



Ag field converted to CREP in Cassia County, with thrifty stand of grasses well-established (Photo by Carolyn Firth/SWCC).

“PERFECT STORM” OF AG FACTORS AT PLAY COULD INCREASE APPEAL FOR CREP

By Steve Stuebner

The summer of 2026 could be hot, dry and challenging for Southern Idaho farmers, but there may be a silver lining emerging – a “Perfect Storm” of factors converging that might compel producers to enroll in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

CREP is a partnership program between the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the State of Idaho that provides incentive payments to farmers to idle marginal irrigated cropland and conserve groundwater.

With many commodity prices below the break-even point for producers, and some farmers facing the possibility that they may be exceeding their water allotments



How to Sign Up!

Farmers should enroll at their local FSA office. Enrollment deadline is March 20, 2026. SWCC staff are ready to assist producers with any questions or technical assistance. Contact our staff for more information:

- **Rob Sharpnack**, State CREP Manager, 208-810-0768, rob.sharpnack@swc.idaho.gov
- **Brian Reed**, Idaho Falls, 208-810-0766, brian.reed@swc.idaho.gov
- **Carolyn Firth**, Burley, 208-810-0759, carolyn.firth@swc.idaho.gov

under the 2024 Water Settlement Agreement, enrolling some acres in CREP might be an attractive option right now, officials said.

“We are hearing from some groundwater districts that some of their members are approaching their fixed groundwater allocation. Based on current pumping rates, some members may exhaust their individual four-year allocations before the end of the term,” said Mat Weaver, Director of the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

“So we’re thinking the CREP program dovetails quite nicely with other groundwater conservation programs that we have in the state – it could be a valuable program to consider,” Weaver said.

“We would very much like to maximize CREP enrollment in Idaho. We think it might be advantageous for water users to strike now while the iron is hot, before nationwide enrollment limits are met.”

Adds George Hitz, SWCC Deputy Administrator, “We’d encourage Idaho’s conservation districts in the Eastern Snake Plain to help us with our outreach on CREP.”

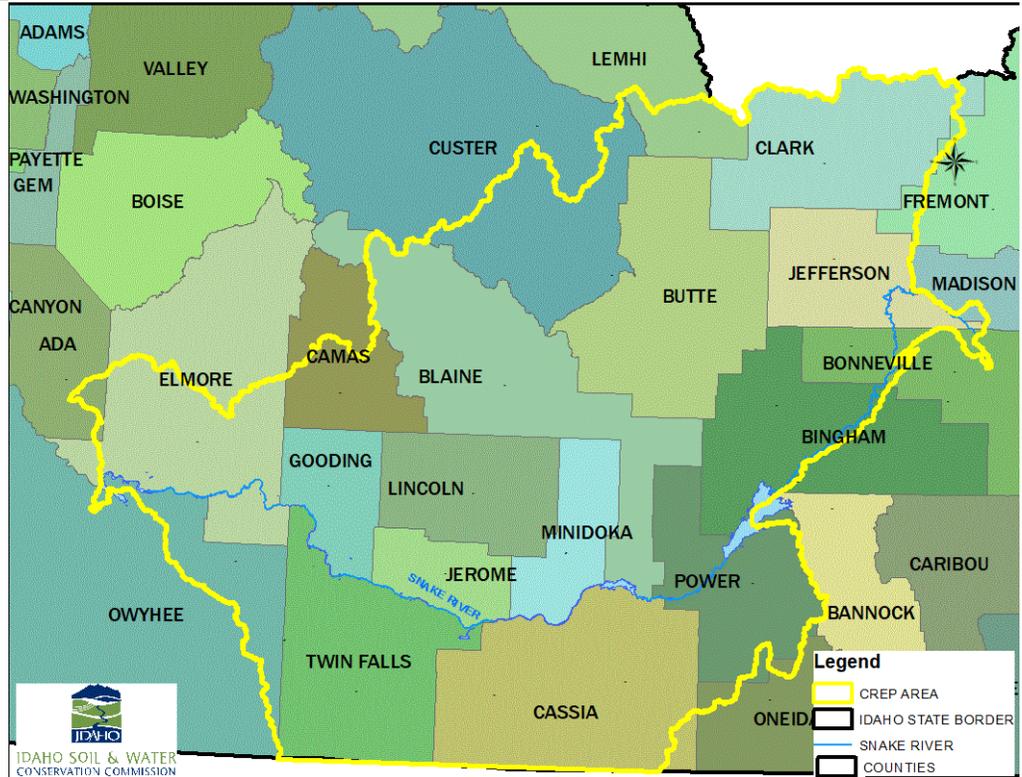
Districts can help by:

