about them. Articles about buffers are appearing in the newspapers and magazines farmers read. Farmers say that they are also hearing more about buffers from local NRCS staff, from farm suppliers and custom applicators, and from conservation organizations, such as Pheasants Forever. The following chart suggests that a strong majority of the farmers are hearing more about buffers. When asked if they were “seeing more buffers in your county,” 68 percent replied, “Definitely yes.”

Chart 2: Are farmers hearing/reading more about conservation buffers?



## Magazines and newspapers.

When asked where they are hearing information about buffers, farmers most often mentioned magazines and newspapers.

*I think there are more articles about them in your farm magazines. Start to see some there.*

*Every farm publication you pick up usually has an article or two every issue on buffer zones and things. [Tie to USDA?] Some do and some don't.*

*I'm personally reading more.*

*Farm magazines. You see what specific fellows have done in their own operation and you see some things I wouldn't have thought of. I think they are trying to let people know what's available.*

*A lot of the farm publications, Farm Journal, Successful Farming, Creative Farmer, I see a lot about streambank stabilization, buffer strips, herbicide buffer strips, livestock buffer strips.*

*In the dairy magazines they address that now as a means of controlling waste-water run-off. Protection for streams from manure run-off and nutrient management stand-points. It's been basically in the last year that I've seen numerous articles on it.*

# Awareness of Specific Buffer Programs

## Farmers were familiar with only those programs that applied to them.

Farmers do not have a complete picture of all available buffer programs. In general, they pay attention to and remember only those programs that apply to them. Thus, there is widespread awareness of the CRP. Many farmers know that they can get buffers from the continuous sign-up portion of this program. They are much less familiar with subsidiary programs, such as EQIP, WRP, and WHIP. When presented with a list of these programs and asked to comment on the ones they know, farmers are most likely to mention EQIP. Their knowledge of the other programs tends to be superficial.

## As previously noted, farmers pay attention to the programs that apply to them.

*EQIP program I am familiar with. The other ones, no. I didn't know what WHIP, or WRP, or SIP, was. I am familiar with the EQIP program. I probably read 'em, you know, and they just didn't strike me. Because I have read this brochure. None of them really struck me as something I could use.*

NOTE: The above comment exemplifies how farmers read and recall programs. This farmer had seen the brochure but recalled only the EQIP program.

*EQIP. I couldn't remember it until Barry said it a minute ago. That's where they targeted certain watersheds.*

*I guess EQIP is a big program. I probably know just a little piece. I'm no expert. It's a program I've heard of. Had some understanding of, but not a lot.*

## Local conservation publications.

Many farmers said that they learned about the various buffer programs from the local NRCS/FSA newsletter.

*The Clinton County agency's newsletter. There have been several things in it.*

*The FSA newsletter is an excellent tool. I've learned a couple of things in the last two years from it, that there's no way that I would have gotten by asking somebody. If it wasn't in there, I wouldn't have been able to ask. It stimulated me to ask and get help.*

*I think the newsletter coming from here [USDA service center]. I think they are trying to do their best to let you know what's available through a newsletter. We're going to have to take the initiative to check it out further to see if we might be able to do some good.*

*Our local office does a real good job of sending out their newsletter and up-dating. They don't explain the whole thing in the newsletter. But they give you enough so you know if you want to go in and ask about it.*

*The local mailings from here, the FSA newsletter.*

## Local commodity groups.

A few farmers said they learned about buffer programs from their commodity groups.

*We have the Cattleman's Association, and we try to promote the program at meetings and we have fliers that we sent out. Normally when you present something like this at a meeting they kind of frown at it, but a month later they'll come back and ask you a question about it and then you send them to see the people here [NRCS office].*

**Personal contact with NRCS staff.**

A number of farmers mentioned that they got information about specific programs from the NRCS staff during visits to the office. Farmers rely on their local offices for guidance. If a program piques their interest, then they are likely to stop at the office and ask about it.

*The information and education from my local office - and [NRCS agent] specifically - the continuous CRP program was something he mentioned to me every time. Of course, I had to take the initiative to go in there.*

*I realized I needed some more erosion control there. The soil, it really wasn't a serious problem but I realized we needed more. So I contacted the SCS. 'Oh, gee!' They got all excited. 'Gee, yeah. We've got a program coming out now where we can PAY you to put those in. And leave them in for ten years. It's called the CRP.' So I said, 'Let's get at it.'*

*I guess I've gone to them over the years. We keep in touch with each other. They know me on a first name basis because I'm in there for one reason or another, and they'll say, 'We've got this new thing out, now.' So it's a work-together situation.*

*Mainly we just hear about them [programs] and let [NRCS agent] help us. 'We got a program for this.' We [the farmers] may not know the name of it.*

**Buffer programs are new; awareness will increase.**

In a number of focus groups farmers pointed out that the buffer program is new. They feel that awareness of specific programs will spread as the program matures, as farmers have more contact with it, and as the benefits are known.

*The buffer strip [program] is a new deal. It's just coming into focus here [Nebraska].*

*I think before they came out with the program - with the CRP, with the strips, before that, I don't think you heard too much about it, or you didn't pay much attention to it because there's not a whole lot of incentive to leave \$1,000 an acre ground sitting idle so someone else can walk out there and hunt pheasants and you pay taxes and get nothing out of the deal.*

*Two years ago there was nothing like this around. I think people will become more aware of it as time goes on.*

*I'd say it's still pretty low-lying as far as planting buffer strips along streams. I don't think it's really taken off.*

**NRCS staff comments on program familiarity.**

Some of the conservation staff echoed this view about the novelty of the program. In some areas they had no demonstration plots to show farmers the practices and how they would work. A key to the program would seem to be successful buffers already in operation, with staff ready to showcase precise problems, solutions and practices.

*I think we're in the beginning of the curve. Talking about a program that's just been implemented the last two years. I think you're in the beginning of it, where people are maybe beginning to warm up to the idea.*

*We haven't been in this buffer thing long enough to where we've got enough stuff on the ground where we can actually show people what's there. That's one of the best tools, just to take them and show them some of the practices.*



# Awareness of the National Conservation Buffer Initiative

## Most farmers are not familiar with the initiative and its goal.

Most of the farmers we met with had not heard of the National Conservation Buffer Initiative and its goal of establishing two million miles of buffers by the year 2002. To be sure, there were a few who had heard of the initiative or who had even seen the Secretary of Agriculture on television discussing this Initiative. General awareness of this effort, however, is low.

### Some had heard of the national initiative.

Some farmers had heard of the initiative and had a sense for its formal goal.

*I thought that it started about two years ago. When they started giving technical assistance and cost-sharing on it.*

*The Secretary of Agriculture said something about this on TV.*

*I just heard in the first couple years they wanted the buffer strips to run clear across the U.S. The goal of the first or second year of the program.*

### Knowledge about the initiative's goal is sketchy.

Farmers had a number of different ideas about the initiative's goal.

*I think it's all water quality, isn't it?*

*That's what I'd say. Number one is water quality.*

*The prevention of soil erosion?*

### Skepticism about the formal goal.

When informed of the initiative's goal of two million miles of buffers, farmers voiced some doubt and raised some questions. Some believe that the general goal is too abstract and that state or local goals should be substituted.

*It's a number. It's an attractive number. It's catchy. Throw a dart at the dart board: 'Oh, we'll use two million.' If you're going to do this thing, let's do it for real. This is bureaucratic crap.*

*What does this two million miles represent? What percent of total stream bank? Why did they pick two million miles?*

Some have their own, personal goals.

*My desire is to take care of the 2,000 feet of frontage I have on my property.*

# Reaction to the Brochure “ Buffers: Common-Sense Conservation”

## The buffer brochure produces mixed reactions.

The brochure “Buffers: Common-Sense Conservation” received mixed reviews from the farmers. Some described it as a good, broad introduction to the buffer program, suitable to farming and non-farming audiences. Other farmers, however, thought the brochure did not provide enough detailed information about the program, that it slighted the economic benefits to the farmer while emphasizing benefits to wildlife, and that it targeted a non-farming audience.

## The brochure is suitable for all audiences and provides a good overview of the buffer program.

*I think this is as good for the conservationists, and also if you're just going to give an overview to John Q. Public.*

*I've read it before and I think it ought to be mailed out to probably everybody. I think it's for everybody. It touches food, water, and soil.*

*I have a feed store, and I hand them out to people that come in. I want people to know what we're doing. That we're not the bad guys, and that we're trying to do something about it. Just to let people know.*

*We have so many people that are moving out of the Atlanta metro area and buying 30, 40 acre estates, that don't have a clue because they've never been involved in agriculture, that this might be useful to them.*

*Well I don't know that this brochure isn't useful to us here. To me this is the first that I've seen it, and I think it has a lot of good information in it. It's a good introduction type thing. When they want to get more specific that's when they should go to the office. [So is this a teaser that gets you to go to the office?] Yes, definitely.*

## Farmers also had strong criticism of the brochure.

Many of the farmers thought the brochure lacked a “farmer focus.” They noted that it emphasized the benefits to wildlife rather than benefits to the farmer, particularly economic benefits. In addition, they thought the brochure was too general; that it raised questions rather than answering them. Some of the farmers indicated that this was the first time they had seen the brochure.

The brochure illustrates how the program would benefit wildlife.

*The brochure is very well done for anyone other than farmers reading it because the farmer knows what's best for the land....I think we have more wildlife today than what there was 50 years ago....So as farmers we must be doing something right.*

*Haven't seen it before. Seems like my first impression is that it's emphasizing wildlife quite a bit.*

*Never seen it before. Very informative but it leans towards wildlife.*

This farmer thought the benefits to wildlife put a positive spin on the program.

*Wildlife is becoming....People have more leisure time. Everybody wants to come out to the country, no matter where you're at. They still want to come down and go hunting, so it's bound to fit into that.*

Participants in each group noted that the brochure omitted economic benefits to the farmer.

