

Fact Sheet - July 2009

Overview

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) assists landowners and operators in protecting grazing uses and other related conservation values by restoring and conserving eligible grassland and certain other lands through rental contracts and easements. GRP emphasizes:

- 1) Supporting grazing operations;
- 2) Maintaining and improving plant and animal biodiversity; and
- 3) Protecting grasslands and shrublands from the threat of conversion to uses other than grazing.

Special Initiatives for 2009

2009 has been a devastating year for Texas grasslands. Hurricane Ike carried a surge of nearly 20 feet high inland in Galveston and surrounding counties. Wildfires across the north and north central portions of the state denuded the soil of cover. Dry conditions in south Texas have placed 78 counties in the highest drought designation categories, extreme and exceptional. Therefore, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency will place emphasis on those two areas for conservation practices, rental agreements and easements through the Grassland Reserve Program for Fiscal Year 2009.

In the sea water contaminated areas of Galveston, Chambers, Jefferson, and Orange counties, the GRP would offer landowners cost-share for either permanent easements or restoration agreements. The lack of rain has worsened the situation as several hundred thousand acres are saturated in salts that may take years to flush away. These areas are in severe need of protection to prevent further erosion and loss of grasslands.

In north and north central Texas, high temperatures of wildfires destroyed vegetation, fences, and livestock as high winds pushed the flames across the landscape. GRP would offer resource solutions to landowners in Archer, Clay, Comanche, Eastland, Hamilton, Jack, Montague, Palo Pinto, Shackelford, Stephens, Taylor, Throckmorton, Wheeler, Wichita, and Young counties.

Triple digit temperatures and below average rainfall has left 78 counties in south Texas in the extreme and exceptional drought condition. These counties account for 40 percent of Texas' cow herd and 6 percent of the

U.S. beef cow herd. There is a critical shortage of forage for grazing and hay. Through GRP, landowners could defer land from grazing for a rental payment until grazing conditions improve.

Program Requirements

For enrollment purposes, only landowners may submit applications for easements. For rental contracts, applicants must own or provide written evidence of control of the property for the duration of the rental contract. All participants in GRP are required to implement a grazing management plan approved by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The easement or rental contract must grant USDA or its representatives a right of ingress and egress to the easement or rental contract area.

Easement participants are required to convey unencumbered title that is acceptable to the United States and provide consent or subordination agreements from each holder of a security or other interest in the land. The landowner must warrant that the easement granted the United States or eligible entity is superior to the rights of all others. The easement grants development rights, title, and interest in the easement area in order to protect grassland and other conservation values. The program participant must comply with the terms of the easement or rental contract and comply with all terms and conditions of the grazing management plan and any associated conservation plan or restoration agreement. Easement and rental contract allow, consistent with their terms and the program purposes, the following activities as outlined in the grazing management plan:

- 1) Common grazing practices, including maintenance and necessary conservation practices and activities;
- 2) Haying, mowing, or harvesting for seed production subject to appropriate restrictions, as determined by the State Conservationist, during the nesting season for birds in the local area that are in significant decline, or are conserved in accordance with Federal or State law;
- 3) Fire suppression, rehabilitation, and construction of firebreaks;
- 4) Grazing related activities, such as fencing and livestock watering facilities; and
- 5) Wind power facilities for on-farm use power generation.

Program Restrictions

GRP easement and rental contracts prohibit the following activities:

- 1) The production of crops, fruit trees, vineyards, or other agricultural commodity that is inconsistent with maintaining grazing land; and
- 2) Wind power facilities for off-farm power generation.

Rental contract participants are required to suspend any existing cropland base and allotment history for the land under another program administered by the Secretary. Easement participants are required to eliminate any existing cropland base and allotment history for the land under another program administered by the Secretary.

Land Eligibility

GRP is available on privately owned lands, which include private and Tribal land. Publicly owned land is not eligible. Land is eligible for funding consideration if the NRCS state conservationist determines that the land is:

- 1) Grassland, land that contains forbs, or shrubland (including improved rangeland and pastureland) for which grazing is the predominant use; or
- 2) Located in an area that has been historically dominated by grassland, forbs, or shrubland and the state conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC), determines that it is compatible with grazing uses and related conservation values. Land that could provide habitat for animal or plant populations of significant ecological value if the land is retained in its current use or is restored to a natural condition would also be eligible.

Participant Eligibility

To be eligible to participate in GRP, an applicant:

- a) must be a landowner for easement participation or be a landowner or have control of the eligible acreage being offered for rental contract participation;
- b) Agree to provide such information to USDA that is necessary or desirable to assist in its determination of eligibility for program benefits and for other program implementation purposes;
- c) Meet the Adjusted Gross Income requirements for conservation programs; and d) Meet the highly erodible and wetland conservation compliance requirements of the Food Security Act of 1985.

Application Procedures

Interested parties may submit an application through a local USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service office located in county seats across Texas. Applications are accepted throughout the year and should identify the duration of the easement or rental contract for which they seek to enroll their land. Rental contracts may be for a duration of 10-years, 15-years, or 20-years; easements may be permanent in duration or for the maximum duration authorized by State law.

More Information

For more information regarding the Grassland Reserve Program contact your local NRCS office, the Texas State GRP Manager, Claude Ross at 254 742-9822 or Mark Habiger, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs at 254 742-9881.

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