- Educating irrigators about the program and benefits.
- Spreading the word to neighbors and farmers in their districts when there is an open enrollment.
- Looking at the benefits of CREP enrollment where croplands overlie areas with a limited groundwater supply, such as Groundwater Management Areas or Critical Groundwater Management Areas designated in Southern Idaho by the Idaho Department of Water Resources.
- Evaluating cropland overlying areas with high nitrates in groundwater or other water quality issues.
- Looking at croplands that could be idled to reduce wind erosion or improve wildlife habitat.

CREP Incentives

Last year, FSA created a Sign-up Incentive Payment (SIP) for CREP, a one-time payment of 32.5 percent of their total annual payment. SIP is expected to incentivize producers to sign up. In past years, when commodity prices were high, CREP rental rates were lagging behind. Today, that’s not the case.

The CREP rental rates vary by county. Check with your local FSA office to determine your local rate. State incentive: The state will



CREP boundary map (yellow line) shows the areas and counties where producers are eligible to apply for the program.

provide an incentive direct payment of 13 percent of the federal annual rental payment for CREP.

For example, if a producer enrolls 100 acres in the program, and the CREP rental rate is \$300/acre, they would receive an annual CREP payment of \$30,000 per year. The state 13 percent match would add an additional \$3,900 a year in a direct matching payment to the producer. And SIP would provide a one-time incentive payment of \$9,750.

Brad Buttars, Manager of the Bonneville-Jefferson Groundwater District, said his producers are paying attention to the dynamics at play this year with CREP, and his water users are interested in learning more about the program.

“I think the word is out,” Buttars said. “If our water users have already used more water in each irrigation season than they were allowed under the settlement

agreement, they need to look at some alternatives before they run out of water. And if there’s a way that they can get paid on a per-acre basis to idle some cropland, that’s a whole lot better than having to idle some farm ground and get nothing for it.”

Under the 2024 Water Settlement Agreement, junior groundwater users were given a reduced water

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allotment of 205,000 acre-feet per year. That averages out to a decrease of about 11 percent, spread out among 12 groundwater districts in the Eastern Snake Plain region.

Seven of the groundwater districts already have some cropland enrolled in CREP, but there is room for more to apply.

“I think people are taking a stronger look at CREP right now,” said Braden Jensen, Director of Government Affairs for the Idaho Farm Bureau. Rob Sharpnack, State CREP Manager for SWCC, came to the Farm Bureau’s legislative committee and gave a presentation recently. “I was surprised at the level of questions being asked. There appears to be more interest in the program this year,” Jensen said.

How the CREP program works

Overall in Idaho, the CREP program, first started in 2006, is specifically designed to reduce groundwater withdrawals from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA). It’s one of many initiatives currently under way to reduce pumping and restore the aquifer to a sustainable level. Estimates indicate the ESPA is over-drafted by about 200,000 acre-feet per year.

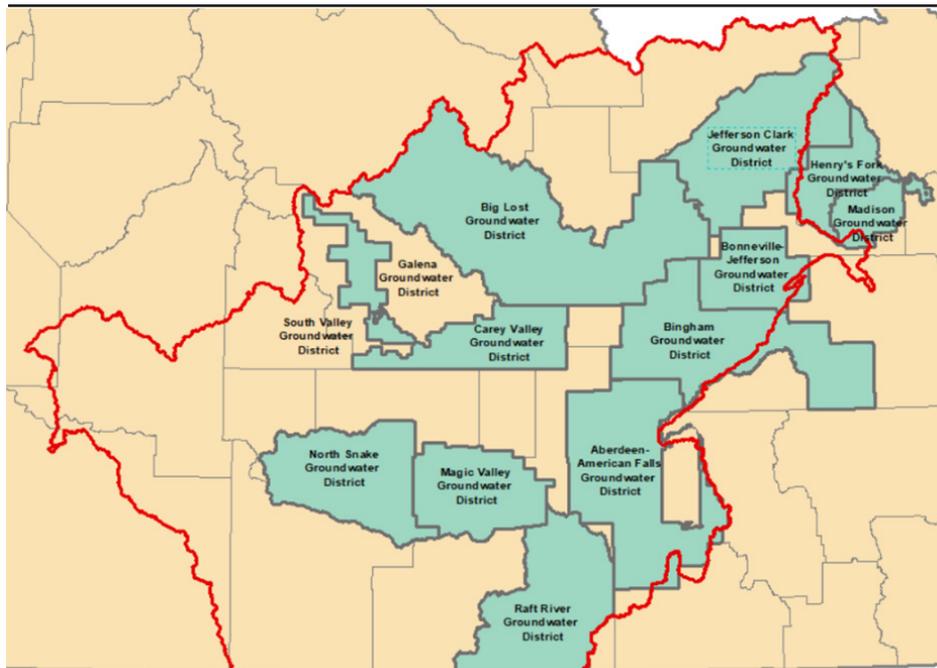
CREP is a national program related to the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Currently there is a national cap of 27 million acres to be enrolled in CRP, and 1.9 million acres for CREP. That nationwide limit has not been reached, as yet.