*In my neck of the woods you're thinking cash rent. I don't see much economics in here. My first thought after you rent a farm, you're on cash rent, is not how I can increase the wildlife....I think you need to emphasize economics more. Get a lot more people involved. You're going to hit some of them here, but you're going to miss a lot.*

*It was good information just to give a cursory overview but as far as the nuts and bolts and the thing from a farmer's viewpoint, as far as nuts and bolts financial expectation, things like that, this isn't that.*

*There's no dollar figures....It looks like it will promote habitat for wildlife, but it doesn't show you a whole lot, the economic side of it.*

**Probably because of these features, some farmers thought the brochure was aimed at the non-farming public, including environmental groups.**

*It's a nice brochure but it's not taking care of the farmer. I think it's more geared to the other aspects than what the farmer, the man taking care of the land, is.*

*I thought it was geared for what all the government publications are geared for — the general public. [So you don't see it as geared for you?] I guess it could have been, but it isn't. It covers it all.*

*It would go over good in a doctor's office.*

*Probably for environmental groups.*

*I think this is intended for somebody else, not for me.*

These farmers nicely summarized the opinions of many of the farmers in the groups.

*The program should be suited toward the farmer and the landowner. These are the side benefits, and it looks like it's more suited to the public, and to get the momentum, [but moving in the wrong direction]: 'Hey, I live in town. Those farmers better be doing those [conservation] kinds of things.' You shouldn't start with convincing the other people that it's good and then the farmer has to do it. You should start by convincing the farmer.*

*I think that a brochure for farmers wouldn't go straight for the wildlife benefits, they would go for what benefits the ground, what benefits the farm, and future generations. I really think if we take care of what we got, we're going to see more wildlife.*

# Promoting the Program

## Farmers continue to think that personal contacts may be the best way to promote the buffer program.

The results of these groups confirm what was heard in 1996: personal contacts may be the single best way to promote the buffer program. In 1996, farmers suggested one-on-one meetings, small group discussions, and open houses as likely approaches. They also suggested the use of trusted intermediaries, such as commodity groups, as likely promoters of the buffer initiative. Farmers in the recent groups echoed these thoughts.

### Personal contacts.

These farmers recommend the personal touch. Note that they also suggest a strategy in which agents visit the properties while talking with the owners.

*One way to do this would be to have target areas within the county that have a goal, say this is how many stream banks, and then look at the targets. Go to the farmers or the landowners in that area, and one-on-one, explain that to them.*

*Contact those landowners and go out and talk to them.*

*One-on-one contact. Explain the program. Hitting the people who should have more of an interest if they are on a quality waterway. Those are the places that should be hit first, not me on the high, dry, hill somewhere.*

*You almost have to do it on a personal contact basis if you really want to get results. It's like we're the membership of an organization. You can send all types of paper but they are not going to join. You've got to talk to them.*

In some parts of the country conservation agents take the program to the producers. In Oregon, for example, one conservationist conducts neighborhood meetings with produc-

ers. Typically, these meetings consist of the NRCS conservationist, the local FSA agent, and an extension agent. They make a short presentation to the farmers and then respond to questions. The farmers and ranchers in the area appreciate this approach.

*Throughout the year they send out newsletters. But then in the spring they go around to meet you and make sure the farmers know about it, the ones that want to know about it.*

*I can't speak for all the ranchers and farmers but they probably hold the government agents in a little bit of hostility. But when they come out and talk to them, and make the effort to bring the programs, and talk to you one-on-one, they're probably a little bit less hostile, more receptive to nice treatment.*

*You're having a meeting with your peers. You got a bunch of neighbors there and you're addressing issues together, rather than in there one at a time. More minds together seem to do a better job.*

*It's a fantastic office. These guys just tell you everything.*

### Trusted intermediaries.

The program should continue to work through trusted intermediaries, such as commodity groups, farm suppliers and conservation/wildlife organizations.

*Conservation groups care [about buffers]. Quail Unlimited. Pheasants Forever.*

*Go to grassroots organizations like the Cattlemen's Association.*

*Ducks Unlimited.*

*The Ruffed Grouse Society.*

*I'd like to touch base on the third party issue. I think that's really great. Somebody as big as DU, they probably raise as much money as all the conservation groups put together.*

**Need for information.**

Some farmers point out that they simply need to know what programs are available to them.

*I guess I want to know what's out there, what's available, and how it will apply to me. That's my main concern.*

*We farmers and landowners need to be made aware of what the programs are that are available, what the funding is, what the requirements are. We need that information or nothing is going to get done.*

*Get the information out there. It could be promoted and advertised stronger at the local level. I'm not insinuating that [agent] does not do his job. It can be pushed harder.*

*There's a lot of programs out there. Tons of them. Good incentives. We don't know about them.*

*The government is passing all kinds of programs but nobody is aware of them.*

# Common Sense in the Buffer Program

## Many farmers believe the program lacks common sense.

In most of the focus groups farmers complained about a lack of common sense in the buffer program. This conclusion was based on specific decisions that they felt increased the cost of the program while making it less effective. Given the program's slogan, this conclusion seems ironic and troubling.

### Lack of flexibility in applying the rules.

Another way to say that the program lacks common sense is to say it's inflexible. Farmers feel that strict interpretation of the rules blocks common sense solutions in their areas. Some are also concerned that management of the program may be in the hands of people who don't sufficiently understand farmers and farming. They express this clearly and eloquently, pinpointing another noteworthy obstruction.

*Everything in these programs seems to be a cut and dried rule and when you're out there trying to operate everything, it's not all cut and dried. Different situations need different things to happen. Things need to be a little more flexible to fit each person's situation.*

*They don't want the farmer taking advantage of the program, and that's right. You don't want people sucking money out for all it's worth. But when they have those rules hard and fast like that, that ties the hands of the local people to do the right thing.*

*The biggest thing is the restrictions in the handbooks. They don't allow them [NRCS] to allocate the funds as they should be allocated.*

*What we're afraid of is when someone comes out here and says, 'You will do this,' and don't use common sense but read it right out of the book. That's what we're afraid of. I trust [local NRCS agent] to*

*interpret the rules within reason. But you get a guy right out of college and he's got this little book to go by, and he comes out here, well, he can give you a hard time.*

*If there was some way of applying the intent to the practice, it would improve the program dramatically. It would also improve the acceptance of it.*

*Seems like they've lost touch with the average farmer. Some of these rules that come down are just so far fetched. Economically not feasible.*

*I see this as having the potential of this thing being directed by people that don't know a thing in the world about what we do out here.*

### National rules and regional differences.

Farmers are concerned that the buffer program's national rules fail to accommodate regional differences.

*The rules need to be more local. We're not the same as Texas, Wisconsin, or Nebraska. It's hard to make a rule that fits everything.*

*The problem is that the language in this program doesn't take into account the differences between Nebraska and middle Georgia. The difference between what we have to comply with here, with wetlands, won't apply in Nebraska where they're more worried about the permit to drill a well.*

*This program needs to address the differences between the southeast and other areas. Even if they can't get it down to the states. But if they could get it to regional differences it would help everybody.*

*Make sure the rules that are written for the program apply to all of the differences across the nation, from Georgia to Utah to wherever.*

### Misallocation of program dollars.

Some farmers are concerned that the program's funds are being directed into areas that, for them, are of low priority.

*Where is common sense? This area shows that we need physical or mechanical structures to control this water and maintain the stability of our soil. They have been refocusing that money back toward wildlife habitat and things like that. Which is great where it works, but there's no point in establishing a wildlife habitat if the river or one of these tributaries of it is going to suck the soil out from under the bottom of it.*

### More remarks about flexibility and common sense.

In the following case, cost-sharing was not provided to install drop structures on land adjacent to CRP land. Erosion on the adjacent property is known to be threatening both the soil and the conservation practices on that CRP land. It is seen as an example where a narrow view of the situation and unreasoned application of the rules resulted in a decision that failed to protect the resource.

In this case "bottom of the ditch" refers to a problem on the neighboring land.

*But what I'm saying is we can go in there and throw all the money at it in the world, we can do everything we want to do. But if we don't address the problem in the bottom of the ditch, if we can't get any cost-sharing, any help, then we have not solved the problem. We can spend all the money we want to from this line up, but until we address the problem in the bottom of the ditch, we haven't fixed the problem. I'm not saying I want to put that ditch in CRP. I realize it hasn't been in production. But we need to be able to spend the money down there and cost-share....*

Here's an example that relates to the administration of buffer programs. In this case, a farmer narrowly missed the sign-up date for the CRP. Now he must take his land out of the program.

*There's something that burns me and maybe you can take this back. A neighbor of mine has had his farm in the CRP for ten years. Highly erodible land. They missed the sign up date by three days. They tell him at the SCS office, 'Sorry, guy. You're going to have to tear this all up next year and farm it. And if you want to re-enroll it, then get your butt back here by the cut-off date.' That's bullshit. They are going to tear that whole farm up. It's all seeded down. They're going to tear it up. Plant crops in it. And then they're going to look at an expense of seeding it all back down and getting this grass cover back in place. That's not right.*

In the following situations farmers have to replant fields to native grasses at high cost and at the risk of increased soil erosion. In the first field, the farmer believes it would naturally evolve towards switchgrass if it were left alone.

*The other thing I don't like, in order to compete you have to agree to do stupid things. I'm going to enhance my grass stand. That means you have to go and plow up a bunch of grass that's already there. It might rain and you'll lose all kinds of dirt. It seems stupid to plow up a good stand of grass that's holding the soil and take the chance of losing a lot if it rains, and maybe you're not going to get a good stand the next time around for a year or two.*

*The 16 acres I'm trying to re-bid in CRP. I'd guess a fourth of it is all in brome. But my waterways were switchgrass. But now a fourth of that field has switchgrass all through it, and in another ten years it's going to be all switchgrass and brome. And yet in order to score more points, I have to tear up 51 percent of that brome field and plant the native grasses in there. If the government is cost-sharing on the seed, think of the wasted amount of money the government is expending for something that's already doing what it's supposed to be doing.*

*Like I say, this field I'm putting in above the 150-acre lake. I'd hate to go in there and tear that up. I tear that up and I get a good rain, all my good soil, since I've had it in there for ten years, all my good soil is going to end up in the lake.*

This decision increases the cost of the program.

