

Title: The Conservation Reserve Program in the Washington Steppe: A Historic Review.

Authors: Mark E. Stannard, USDA Plant Materials Center, Pullman, WA
Rod Hamilton, USDA Farm Services Admin., Spokane, WA

Approximately 1.5 million acres of cropland is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the state of Washington. Much of this land occurs in the Columbia steppe region, alternatively known as Washington's winter wheat – fallow region. CRP first enrollments occurred in the mid 1980's. CRP at that time had two objectives: 1) reduce the national wheat surplus, and 2) take highly erodible land (HEL soil) out of annual production. CRP converted annual cropland to perennial cover for a period of ten years. The perennial cover of choice was crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron desertorum*). This species met the two objectives but offered little immediate ecological value.

The next era of CRP occurred in the mid 1990's. However, enrolled land had to provide environmental benefits beyond soil protection. Installing wildlife watering facilities, establishing *Artemisia tridentata* stands, and seeding native grasses on at least 51% of the CRP acreage were a few improvements applied by farmers. Many of the original contracts were extended another ten years with these added improvements.

Most of the crested wheatgrass stands are now at least 20 years old. The original plants are still evident but crown areas have diminished, and natural reseeding of crested wheatgrass has been minimal. Native species such as *Achillea millefolium*, *Ericameria nauseosa*, *Poa secunda* and native *Astragalus* are colonizing these old stands. *Artemisia tridentata* plants established in the 1990's are producing seed and seedlings are commonly found downwind. It appears that crested wheatgrass is acting as a mid-seral succession stage in this region.