Major water benefit: Since the CREP program started 20 years ago, farm acreage enrollments each year have led to a cumulative savings of 622,529 acre-feet of pumped groundwater in the ESPA over that period, according to the SWCC.

If the CREP program were maximized

CREP current enrollment in Southern Idaho Groundwater Districts

| GW Districts | Contracts | Fields | Acres | Groundwater | | State | |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------|-------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | | | Savings (ac.-ft.) | FSA Rental Payment | Match Payment | Total Payment |
| Aberdeen-American Falls | 13 | 34 | 1,798 | 3,597 | \$404,763 | \$41,844 | \$446,607 |
| Bingham | 17 | 45 | 2,038 | 4,076 | \$483,265 | \$58,850 | \$542,115 |
| Bonneville-Jefferson | 2 | 8 | 51 | 101 | \$7,152 | \$560 | \$7,712 |
| Jefferson Clark | 4 | 8 | 43 | 85 | \$6,540 | \$759 | \$7,299 |
| Magic Valley | 60 | 322 | 3,535 | 7,071 | \$952,960 | \$121,199 | \$1,074,159 |
| North Snake | 4 | 17 | 428 | 856 | \$118,468 | \$15,401 | \$133,869 |
| Raft River | 20 | 87 | 1,605 | 3,211 | \$308,961 | \$22,155 | \$331,116 |
| | 120 | 521 | 9,498 | 18,996 | \$2,282,109 | \$260,768 | \$2,542,877 |



Red boundary shows area where producers could sign up for the CREP program.

in Idaho by enrolling an additional 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland, that could save about a million acre-feet of water in the ESPA over ten years.

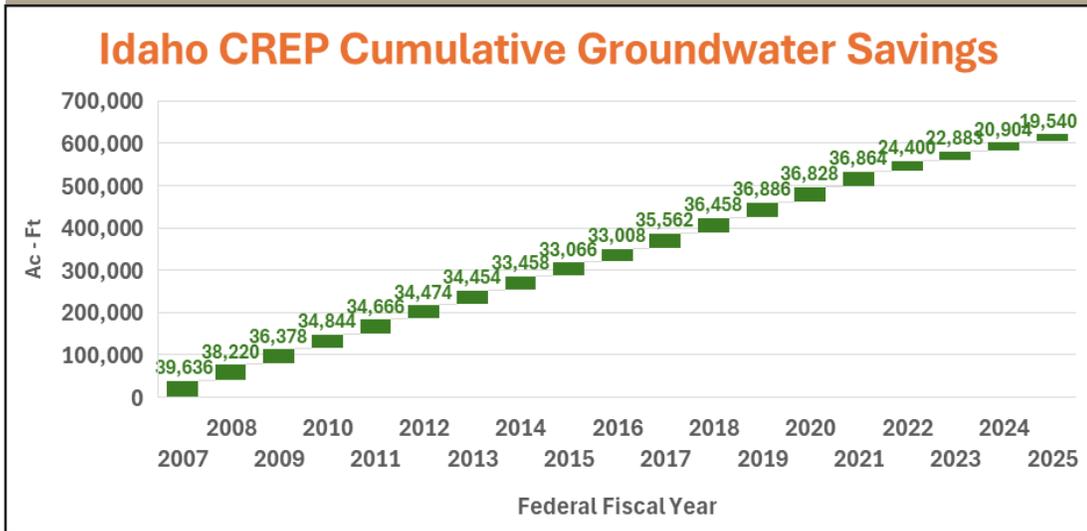
If producers enroll in CREP, they need to work with SWCC staff to develop a conservation plan for the cropland involved. They must voluntarily idle cropland and stop irrigation use for a period of 10 years. Only farmers who irrigate with groundwater are eligible. They must have been irrigating the land enrolled in CREP the last four out of six years.