*They are handing out these rules and regulations. You get more points if you destroy this. On a 20-acre field you have to destroy ten acres. It costs you \$100 an acre for seed. The government will pay their share of Round-up and everything else. You're spending the government's money to do ten acres. You're probably spending between \$500 and \$1,000 that wouldn't have to be spent.*

### **Native grasses.**

The requirement to plant native grasses caused this farmer to take land out of CRP and put it into production.

*I've got a quarter in CRP. I got fortunate. When I bought it I farmed it for three years, and the guy that had it before should never have farmed most of it. It should have stayed in pasture. I put it in CRP, that was the general idea, and now this coming year I've got 37 acres I'm going to farm again, because of the part they insisted I put native [grasses] on it, and I said I wouldn't do it.*

### **Concerns about the FSA.**

Some farmers explicitly attribute the lack of common sense to the FSA and to its interpretations of the rules.

*I'd rather see the money go back to the NRCS and let them do what they know how to do.*

*The people who know what needs to be done have to have the money to spend, not some guy that's just running the paperwork.*

*These guys [NRCS] are trying to run a program and somebody else is allocating the money. This other person does not want to give the money out, if you want to be honest about it. It's like it's coming out of their hip pockets.*

*What we run into are wording problems, that, because the money has been taken away from his [NRCS] office, and is now directed to the FSA, they [FSA] back up and say, 'No, you can't do that because right here it is in black and white. We can't spend money right there.' Even though the common sense and plus the educational knowledge these people [NRCS] have is not allowed to work. Because they're not, the funds have been taken away from them and directed to another agency.*



# Local Control

## Farmers want more local control of the buffer program.

Farmers want their local agents to have more control. They feel that, naturally, local agents understand the local situation better than people in Washington, D.C. do. Local control would increase flexibility and common sense in the program.

### More local authority.

*How can we get our own office here to have a little more authority, rather than go clear back to Washington? They know what the farm situation is here. Them people back there don't know a kernel of wheat from a kernel of corn.*

*I think the buffer program is an excellent program. I'd like to see more local authority and more local pricing, instead of having Washington establish the price you receive.*

*I'd still like to have our local [NRCS agent] have more authority.*

*The closer you can get the solutions to problems back to the source, at the source, the better off and more reasonable the solution is going to be. The closer you get the solution back to the source of the problems, is key.*

*One other point: county local autonomy is necessary. It won't work without it. Don't make two offices. You need one office with one guy watching everything.*

*Flexibility and local control. It's been proven that local watershed committees really [provide] a lot of productive, good information. If we had a little input from committees like that.*

### More program flexibility.

More local control would result in more flexibility in the program. Farmers suggest that the local agent should look and listen and then decide, based on each specific situation.

*Give [NRCS agent] and his people more flexibility. They come and say, 'This buffer strip can only be 100 feet wide along a stream bank.' Well, maybe it needs to be 110 feet wide. Do what it takes to make it work right.*

*There needs to be more flexibility at the local level. They are out here. They see the problem. Sometimes the only way to solve the problem is to make the buffer wider.*

*The intent of the program is clean water. There needs to be some room for interpretation. Then I think the program would be great.*

*Flexibility is important. Local control is very important.*

*I'd say more flexibility to enable us to use more common sense in doing it.*

Some producers suggested a county committee of farmers to resolve problems related to the application of program rules at the local level.

*There will be instances when people try to abuse the intent and in those cases there ought to be some arbitration, like a county committee.*

*I like the idea of a county committee deciding a ruling or an interpretation that you feel may be unfair. Because those people are generally farmers.*

*I think if you get local farmers and ranchers involved you get better decisions and better involvement.*

**Producers want to be included in program decision-making.**

*I'd like to make it [local control] the local level, not just the local office. We have great staff doing great things but I think if you get local farmers and ranchers involved you get better decisions and better involvement. The will to do well, the will to do good, is really strong. But there has to be an opportunity to participate and to change the system. What can be accomplished with participation is pretty amazing.*

*In [name] case I'd be comfortable with that [letting the agent have control]. But there have been people in that chair and this office that I don't think all the growers would have been too happy about having that control.*

*If local watershed councils could have more input, that would be good.*

**Comments about a locally led program in The Dalles, Oregon.**

Producers in The Dalles, Oregon, commented favorably on a local project that the local ranchers designed: the Buck Hollow Project. They feel that this project could serve as a model for the entire country. The ranchers in this project took what might be called a “landscape scale” view in thinking of ways to control runoff and stream bank erosion.

Ranchers determine how to meet the goals.

*We have one of the best successes in America. That's the Buck Hollow Project where we were allowed, as a local group, to set the rules to improve water quality and quantity. You have to say, 'Here is the goal, how are we going to meet it?'*

Ranchers take a “big picture” view of the problem.

*We said we're going to capture every drop of rain that falls and let it trickle into the creek and the creek will heal itself. We don't care, then, about the 300-foot buffer that's down there because that doesn't make any difference. We've looked at the big picture and asked what do we have to do.*

Ranchers feel good about the results.

*We've had fish coming back in droves. The wildlife is loving it. And the ranchers are economically benefiting from it because we have the ability to locally manage the project.*

They think it could work elsewhere.

*It's a model not only for Oregon and the west coast, but all over America as to how to do it right.*

Some, in Oregon, feel that the federal government hasn't recognized the value of the Buck Hollow project.

*The government came in and said, 'This is what we think will work.' They didn't even consider what he had already tried. They say, 'Here, this program we think will work. We don't care what you've been doing for the past ten years.' It [federal government] doesn't give us any consideration.*

Ranchers appreciated the technical assistance the Buck Hollow project received from the NRCS.

*We've built 50 of these conservation dams. There would be no way on earth you could ever get through the red tape to even build one by yourself. You have to have an engineer and the water right and all of that. But through the technical assistance, they do all the engineering and all the permits and paperwork and everything. The technical assistance is phenomenal.*

# Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

## Farmers in Oregon have mixed feelings about CREP.

The CREP program is active in six states. Its goal is to install 100,000 acres of conservation buffers in each state. Oregon is one of those states. In Oregon we met with producers who had had experience with the program and who held a few opinions about it. Treat the following appraisal with caution since it is based on a small number of farmers from a single state.

Overall, opinions of the program appear to vary by commodity produced. Grain farmers are more positive about the program than those who raise cattle.

### Positive aspects.

Farmers appreciate the cost-sharing that comes with CREP.

*[CREP uses] lots of the same rules and guidelines as the riparian buffers on the regular CRP sign-up. So this fits us just right. It kind of pushes us over the edge. I don't think we would justify enrolling if it hadn't been for the CREP.*

*I think it's great. They cost-share to help you plant trees on these places that have been pretty much beaten down to the bedrock by the cattle over the last 120 years, and it really gives it a chance to come back. I've had the cattle out of the bottomland for two years, and it's starting to come back really nice.*

### Hesitations and concerns.

Cattlemen are reluctant to sacrifice their best ground to this program. They don't believe that the program works to their financial advantage. When they fence cattle away from a stream, they are, in effect taking the entire pasture out of production. They are paid, however, only for the land that is actually in the riparian buffer.

*My chief concern has been, our cattle portion of our business is pretty dependent on the bottom ground.*

*That's where they water, that's where they eat the green grass and get their protein in the spring, and everything.*

### Says another cattleman:

*Economically it doesn't make sense for me to get involved in it. I put together a few numbers to show why it won't work for me.*

*I'm not going to sacrifice \$7,500 worth of grazing, and [undertake] the hassle of managing that fenced strip differently, for \$4,000. If somebody came and said, 'Let's make sense out of this. Let's not put in a \$30,000 [riparian] fence that's going to be impossible to maintain.' I can say, 'Pay me \$7,500 a year, and I'll forget the cows.'*

*I have to say when the Fish and Game came in and starting making these offers, that [lack of economic sense] was one of the reasons I didn't participate in the program.*

*We have maybe a 5,000-acre pasture that qualifies for 200 acres of riparian or less. We got to somehow make some income off that creek bottom to justify taking out that whole pasture. It's just a matter of crunching the numbers. There should be some incentive for enrolling the 4,000 extra acres.*

Not all farmers want the payments in a lump sum.

*I'd rather have it spread out.*

*You're spending the next generation's inheritance.*

### **Insufficient flexibility in CREP frustrates program goals.**

CREP suffers from the same rigidity that characterizes the CRP. In the following example, the producer farms land above a waterfall. The upland water quality directly affects the fish and water immediately downstream. But because there are no fish in the stream above the falls, the land above the falls and adjacent to the stream does not qualify for CREP.

*They [CRP and CREP] are pretty much the same guidelines. With the CREP program there has to be fish in the stream to qualify. We have some cliffs and waterfalls, and everything above the waterfall doesn't qualify under the CREP. Even though it supplies the fresh water for the fish. Common sense tells you that shouldn't be the case. We've had Fish and Wildlife people tell us it should be qualified, should be the same. I'd see that as a negative [feature in CREP].*

Situations like the one described above produce the following effects:

1. Producers lose respect for the program.
2. The program fails to protect the soil, water quality and the fishery.
3. The program will fail to meet its target of placing 100,000 acres of land in conservation buffers.

### **Proposed changes to CREP.**

Producers suggested a number of changes that would make CREP more appealing to them. Key among these is payment for the removal of whole fields from production rather than the futile attempt to exclude cattle from narrow riparian areas. They point out that they can make significantly more money from the whole pasture than they can from renting out a riparian corridor alone. Some also believe that there should be a provision in the program for managed grazing along these streams.

The fences won't restrain their cows.

*Keep the cows out. When they get within 150 feet of that live, running creek they're going to go through [fences] it.*

*Set the whole pasture aside, not just the riparian corridor.*

*Let's get a program that makes sense, where you can tie up the whole watershed (the whole uplands part of it), and not put in a whole bunch of things that are hard to manage, to maintain, and are expensive and disrupt the landscape with fences. Let's just come up with a reasonable rent that makes you want to get rid of your cows.*

Allow managed grazing.

*Another big deal is the grazing of it. I think, managed in the right situation, grazing is a tool to work with to help improve things. Not in every situation, but in a lot of places.*

*We've come a long way with our cattle management, and we understand more how to manage cattle with riparian zones. I think this exclusion mindset has its place when that management isn't present. I'd certainly get interested if we could utilize that pasture, but utilize it strategically. Have a grazing plan ahead of time. We'd get some grazing value out of it, and it wouldn't be so expensive to entice us into.*

# Rental Rates for Land Placed in Buffer Strips

**Farmers have mixed feelings about the rental rates; for some the rates are too low and for others the rates are adequate given their marginal land.**

Farmers have a range of concerns and comments about the rental rates for land placed in buffer strips. Some farmers complain that the rental rates are too low, particularly for buffers along streams. Some note the disparity in buffer land rental rates between states. And some feel adequately compensated for what to them is marginal ground.

**Some farmers say the rental rates are too low.**

For some, the rental rates are too low, particularly for land that farmers consider to be their best ground. These farmers have little incentive to participate.

*It depends on what you have to do to establish it, though. When you're taking some of these filter strips, you don't have to do a whole lot but maybe go out and seed it, get it growing, then that's very attractive. Some of these waterways that you sign up, you're talking thousands and thousands of dollars to build maybe four or five acres of waterway, and then you're looking at \$110 to \$115 an acre back. It's not any incentive at all. It's a little icing on the cake, but it's not much incentive.*

*The rental rate isn't a big incentive because I don't think the rental rate for the quality of ground, for planting that narrow strip, was near enough what it should have been. Most of the time when you're planting that filter strip you're planting pretty good ground. I think we could get a lot of filter strips if they would just set a minimum of \$100 an acre. That would encourage a lot of people. I mean, you're using good*

*ground. I think it would do a lot of good for the little extra amount of money it would cost.*

For this farmer the rental rates do not even cover the maintenance costs of his buffers.

*If you didn't have to do anything, the payment's on the ragged edge of 'okay.' But the fact of the matter is that it costs me more to keep up the maintenance on it. Forget about everything else. There's no return on that land. I spend every penny plus more on maintenance. The fact of the matter is, the money is not adequate. Any way you look at it, it's not adequate.*

Some farmers who have not installed buffers under the continuous sign-up would require a handsome incentive or, again, program flexibility, to take their best ground out of production.

*I think we're just kidding ourselves that it's an incentive. If I don't get well paid for it, why should I take out my best ground and put it into a grass strip? I'm going to be straightforward. I wouldn't do it unless I got well paid.*

*I've got some land along the dam that I would like to put in a buffer strip. If I'm going to put in a buffer strip, I'm going to put it all the way along the pond. There's one area that seems to flood every other year, but when it doesn't flood, you're talking super crops in that area. When it does flood, you don't want to drive through it because of all the sticks and everything else that came in. But I can't get enough of a payment to go all the way around, to give up the good, every other year. The area that floods, when I have corn there and it doesn't flood, we're talking 180 to 200 bushels. It's like irrigated ground. But they only want to give me \$58 an acre for all the way around. I don't think it's quite worth giving it up.*

*Some of the ground we would consider doing that to is expensive ground. It's the best production, and it's expensive ground, and I don't know if they [NRCS] are willing to put that much money into it to take it out of production.*

*We'd probably put some along the creek bottom if the rental rates were higher. You're putting in pretty good ground but you're not getting a lot of money back out.*

### **Farmers are aware of and question the inter-state differences in rental rates.**

*Question: why do we not have these priority areas, and why is the payment in Iowa \$125 an acre? They have 125 or 150 bushel corn. So do we. Is it political pressure? Do the Iowa legislators have more power than our Texas legislators?*

*Our rates are based on soil types, and most of ours will vary from 30 to 38 dollars an acre. Then there is an incentive on this program where you could get possibly 40-something dollars an acre. A gentleman on my district board, he said his father put some land in, in Iowa, and he's getting like \$118 an acre.*

### **Other farmers feel adequately compensated for land they consider to be marginal.**

Farmers noted that buffers are an ideal alternative for marginally productive land and where land is hard to farm.

*This thing is really a help to me because I'm renting my land. You get paid for these buffer zones. Comparable to money rent. If he can't get in along the creek, under the trees, with his combine, he's not going to farm that. Where this way, I can get in under them to do the mowing (and one thing and another) and keep the weeds down, and I'm getting paid for it. So I feel it's an advantage to me and to him. He doesn't have to pay for something he's not getting too much off of. Along the creek we have high trees and — it was mentioned that 50 feet out from the trees — those roots get in there and they really sap the moisture out, and you don't get much income off of that.*

*We're being paid X number of dollars per acre to take that out of production. We're saving the input costs. That's probably the biggest reason. The sum of the negatives versus the sum of the positives, when you look at the whole thing, there's no real comparison. The benefits far outweigh any negatives that's been mentioned here.*

*I'm not sure what it is on a per-acre basis. I think on the ground that I would put in, and the little bit that I have in, as far as a filter strip, it's something that I basically got nothing out of. The waterway that's included in that part is heavy clay ground. I got nothing off it as far as production of economic crops go, and the buffer around the dam, that's heavier ground. No economic production. So in that situation it's a win-win situation for recreational regions; you can get closer to the pond, and I get a little return from it.*

**Still other farmers consider the annual payment insignificant relative to the cost-sharing and the benefits of improved wildlife habitat.**

*It's insignificant. No, it's not a reason to do it. I think the initial cost-sharing is probably a greater incentive than the ongoing annual payment.*

*When they'll cost-share the fencing, the critical area, that is an incentive. But as far as the annual payment, I don't even know what it is.*

*The payment for taking land out of production is not really worth what you could get out of it if you had it in production. But the other benefits, creating wildlife areas and that kind of thing, you do get benefits out of it other than monetary value.*

**Low grain prices may entice farmers to enroll land in the continuous sign-up.**

Farmers may be more willing to install a buffer now than when grain prices were higher.

*With the price of grain the way it is right now, maybe we should all buffer a little more.*

*Because of low commodity prices and the extreme cost of doing the work [installing and maintaining buffers]...it's a fact that the landowners have to have help from the government in order to do the buffers.*

# Conservation Buffers and Rented Land

## Rented land is an obstacle to the installation of conservation buffers.

Many of the farmers who operate rented land say that they have a hard time installing conservation buffers. Landlords are reluctant or unable to incur the costs of installing buffers and unwilling to forgo the income that such land might generate. Tenants are reluctant to invest in buffers on land that they rent when they have no guarantee that they will be operating that land in the future.

NOTE: The 1997 Census of Agriculture underscores the importance of rented land in agriculture. It shows that “part-owners,” for example, rented 270 million acres of land in 1997. Tenants accounted for another 46 million acres of cropland. The obstacles to installing conservation buffers on rented land means that a significant fraction of agricultural land is closed to the buffer program.

### Landlords can't or won't incur the costs of installing buffers.

Some farmers report that the cost of buffers deters landlords from installing them.

*It's hard with landlords. We've tried to do a lot on our ground that we own. On rented ground, it's very hard to convince landlords. They want to know, 'What's it going to be back to us?'*

*To a landlord they can't see any economic benefit from this, they're off someplace else, waiting on their rent check to come each year. To ask them to pay their 50 percent [may not work]. The total cost of installing waterways is close to \$4,000 an acre, \$2,000 an acre cost to establish a waterway out of their pocket. Then their \$100 an acre for ten years is, a lot of times, still not enough incentive.*

*I had a couple of landlords that's heirs to farms. Basically they have no farming background, whatsoever. You start talking about erosion control and it comes down to, they're fairly young, raising a family, and you start talking about the cost of installation, and it's like, 'We can't do that.'*

*Especially if they have to pay inheritance tax. They have to come up with tax money or sell the farm.*

Some landlords don't want to give up production on the land that would go into buffers.

*I don't think he'd let us do it [install buffers] because he wants us to maintain it as it is for production.*

### Landlords want to maximize their return on the land.

The following quotes reflect a view that landlords won't take an interest in conservation because they don't have a direct link to the land, and because their focus is on the “return on investment.”

*Most of them are looking at a return on their investment and they may have inherited that investment and they've never spent anything. They don't want to spend anything. And they can't see that doing conservation work is meaningful because they are looking at it only from a dollar angle. That's fine. It's a business. They also don't have that connection to the land that makes them want to leave it better than it is.*

*If you don't have a vested interest in maintaining something, you won't. If you're an absentee landlord you won't have a vested interest, really. You inherited the land for a dollar an acre and anything you get is your return, and you don't care about giving up a penny of it.*



**Some landlords have no tie to the land.**

Farmers also imply that those they rent from don't have a connection to the land and aren't in contact with the conservation agencies.

*I rent from a lady in Arizona. They are never around. That's how far away and remote it can get. Those people probably aren't educated. We're in the office here, and get to see this stuff [buffer material] every once in awhile. They don't have any idea what the ASC is here.*

**Unstable tenure means that tenants won't install buffers.**

Tenants are reluctant to install buffers on rented land because there's no guarantee that they will continue to farm it in the future.

*I cash-rent a lot of ground and normally you have it for an extended period of time but you don't want to invest a whole lot of money. If it's going to be a payment type of situation, you'll get your money out of it. But sometimes, some places, you don't know if you'll have it for an extended period of time.*

*Out of fifty landlords, I probably have three that would ask me, 'Is there anything we can do for conservation?' Where there is major erosion, the reason it's like that is that they didn't care and it's already got out of control. It's like that when I get it, and I can't afford to go in and spend what I'd have to because you never know if you're going to have it next year.*

*Lots of absentee landowners, they don't want to put out nothing. If you're gong to do it, fine. But like I say, you can't afford to do it on rented land.*

This farmer lost an investment he had made on land that he rented.

*I put a nice waterway on a farm. I knew the landlord didn't have the money to put it in and it definitely needed a waterway. So I paid to put it in. I ended up losing the farm three years later. That's money out of my pocket. That's my hesitation as far as who pays to put buffers in on rented ground. If you don't get the landlord to pay for it, you could easily be out-of-pocket.*

Sometimes landlords and tenants simply see things differently when it comes to managing the land.