The producers are required to plant a seed mix including, native grasses and forbs, in the place of the crop. Participating farms do not lose their

water rights while they’re enrolled in CREP. They retain their full water rights, Sharpnack said. They can use the water associated with the idled cropland once again if they chose to go back to growing crops after the 10-year period.

Five years ago, CREP enrollment was dropping because of high commodity prices. Some producers who had been under contract with CREP chose to terminate those contracts and start growing crops again to make more money.

At its peak, nearly 20,000 acres of cropland were enrolled in CREP, leading to water savings of about 40,000 acre-feet per year. Currently, CREP has about 9,727 acres enrolled in the program for a net water savings of 19,453 acre-feet. One



Cumulative groundwater savings from CREP sign-ups since 2007 is 622,529 acre-feet, benefitting the ESPA (Graphic courtesy of SWCC).

acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to flood one acre of land to the depth of one foot.

A total of 50,000 acres of land in Southern Idaho is open to CREP enrollment in 23 counties, including some counties in the western Snake Plain such as Elmore County and a few portions of Ada County. With enrollment only covering about 10,000 acres, there is room for many producers to enroll in the program on 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland.

Producer feedback on the CREP program

“It’s been good for us,” said Todd Harris, a producer who co-owns a family farm and ranch in the Soda Springs area and Malta.

The Harris family enrolled about 1,200 acres of cropland in CREP about 19 years ago. “The crop prices were low at the time, and we were looking at a drought year,” he said. “Right now, we’re kind of in the same situation, plus power rates are going up, and everything costs more to grow a crop. The additional money from the Water Board is going to help as well.”

Producers need to know that

they will have to make a long-term commitment, he said, enrolling acres in the program for 10 years to meet the terms of the CREP contract.

“It was a huge struggle getting the native grasses established,” Harris said. “We put in 1,200 acres of native plant seeds, irrigated it, and we couldn’t get it very well established. And then the weeds came in, so we had to deal with that.”

Today, FSA allows a diverse seed mix which will grow better in the Eastern Idaho climate. “That helped using the different seed mix,” he said. “Just getting it established is the hard part.”

SWCC staff will assist producers with the seeding plans and provide details about the best seed mix, Sharpnack said.

Harris said he recommends taking a look at CREP if farmers have some marginal cropland producing meager crops, or if CREP would be an advantage to reduce their water use, or both.

“I do wish they’d let you graze it, that would make those idled fields more productive,” he said.

Under the rules, idled cropland put into CREP cannot be grazed by livestock unless an emergency drought

declaration has declared for a particular county, with approval.

Dean Stevenson, a Rupert sugar beet farmer and chairman of the Magic Valley Groundwater District, said he has had a good experience with the CREP program. He enrolled a number of pivot corners into CREP, about 115 acres in the early 2000s. He has since enrolled more acres on farm ground that he

shares with his brother.

“When we enrolled in CREP, the farm economy was rough, and CREP looked like a good alternative,” Stevenson said. “I used to irrigate those pivot corners with hand lines, so I just eliminated watering those corners and the labor associated with that.”

As a member of the Magic Valley Groundwater District, the water that Stevenson saves through CREP also counts toward the 11 percent reduction he’s required to achieve under the 2024 Water Settlement Agreement. “That made it easier to do my reduction because I was in CREP,” he said. “It wasn’t as big of a hit.”

“CREP has worked well for me,” he said. “We kind of have a lot of stars aligned right now to make the program pretty attractive with prices down and water being tight, I hope people will take a strong look at it.”

Farmers who have water rights with trust water or enlargement limitations “should take a hard look at CREP,” he said. Those water rights could be undermined if Snake River minimum flows are

not met at the Swan Falls gauge.