*One of the things that a lot of us have to work through is this landlord-tenant relationship. Sometimes tenants have one view and the landlord has another and vice versa.*

# Use of Buffers

## Farmers want to be able to use the buffers for haying and/or grazing.

Buffer strips often include some of the most productive land on a farm. Farmers want to be able to use those few acres for haying and/or grazing. The program would hold greater appeal if farmers could use the buffered lands. In addition, farmers suggest that they would maintain buffers more diligently. They might even accept lower rental rates and save the government some money.

## Farmers want to have the option of haying or grazing their buffers.

This comment about not being able to use the best land seems to represent the general opinion and desire of the farmers.

*One advantage would be if you could productively use the buffers. That's the best land. That's where all the dirt filters down. That's the best land, and the best land can't be used.*

Though this farmer does not have livestock, he questions why the program forbids fall and winter pasturing.

*I don't have any livestock but that [prohibition] would be a disadvantage of the strip that we put in. After it was established, say after two years, I don't see where it would hurt anything, if you had a cow-calf operation, to be on there in the fall or during winter months when you're grazing your stocks. Not for spring pasture, but for fall pasture. The way the rules read is you have to fence that off. Could there be a clause in that grazing operation? If it's a certain type of grass that could withstand the grazing for a period of time, say 30 days or 60 days?*

## Haying and grazing would attract farmers to the program and would cut government costs.

Some farmers suggest that permitting haying or grazing on the strips would attract more farmers to the program and might cut government costs by reducing the annual rental rates.

*The filter strip would still serve its purpose if they allowed the farmer to use it for either grazing or haying. Maybe then the government wouldn't have to pay as much and you'd have more interest because [the farmer] could still use it.*

*In our critical areas this rental rate on land doesn't mean anything. But if we could get the help to establish these practices and then be allowed to use the land [in return] for maintaining them, I think we would have a whole lot more conservation work being done — if the money could be focused that way rather than in long term rental rates.*

## If buffers could be hayed or grazed farmers would pay more attention to their maintenance.

Some farmers believe that if they were allowed to hay or graze the strips they would actually take better care of those strips. In other words, haying the waterways and strips would be an incentive or reward for doing the maintenance on them.

*One of the fallacies is that when they build waterways they won't let a man go back in and harvest hay or graze it with cattle. If they were to allow people to bale hay off them or graze cattle on them, where they could receive a little more income, they could [afford to] maintain them a little better and would be more concerned about maintaining them.*

*You don't farm across it, but I think cutting hay off of it is a perfect idea. Some of the waterways, if they do them wide, if they get trash built up, the first thing the water is going to do is start whipping around. If the excess growth is baled off, you ain't got that problem.*

*I realize the CRP was designed to take land out of production. But 7.4 acres is a very nominal amount of land. [I want] to let a neighbor come in and give him the hay. [In return, he would be taking the hay] off of there. He would keep the strips clean. Keep the waterways clean so they operate like they're supposed to.*

This farmer observed that rules against the haying or grazing his strips has increased the need for maintenance on his land. For instance, he puts more money and effort into fencing.

*...it becomes more of a hassle because we graze all of our beef stocks, but you can't graze them [the buffer strips]. They don't want you to let them herds on there, ever. So you have to fence all that separate, and then you can't turn around on there or anything. So it becomes a problem, and you'd rather keep farming it than have to fence it off.*

# The Requirement to Plant Native Grasses

## Farmers do not care for the requirement to use native grasses.

Farmers look at the requirement to plant native grasses as a possible deterrent to their participation. They point out that native grasses are relatively costly, they can be difficult to establish, and there are better or equally suitable non-native grass alternatives. It should be noted that the comments that follow apply more to the CRP than they do the continuous sign-up or to CREP. To the extent that the continuous sign-up requires the use of native grasses, it is a deterrent to farmers.

### Native grass seed is costly.

*Seed cost is one of the things to consider. Especially right now. Everybody thinks native is better for pheasants. That's to be debated. The filter strip will still serve its purpose if it was brome or a different grass [a native grass] that's getting over 100 dollars an acre.*

*Seed cost. We kind of got caught in the squeeze because they were wanting to put this change in the CRP. There was a lot of brome in here and they wanted to change a bunch of that into native grasses*

### Native grass can be difficult to establish and maintain.

*And it takes a lot longer to establish. We had some native that took three or four years before we got it established.*

*The native grasses are definitely a lot higher maintenance to get started. Maybe once they are established you can take care of them equally as easy. They aren't any higher once they're established. But to get them established, they are a lot higher.*

*It's hard to start grass waterways in dry years because the grasshoppers can be kind of heavy. We've had years of chinch bugs and they just love that little young grass. It's pretty hard to get waterways established. You can go two or three years when really it ought to take a year or so to get the grass established. We've replanted waterways several times and you still come up with nothing.*

Native grasses also can be difficult and costly to maintain.

*We've got some ground that we've agreed to spend \$120 an acre to seed it. It will have some native flowers, the different grasses, and some clovers. We've been doing some of this, and this is going to be a problem in the future. Eliminating weeds from some of the grass. As soon as we put the clover out there, that eliminates some of the cheaper sprays we can spray on that grass to kill the weeds. If we use those other sprays that will kill the clover, we're putting out.*

**Farmers believe there are suitable non-native alternatives which are less expensive and easier to establish.**

*We planted a lot of native. As far as I think, for even my waterways, brome is a more solid cover than your native grass. Your native is more of a bunch grass and doesn't fill in like your brome does as far as holding soil.*

*Natives is all in bunch grass. Water will run around that where the brome, it's just solid root system.*

*Native grass is very expensive to put in and, given the practical experience in the land that I have farmed all my life, Bermuda grass is pretty much the only grass that will substantially reduce erosion and maintain itself. [Lots of waterways] have been put in fescue, and after a few years, if they are not maintained extremely diligently, they just create erosion problems because they clog up and the water just starts cutting ditches down through them.*

Farmers complained that in order to benefit wildlife they are forced to destroy grasses that they feel are providing erosion control. This is seen as an irrational part of the program.

*We already had a 12-foot brome strip. We planted this with good intentions instead of farming right up next to it (stream). And so*

*now we planted the new buffer strip. We still had the brome right next to that. They wanted us to go in and destroy it. There is no reason to go in and destroy that brome. But they wouldn't let us utilize that as part of our payment strip. We had to still measure our next 20 feet on the other side of the brome strip. I said, 'Why destroy a strip that's already served its purpose? That doesn't make good sense.'*

*Why should you destroy something that's doing what it's supposed to be doing? So you can plant native grass in there because it's supposedly better for pheasant hunters? Well, that may be. I could have got more of mine in the program, but I'd have to destroy what I had there, and I said I wasn't going to do that.*

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# Farmers Want Field Borders

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## Farmers express a strong desire that field borders be added to the agency's list of CRP-approved buffer strips.

When asked about additional buffer practices the NRCS should consider for approval, farmers immediately referred to the brochure's listing of field borders. Speaking for most of the farmers in the groups, one farmer stated: "We need to get paid for that [field borders]. I'd put field borders in. I'd do it next year. I think we all probably would."

**Farmers like the idea of field borders. They would install them if they were part of the continuous sign-up portion of the Conservation Reserve Program.**

*You list field borders here [in the brochure]. That's one that would gain lots of popularity around here. You can never get money for field borders. It must not be very high on the list.*

*That's one program that, if it could be added to CRP, would be fantastically accepted. Field borders, you bet.*

*I'd like to put in field borders but can't. Must not be very high on their priority list of buffers.*

*I'd like to see the buffers put up against the woods. That's where we have the biggest problem. I don't raise anything there anyway. In fact, I leave some of them pretty wide anyway. I think our quail would come back. The fence rows are gone, basically, in this area. It would make a lot wider fence rows and give [the quail] a place.*

*I don't get anything from it now because the trees go out 30 or 40 feet. Quite frankly, I'm not going to take the time to go in there and plant a grass strip if I'm not going to get paid for it. I'll just chop the corn down that doesn't grow. [Laughter.] That's not a drawback to what I'm doing, but a drawback to not doing more.*

And finally, this farmer offered "one thing that should definitely go into the report":

*Make field borders a paying proposition.*

# Influence from Outside Groups

## Farmers are concerned that outside, non-farming groups exercise undue influence over the program.

Farmers noticed the numerous outside (environmental) groups listed as program partners in the brochure, “Buffers: Common-Sense Conservation.” This generated a discussion as to whether outside groups should be partners, and what influence they might be exercising in the program’s administration. Many farmers thought these outside groups had “too much say” in the program and in farm programs in general. Some farmers, however, welcomed the outside groups as partners, hoping the extra dollars they brought with them would strengthen the program.

## Many farmers believe that outside groups, usually environmental groups, have undue influence over farm programs.

*I feel that the government got started on the right track, but they let your list of people have a little too much say...Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Audubon Society. They all have too much say. And they’re the ones who’ve come up with a bunch of money to pile in. So they let them have all the say about the way it ought to be done. They’re talking but not really using common sense as far as I’m concerned.*

*They have really had an impact in about the last two years in this area on what we do. A lot bigger impact than what they should have. It’s all right for them to get their two cents in, but...*

*It’s probably the result of pressure groups that have gotten out in front of the public better than we. We’re all wildlife conservationists, I’m sure. We all do lots of things on our own, even. But the outside pressure groups are kind of taking away from what we really need to direct ourselves to.*

*[Are there groups that are having more influence on the program than before?]  
Groups that don’t eat beef. Groups that promote vegetarian rather than eating animals. They pressure you.*

*The pressure groups are non-vested interest groups. They’ve got no investment in the land. They have no investment in anything but their personal agendas. If you have land, you should be the person that somebody comes to and asks how to do it. Wildlife habitat is great in areas that can’t be recovered. That’s great. Make everything that’s unreclaimable for wildlife, and make those people happy. Wonderful. But keep the productive land productive without a bunch of restrictions.*

*When you’re talking third party, you’re talking about money from these people coming forward and saying, ‘All right, the USDA’s got so much money, DU has this money they’re going to throw in.’ ‘Cause money talks. Money talks and bullshit walks.*

Farmers don’t want outsiders to tell them how to care for their land, particularly when the outsiders fail to “pay their way.”

*I don’t know. You got a lot of environmental groups out there who feel it’s quote, ‘Our job to take care of our ground in an environmentally sound way, but you pay for it, not us.’ Saying to us, ‘You pay for it.’*

*Basically we’re the stewards of the land and they are telling us how they think we should be doing our job. If they want to actively participate in it then they ought to put some money up.*

**Some farmers, however, think outside groups should be partners in the buffer program.**

Not all farmers are opposed to partnering with outside groups. Their thinking is that groups such as Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever could strengthen the program with their added dollars. It would also be a “good gesture.”

*[So not only do you want to have communication with DU, but they should say it with money?] That’s what they do in the pheasant program here in Indiana. The DNR rents, leases CRP ground in the pheasant*

*belt. Or the ground they bought with hunting license money, but in turn they come along and kick in some extra dollars for these people to keep this land out of production, and it ends up a pretty good thing.*

*[Should groups such as National Audubon be contributing to this?] I think it would be a good gesture if the groups would contribute to paying for this. They are ultimately benefiting from this as much as we would benefit.*



# Technical Assistance from Local NRCS Offices

## Farmers strongly value the technical assistance they receive from local NRCS staff.

Farmers offer high praise for the technical assistance they've received from their NRCS staff. Most farmers explained that they could not have installed the buffers without such technical assistance. For some, the technical assistance part of the program is at least as important as the economic incentives. This observation represents the opinion of most of the farmers in the focus groups:

*I don't think I could have done the program on my own, just knowing what I know, without the help here. We spent a lot of time talking about recommendations and showing me how it could be done. I really don't think I could have done it properly without them.*

## Farmers need and rely on the expertise of their local NRCS agents.

Most of the farmers indicated that the technical assistance they receive from their agents is critical for their participation in the program and to their installation of buffer strips.

*There's people in the office here who design these waterways, cattle structures, they look at your runoff, how big it's going to be, actually engineer the system. I wouldn't have any idea on some of these waterways how to make the grades, and we don't just get the cost-share money out of them, we also get the plan on how to go about doing it.*

*In my case, putting in a wetlands, I asked NRCS, 'Who's going to lay this out?' And he says, 'Well, I will.' That took an incredible amount of my anxiety away.*

*I look at more than the buffer area, which is more attractive to me now than my original ideas. I'm an educator, not a farmer full-*

*time. I don't know these type of things. I've got to have the technical support.*

This farmer commends the NRCS staff for the overall improvement in his farm operation.

*If it wasn't for the help with planning, education, and alternatives, the farm wouldn't be what it is today, which is changed around. Anybody who drives by says the same thing: 'Boy this place doesn't look the same at all.' The reason is education and opportunity from the programs. Without them there is no way that it could be where it is today.*

The technical aspect of the program may be at least as important as the cost-sharing and rental payments.

*Technical side is very important. It's tremendous. The person that wants to adopt that practice needs to know what he's getting involved in. He needs technical assistance. [How do you compare it to the cost-sharing, the economic side of the program?] It's just as important, really. Maybe more important, because without the technical office here I couldn't do what I did this past year.*

## Farmers express unsolicited praise for the NRCS agents.

*To me the tech side is important. Even with a simple process like a field border, you have somebody to bounce something off of. Talk about seeding and different mixes. A very minor thing compared to putting in a wetland. But it's important to have that available to us. I think I have a good working relationship with the local NRCS agent. I appreciate the input and the things that he does on different aspects of my operation. To have this man available to us to hit these specific spots and then come back to us and say, 'This is what you can do and this is what you can't do.' That's very important.*

*The personnel we have in this county, in this area, people know they can get the help if they want it. They are there to help and they've helped us a lot and we appreciate it. I think that's known around here and we're very fortunate to have that.*

*I think the availability here in Putnam County is really strong. I think we're fortunate to have that in this office and other offices around here. 'Cause there's too much out there for us to know. You got to have a lot of help in this day and age.*

*We just can't say enough for what these guys do for us. They are a necessity to the farmer, to the man doing the work, just to everybody. They're available when you need them, they'll give you the layout of what you need to do.*

**The need for technical assistance may be changing, or it may vary from place to place.**

A few farmers observed that private contractors offer technical services (once the domain of NRCS staff) and that, today, staff responsibility is limited to governmental administration.

*The technical assistance today may not be in as much need as it was in years past. They used to come out and lay out our terrace lines, lay out our waterways. Today, the contractor pretty much does these things. He even oversees, measures up his own work. Their [NRCS] technical assistance is in different areas today than what it was in years past.*

*It used to be a different type of help. Then it was in-the-field help. Now it's just, 'This is how the program works' and all the quirks of it and, 'This is what you have to do, and this is how you have to do it to be eligible.' Now it's more they are between the law and you. They have to be the interpreters.*

**Not all farmers require or want to wait for assistance from an NRCS agent.**

Some farmers have the confidence and knowledge to install buffers and other practices without NRCS input. Some just don't want to go through a governmental program for what they can do on their own, even with a cost-sharing incentive.

*I farm with a guy, my dad, who sees something and he does it. Regardless. We don't always call the office and everybody else. We just do it. And it may not be perfect, but it holds the soil and you can cross it, and that's the main thing you're looking at. From starting a buffer strip, and doing it through the government program, I know they are busy. They got a lot going on, and it's hard to get everybody lined up together to go in and do the job. And to get the cost-sharing figures and all that. Especially when you're doing your own contracting work yourself and you're not charging, you're not paying someone to do the work. How do you keep track of the hours and do all that kind of thing? I know there's ways to do that, but we just go do it.*

*[Could you install buffers without the technical input?]*

*Field borders I know we could.*

*Structural engineering, no [we need help]. Just plowing or putting in a grass strip there's nothing difficult about that. As long as you have the guidelines for seeding rates, what qualifies as far as being reimbursed.*

# Program Coordination Between the NRCS and the FSA

## Farmers have mixed experiences with program coordination between the NRCS and the FSA and within the individual agencies.

Program coordination is not consistent; some farmers praise the coordination between the agencies, saying that the people in both agencies work well together and that the program administration appears to be smooth. Other farmers, however, have been frustrated by the mixed messages they've received from the two agencies and within the individual agencies. Farmers also become frustrated when the local office cannot answer their questions and they find themselves referred back and forth, getting either no answers or conflicting answers.

### Program coordination has been smooth for some farmers.

In some areas of the country farmers said they thought program coordination between the NRCS and the FSA has worked well; the farmers haven't experienced any frustrations or received conflicting information. In their words, "The left hand and the right hand work together well."

*My personal opinion is that they coordinate very well. They work together well. The left hand and the right hand work together well.*

*I think it comes down to people. The people, if they don't know the answer, they say, 'Let's go talk to Barry.' If Barry's not sure of the FSA payment, 'Let's go across and talk to Roger.' I think they work together in here. I think they work real well. Once you get hold of somebody, I think you get the same story on both sides of the aisle.*

*I don't see any confusion at this office. If you didn't know any different, you walked in*

*the front door, you'd think it was one office. The people all work together. I just look at it as USDA. It's hard for me. I don't stop and think, 'Well, I'm going to FSA or NRCS.' Because they all work so well together. It's like sitting here trying to figure out who's got red or green equipment. If you don't know, how you going to tell unless you ask them? I'm not in here that much but from the producers' standpoint, I don't have a problem at all.*

### In other parts of the country, however, farmers feel that there is poor coordination between the two agencies, and that they aren't providing the same information.

*And you also run into some problems in the office. We were told in the beginning that when we completed part of the fencing, [NRCS] came out and inspected it; that you turn your bills in and you get reimbursed. And we proceeded to turn some bills in. But before that happened, we found out that if you get paid for that, that ends that component of the program. And so if we had turned in a partial area, then we would have to go to another agency [FSA] to file for payments, and then over there they're not real sure amongst themselves if what you're doing is right or wrong, and you end up nowhere. It got very frustrating. So it's not just communication with us, but also communication between the two agencies and within the one service [FSA]. It's very frustrating to try to comply and do the work, and then you can't get the same answer from two places, but you get a different answer. You ought not to be frustrated in trying to find out the clarity of the regulation, and you ought not to be frustrated when you file your claim to be reimbursed. You ought to feel confident that what you've been told and what you've been doing is the right thing.*

*When we did the wetland this year, with the local contractor who did it, there was a little conflict. The NRCS man said this is the way it should be laid out, DEP was paying for it, so there was a little of, 'It's going to be their way because they've got the money.' It all worked out in the end but there was a little bit of conflict there. It seems fine now but there can be conflict.*

Part of the problem may stem from a dependence on decisions made in Washington, D.C.

*There are 12 pending requests that have been in this office waiting for approval for initial payment since the spring that have not been acted on. There's a wait-and-see, a bureaucracy. The question that comes out of Washington is that they're told one thing one day and one thing the next day at the local office. 'Go ahead, no you can't go ahead, go ahead but you have to do it this way.' It's bureaucracy at its finest. I have a cost-share that's been pending since March [1998].*

NOTE: The above farmer is referring to CP22, riparian forest buffers. Part of the continuous sign-up, the buffers are designed to help keep cattle away from creeks. In Georgia, the FSA has questioned the eligibility of CP22, and therefore, put all applications on hold. As indicated in the quote, farmers with applications pending are frustrated by the indecisiveness.

Farmers can also become frustrated because the local office they rely on may not be able to answer their questions. They get a runaround, chasing answers from office to office.

*You can call one of the offices here, and they'll say, 'We don't exactly handle that, but maybe if you call so and so down at that office they can help you.' You can play cat and mouse like that a couple times and you might get where you're supposed to be.*

*My problem is that you come down here [local office], and they may have to call Athens, and then they may not know the answer. That's just government. It's not new, it's been like that as long as I can remember.*

*Well one problem is that the program becomes a moving target. By the time we hear about the program and finally talk to [NRCS] about it, they're not sure where they stand because the program becomes a moving target. They can't help us unless they know, and they don't know because the agency doesn't know.*

Some farmers suggest that the program be consolidated and administered by one department.