Even though there is the potential for enrolling 40,000 acres of irrigated cropland in CREP in Southern Idaho, Stevenson points out that the program has some side-boards on how much income a single producer can receive.

That cap is \$50,000 a year per farm owner, Sharpnack said.

“They have a payment limitation that FSA will calculate,” Stevenson said. “You can’t just go out and put a couple of thousand acres in CREP.”

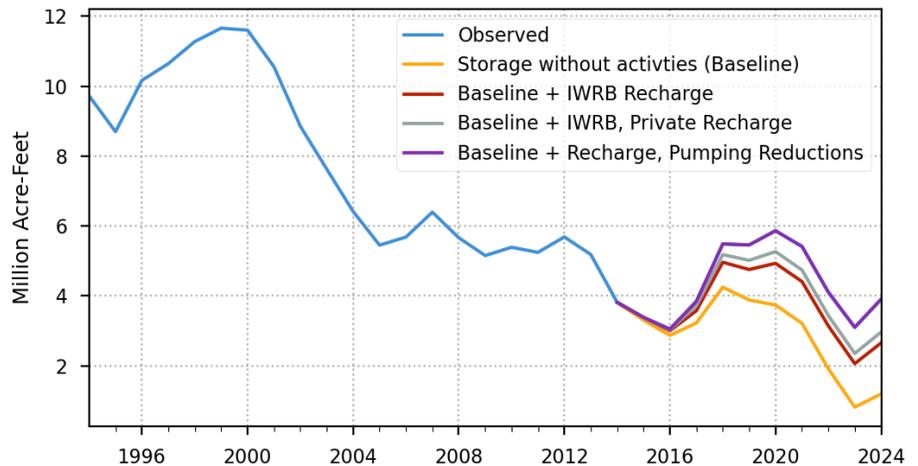
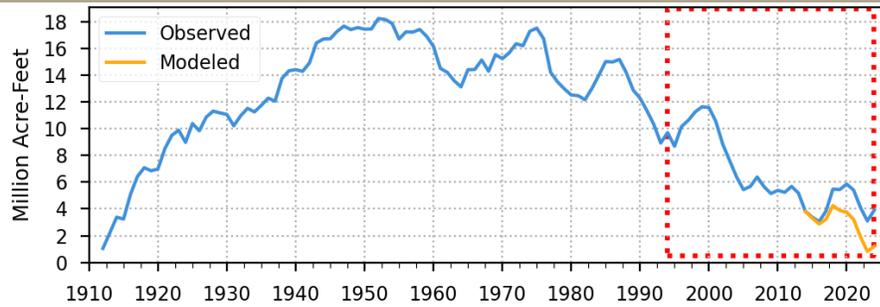
Stevenson also pointed out that the groundwater right idled during the 10-year CREP contract cannot be used on other crops, and the CREP seeding is supposed to be left alone with no irrigation or grazing. “You can’t divert the water while it’s in CREP, and you can’t transfer it either.”

He agreed that it’s challenging to keep the weeds and rodents out of the seeded fields. “We have had some issues with cheatgrass, but now we have a pretty good stand of crested wheat on our CREP ground.”

SWCC officials will come inspect the fields on a periodic basis to ensure that the CREP rules are being followed, officials said.

Why CREP is important - Economic value of the ESPA

The ESPA has tremendous significance to the communities of Southern and Eastern Idaho and the State of Idaho. It is known as a sole-source freshwater aquifer that



Graph showing ESPA water volume increases with aquifer enhancements since 2016. (Courtesy of the Idaho Department of Water Resources)

provides safe drinking water to more than 400,000 residents and 18 cities, irrigation water for more than 1 million acres of cropland, and water for many commercial and industrial businesses – from malt and barley plants to potato processing plants and cheese manufacturing plants.

The ESPA region produces about 21 percent of all goods and services within the State of Idaho—resulting in an estimated annual value of \$10 billion. Water is the critical element that supports everything.

The ESPA has been in decline since the 1950s. Recent aquifer-

enhancement activities including ESPA Recharge, IGWA Recharge, Groundwater District reductions, Cloud-seeding, and Groundwater to Surface Water Conversion Projects, are all contributing to stabilize the aquifer over time.

The CREP program is one more tool in the toolbox that would help stabilize the aquifer, officials said.

For more information on CREP, go to: <http://swc.idaho.gov>.

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.

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