*It seems to me that every federal organization has their own programs, and some of them seem overlapping. There ought to be some way that the programs are consolidated and one department is handling this and disseminating the information so you don't have overlapping problems. But that's bureaucracy. That's always been the problem. Somebody is going to lose their job if you consolidate, so that's the reason it never gets done. Bottom line.*

*Don't make two offices. You need one office with one guy watching everything. Tear the wall down between the two places and have one guy whose office is between the two, and he administers and organizes the two.*

This farmer would like to see the NRCS have more say over the spending of money.

*I'd rather see the money go back to the NRCS and let them do what they know how to do. The people who know what needs to be done need to have the money to spend, not some guy that's just running the paperwork.*

NOTE: The participant survey asked the farmers if they had ever received mixed messages, defined as different or conflicting information, from the NRCS and the FSA. Results show that 34 percent of the farmers had received mixed messages, 44 percent had not, and 22 percent were not sure.

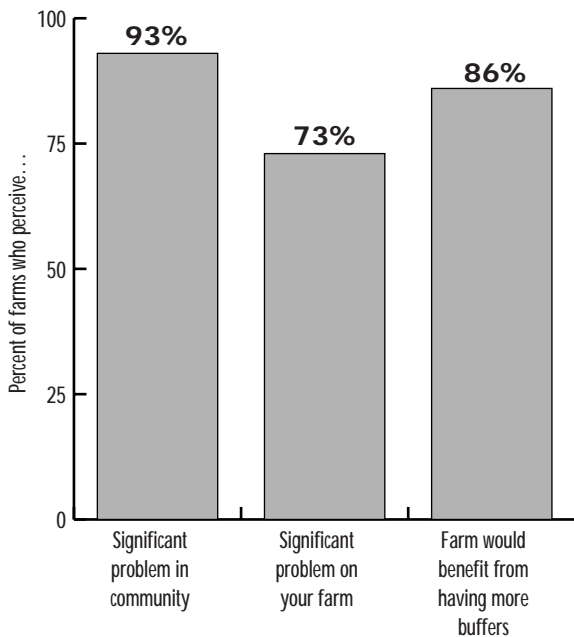
# Awareness of Soil Erosion

## Farmers agree that soil erosion is a problem.

Farmers agree that there is a problem with soil erosion which must be addressed. When asked to comment on the conservation issues in their areas and on their land, they immediately mentioned various forms of soil erosion. Some spoke about gullies in their fields, while others were concerned about local streams and creeks that were cutting into their farm land.

The following chart shows farmers' perception of soil erosion in their communities. Note that 73 percent agreed that they had land with a "significant erosion problem." Farmers also agree that buffers are a solution. More than eight farmers in ten (86%) feel that they would benefit by having more buffers on their land. The focus groups suggest, then, that there is clear recognition that a problem exists and that buffers may be a solution to it.

Chart 3: Awareness of soil erosion problem and perceived need for more buffers.



## Erosion from streams and creeks.

Farmers in Nebraska and Texas were particularly concerned about erosion from streams and creeks that run through their land.

*On the land that I own I have some pretty severe erosion on the east side because there's a creek running, and it's gradually working back. Every time it rains I lose another foot. I'd like to learn the best solution to slow down the erosion.*

*We have some members that have lost 180-acre farms to the Red River.*

*The Sulfur River runs through my land, and every year I lose a few acres.*

## Erosion on cropland.

Farmers also identify erosion as an important source of soil loss on the fields they farm.

*On the cropland and black land southwest of Lamar County, any kind of erosion that can be visualized, we have it. Sheet erosion. Rill erosion.*

*We've got more sheet erosion. And we lost tons and tons of good land.*

*I have a severe erosion problem on parts of my land.*

*The north end of the county is blessed with a lot of top soil. That's why we're still farming the way my grandfather farmed. Erosion's been kind of a perpetual deal, where we lose a little bit all the time. Then we've had a couple big events here and, all of a sudden, you can start counting a lot more rocks in the shallow ground you do have. It's been a little sobering in our operation.*

# Benefits and Drawbacks of Conservation Buffer Strips

## Farmers name several benefits and drawbacks to the use of conservation buffer strips.

The previous study (“Qualitative Evaluation of the Continuous Sign-Up Program,” December 1996) explored in detail the benefits and drawbacks of buffer strips. Therefore, this recent round of focus groups was devoted primarily to other topics. The new findings, however, confirm what was learned in 1996: in general, farmers seem to like buffer strips. They have no trouble naming a number of benefits and, of course, they also list several drawbacks.

### Buffer strips control soil erosion.

In focus groups, farmers readily bring up numerous benefits. Control of soil erosion is considered most important.

*Save your dirt.*

*My main reason [for favoring buffer strips] is that the sheet erosion, where you lose your top soil, is always bad enough. But when you just continually lose acres to [erosion], you're just shooting yourself in the foot if you don't do something to try to stop it.... We're just trying to maintain and control.*

*For the mere fact to just slow down erosion. We got highly erodible ground, and we've got ground that's on the borderline of being highly erodible.*

*Erosion control is another big one that no one's said yet. That's real important. Saves the soil. Do away with a lot of erosion.*

### Buffer strips protect water quality.

*It's for environmental reasons. For water quality, clean water.*

*Probably got a few fish we want to save.*

*I thought the point of this here program was*

*for the water, the water quality. I mean, that's why I do it. We've got a nice stream running through the back land, and I know if I didn't do something I'd be losing it.... My grandkids now are old enough to play and fish it.*

### Buffer strips can ease a farmer's labor in working the land.

*A lot of time, the grass waterways are a lot easier to cross than a big old gully running down through your field.*

*The biggest selling feature to me is that I'm working towards keeping the heavy equipment to a minimum. I'm no-tilling even the river bottom. The least amount of trips over the fields. We haul our grain. Outside of the combine, there's nothing [no heavy equipment] on any of our river flats.*

*As far as advantages, [the buffer strip program is] allowing me to do with, to work my farm, which is marginal ground as far as crop production. Harvey [landlord] hasn't made a dollar off that place in the past five years. But it's allowing me to do with the farm what I want to do, and also get government monies to assist me with it, and to pay me for it. I win both ways.*

### Buffer strips provide habitat for and thus attract wildlife.

*The other reason is my landlord.... He's quite a hunter. The other reason was for pheasant hunting. He likes to come down to go pheasant hunting. He put it [a buffer strip] in there. One of his reasons was for wildlife habitat.*

*I'm a dedicated quail hunter.... The quail population had been going like this [downward gesture], and I'm having trouble finding quail. My primary reason was to establish some wildlife habitat and to entice the quail population back up.*

*One of the reasons we did it was for wildlife. It's beneficial to wildlife, non-game and game....The wildlife is a big one.*

*That's one of the reasons we're doing it. One of the things we talked about, the riparian buffer down by the stream will make more of a natural corridor going down into the wetland area, and I love to hunt deer, and we'd seen a lot of deer. So to provide that kind of habitat, to kind of channel them.*

*The seedings that I try, I'm doing at home, I'm trying to tailor towards wildlife management. The last thing we're going to do here, I'm going to put in switchgrass....Filter strips to benefit the deer.*

**Buffer strips provide direct financial reward.**

*Income, yeah. Where I put my filter strip in, I didn't raise anything there anyway. I farmed it but I never raised anything. I've had a yield monitor for the last three years. Of course, I really knew I wasn't getting any income from it, anyway, when I got the yield monitor and got all these maps out, and see the little yellow ring around it all the time. It started me thinking that you spend the same amount of money farming that ground you're raising nothing on, as you do where you raise your crop down at that end of the field.*

*And you get paid for it. Good deal....Yeah, the economics of the thing.*

*Here's one that we probably haven't seen yet, but if you go and put these buffers in, at some point the value of that property increases tremendously. It will help bring a lot more money to the value of your land if you go and sell.*

**In addition to the direct financial reward, buffer strips have an aesthetic appeal which can increase the farm's value.**

*No matter how hardened you might be to ranching or raising cows, when you go out and you see a flock of geese kick off one of your new sediment basins, you get pretty excited about it. That's the aesthetic value.*

*Grass waterways add to the appearance of the farm, I think....The whole aesthetics. It looks better.*

*I'd say combination, basically. The wetland we put in for wildlife or just for aesthetic value; it's nice to look at, well groomed. Or we been farming more no-till, which I think looks nice. Have these nice areas. You can get waterways or filter strips and they give it a nice look. I kind of like the way they look.*

**Farmers install buffer strips in order to be good stewards of the land.**

*The long range positives — we do it for our children and grandchildren.*

*My philosophy is the old saying, 'Leave the land better than when you started.' That's it. I want my sons to have a better farm than the one I started.*

*For a better future — for stewardship.*

*One of my great interests in these conservation practices is the next generation — the soil we're leaving for the next generation.*

**Buffer strips can help a farmer comply with anticipated local environmental regulations.**

Farmers also expressed concern that local governments were beginning to mandate stricter environmental controls. By controlling soil erosion and protecting water quality now, farmers may be closer to compliance when laws are enacted. Farmers did not raise this topic during the 1996 focus groups.

*The good things about these buffers is that it puts you normally into compliance with the land use plans that are being implemented by the local governments.*

*This program is not necessarily a mandate. But what we're seeing is our local governments beginning to mandate.*

*I feel like either I'm going to do it through this program or it's going to be forced on me at some point by the county. It may not happen within the next year or two, but it will down the road, for sure.*

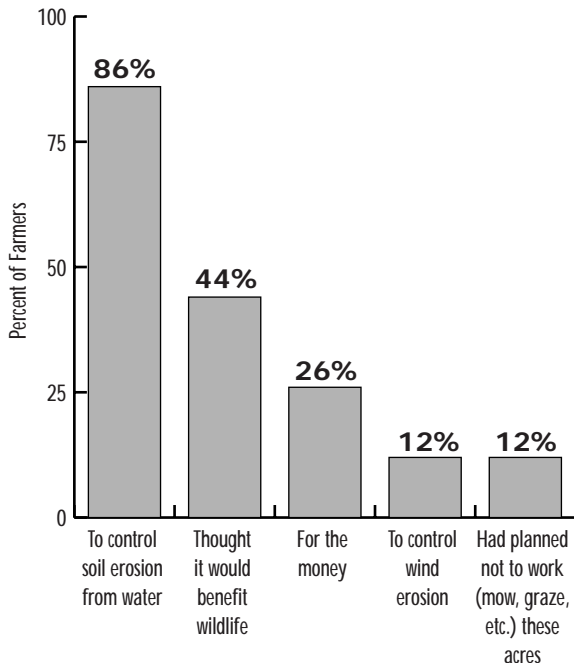
**Farmers sometimes have buffer strips thanks to the buffer strip program itself.**

Farmers often name the programs themselves as beneficial. The buffer strip programs help and encourage them to conserve land and protect resources in a variety of ways. They appreciate the help and encouragement to do the right thing.

*We probably wouldn't have done it unless we could have put it in the CRP. I know we wouldn't have got a price on it. Otherwise we would probably have farmed it up to the edge....We wouldn't have put it in, truthfully.*

The participant survey confirms the focus group findings and quantifies some of the benefits farmers receive from buffer strips. For the 48 farmers in the groups, controlling erosion from water was beneficial to 86 percent; 44 percent saw benefits to wildlife; and one-fourth (26%) benefit from the financial payments the program provides.

Chart 4: Reasons for installing buffer strips.



NOTE: Two-thirds (68%) of the participants listed “controlling soil erosion from water” as the most important reason that one might install a buffer strip.

**Drawbacks to having buffer strips.**

Farmers list a few drawbacks to the installation and care of buffer strips. For instance, buffers may require a great deal of maintenance, they take land out of production, they can be difficult to farm around, and they attract unwanted wildlife and pests.

**Buffer strips add time, labor, cost, and various troubles to farming.**

*The negative side is managing these practices. Every time you put one [a buffer] in, it creates a new management entity that you have to worry about. For me, that's the biggest problem — it's managing all of these practices. It's adding to your workload.*

*Maintenance, that's the big one.*

*Along the river, vegetation grows rapidly. Have a lot of moisture, have a lot of heat. We've had to become more conscious of keeping things trimmed. I manage it with chemicals because encroachment happens quick. That's a draw-back.*

Some farmers noted that buffer strips require fencing.

*More fences and gates to maintain.*

*The fence work, just the work of building the fences and maintaining them. It's a real job. As they age you really get into maintenance.*

**Over time, gullies may form along the edges of some buffer strips.**

*Grass waterways. One thing that limits how many you put in and how fast you do it, is once you've got them, they need a lot of maintenance. A lot of the waterways we've got around here, they don't just stay good. The water wants to run down to where the grass starts, and then you've got, instead of a waterway down the middle, you've got one in the middle and one down either side. Then that waterway straddles out and then it starts to wash. Once you fix that waterway, then you want to maintain it, and that takes some time.*

*What we're running into now is, [water is] running on each side. It just starts creating new channels.*



*The water is cutting around the edge. Or you have a bench along the edge of the waterway and the water never even gets into the waterway but runs down the edge of it. So you have another ditch right outside that took up more farmland.*

**Buffer strips sometimes take valuable land out of production and cost the farmer money.**

*Any time you take land out of production you automatically think, 'This is going to cost me something.' Especially if it's good land....*

*That's when you take ground out of production that you could have economical production from. Normally along the waterways is where your better ground is at. So you're taking your best acres out.*

*The filter strip idea is a good idea, but it ties up land and it's not productive. And generally that's the most productive part of your farm, because that's where the good land washes down. It takes good land out of production.*

**Farmers may find it hard to farm around a buffer strip.**

*I raise cattle. If I put a buffer strip in a field, and I've got one now, it's 30 feet wide along some intermittent corn, and I harvest corn stalks in the fall. I can't turn my cattle in there to graze it, unless I fence it. [So it changes your operation?] Yeah, they change the operation on it. Every time I put one in a field, it's off limits.*

*I've seen it on farms with the contouring strips. It does make things inefficient as far as being able to farm it with bigger equipment efficiently.*

*We grow a lot of soybeans on terraces. He's got a 25 foot head-on combine, and that doesn't bend too well on those terraces, let alone any wider piece of equipment.*

*Where's there's a lot of timber operations, these fences are causing us to put in special provisions in timber contracts about these buffer areas and maintaining those areas with the timber. Special provisions might be that in the area there are some trees that*

*needed to be removed that had been fenced out and the guy wanted no mechanical operations in that area even though the trees were coming out. [How do you do it then?] We had to use mules. Log them with horses and mules.*

*Watering situation, too. You're changing the whole environment of the watering, which I didn't used to worry about 'cause the cows would just go to the creek. Now if you put a watering system in, you have check that watering system to make sure it's fine.*

Buffer strips also make it more difficult for farmers to apply chemicals only to their crops.

*I think if somebody is going to spend the time and money to establish a filter strip, I think that's part of the management of that filter strip. It doesn't always get done. We make mistakes. Forget to tell the guy on the spray rig or whatever. You don't mean to but it happens. That's just part of the maintenance. [So they spray your buffer strip and it dies?] Yeah, it dies partly or whole.*

*They see a strip of grass they know it's probably not supposed to be sprayed, but they might not get it shut off soon enough. And the edges always seem to get a little narrower all the time. That's what you got to watch. Our waterways, the ones we put in, with Barry in this office, they don't run straight, perpendicular to the rows, they want to run at an angle. Then if you're running a 60 foot boom, one side is wanting to stick out, and one side has not reached it yet, that's just farming around this part of this country and learning to work around what you've established. You got one end of the boom stuck out there and ain't shut it off yet, you're going to kill something you don't want killed.*

*If your waterway does its job, the water is supposed to run down through it. If you get your application out there, and get one of these big rains, it's going to catch all that sediment, and now you've got half your chemicals laying right in the waterway.*

*You wouldn't want to be spraying your grass strip with the same thing you spray your corn field with. Spraying can be a problem.*

**Buffer strips invite unwanted wildlife and pests.**

*Riparian buffers are like a sin. Because who needs that kind of stuff to harbor all kinds of weeds and deer and wildlife that is a pest.*

*The cleaner you keep that waterway, then you don't have those hogs nesting up in there. If you start letting it get growed up deep and get a few sapling trees started, here come the hogs and then you got problems.*

*Also, anytime we try to plant something in this critical area, we got so many dang geese here now, they pull up everything. They pulled up everything on my dam last year.*

*Filter strips are just a waste of land to us [in Texas] because where I've seen several of them placed you could just call them wildlife habitats. Where there is no flowing water through the area, I can't see any benefit to soil conservation.*

**Buffer strips encourage weeds.**

*Definitely more of a maintenance cost. If you don't chop it, spray it, keep your perennials out, you end up with burdock.*

*You have to be conscious of all those weeds. Burdock comes in. Thistle weed. We deal with thistle a lot. It's just terrible in our area. We all manage for weed control but we need to get the municipalities and the state to manage for weed control. It extends into the cultivated fields very quickly. Hard to manage.*

*It's in some of these buffer areas — the natural growth which is probably good for wildlife — but the natural growth of the briars, and everything else you've worked a long time to beat back come back again and again. So there's more maintenance there.*

*That's one of the things that's bothering me. The filter strips that I have around the productive land, the maintenance of them — to try to keep down those noxious weeds, because I don't think very many of the grasses we paid for came up. I think most of it is those pest weeds.*

In the end, however, farmers seem more kindly-disposed toward buffer strips than they are highly critical.

*The negatives we addressed aren't necessarily negatives so much as they are inconveniences.*

# Conservation Buffers and Allied Practices

## Farmers agree that buffers should be used in concert with other conservation measures.

The results of the discussions and the participant survey reveal that farmers use multiple conservation practices on their farm operations. They already have ongoing help from outside representatives, including the district agents. They trust that the agents will help with buffers, too.

### Farmers are “doing everything they can to survive.”

*I think anyone that’s survived in farming these days has already implemented all of these [conservation] programs.*

*If you’re not out there watching you’re shooting yourself in the foot because you’ve got too many dollars already invested. Like with the nutrients, if you’re not doing soil testing, it’s easy to throw away five or ten dollars an acre if you’re not careful. Or to not spend a dollar an acre that would have made you ten. Anyone that’s in farming today is doing everything they can to survive.*

*I have my soil tested every year. You are out there every day watching, looking for things to come, and you take care of them yourself or you have someone else come in, depending on how bad it is. If it’s something you can handle yourself, if you got the equipment, you take care of it. If not, you have somebody else come in for you.*

This farmer attributed his integrated management plan to the assistance he receives from local agents and farm product representatives.

*The thing that I like is we have a lot of resource people we can call on who will help us make good management decisions. You still have to be the one that makes the final decision, but I trust most of the people I may call out to help, whether it be a representative from a local chemical company or a county agent or whoever. I think most of the people here really understand the situation and want to help us make the right management or conservation decision. Because of that help and the ability they have, I’m able to do some of these things you’re showing me here that maybe I wouldn’t be able to do otherwise.*

Data collected from the focus group participant survey indicate that nearly all farmers with buffer strips also have other conservation practices on their farms. Nine farmers in ten practice minimum tillage (90%), and a similar percentage (89%) have buffers on their land. These buffers include grassed waterways, contour strips, and terraces.

# Farmers' Reactions to the Meetings

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## Farmers appreciate being consulted in the program review. They hope they are listened to.

Where time permitted, at the end of the meeting, participants were asked how the meeting was for them. Despite some of the problems and frustrations they've experienced with the buffer program, participants appreciated being consulted. They hope that people running the program pay attention to their comments.

*I felt it was real good. A real good meeting. As a final thought, I would say we want to see programs like this continued — if we're going to farm, and our kids are going to be able to farm, and we want to make a living and be successful at it. But we're also the ones that are living out there, and we want to take care of what we're doing. Programs like this can do it. Thanks for listening to what I have to say.*

*I agree with him that it was nice to be invited. I wonder what will happen once this is all done.*

*Whether anything comes of this or not, this is probably one of the more productive meetings I have been to.*

*It was very good. A real meeting with real people.*

*That was a good program meeting. I'm glad you asked me to come. I really enjoyed it.*

*I appreciate meeting with people offering the opportunity to express my concerns. Thank you.*

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