

Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP)

Reducing Mowing to Benefit Wildlife – Fact Sheet



Early fall cover following rotational mowing



Winter and early spring cover following rotational mowing

PA CREP

The Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (PA CREP) is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that started in 2000. In addition to the standard objective of reducing soil erosion on cropland, PA CREP has two other primary objectives: improving water quality and improving wildlife habitat. The wildlife habitat objective is targeted specifically to grassland habitats for declining grassland dependent wildlife. This fact sheet addresses mowing to achieve this wildlife habitat objective.

Mowing & Wildlife Habitat

Targeted wildlife depends on grassland habitat for nesting and rearing their young. The nesting and brood-rearing season for grassland birds ranges from the beginning of April through July across Pennsylvania. Nest destruction from haying and mowing during these months is the primary reason for the 75 - 80% decline of many grassland bird populations in Pennsylvania over the past forty years.

Mowing is **not** required in PA CREP. Mowing is only necessary to either help establish the desired vegetation or to help control the invasion of trees and shrubs. When mowing specifically to help control the invasion of trees and shrubs, delaying mowing and

then mowing only a portion of a field in any given year benefits wildlife.

Establishment vs. Maintenance

For most land enrolled in PA CREP there are two distinct management periods. The first is when a new seeding or planting is being established, and the second management period begins once the new vegetation is established. These are referred to as the Establishment Period and the Maintenance Period. However, there are some grasslands enrolled where the desired vegetation is already established. These fields require only maintenance management for the entire life of PA CREP contract. Recent contracts include cost-shared Mid-Contract Management activities and will usually not need any mowing in addition to the Mid-Contract Management activities. PA CREP Participants with older contracts can have Mid-Contract Management activities added to their contracts.

The information in this fact sheet will be divided into mowing during the Establishment Period where applicable, and mowing during the Maintenance Period. There are **NO RESTRICTIONS** on the timing and frequency of mowing during the Establishment Period, only some restrictions on mowing **height**. There **ARE RESTRICTIONS** on both the timing and frequency of mowing during the Maintenance Period.

HEL Fields & Buffers

There are also two major distinctions between the types of land enrolled in PA CREP: Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and buffers. Fields that include Highly Erodible Land must not only be sloping land, but also must have recent cropping history. Most buffers are adjacent to streams, lakes, or ponds. These are referred to as *riparian* buffers. The PA CREP program has specific Conservation Practices (CP) for HEL fields and specific Conservation Practices for buffers.

Conservation Practice (CP)

HEL Fields:

CP1 – Introduced Grasses and Legumes

CP2 – Native Grasses

CP4D – Wildlife Habitat

CP10 – Grass Already Established

Buffers:

CP8A – Grassed Waterway

CP15A – Contour Grass Strip

CP21 – Filter Strip

CP22 – Riparian Buffer

CP29 – Wildlife Habitat Buffer

CP30 – Wetland Buffer

Mowing Restrictions & Mowing Recommendations

Mowing restrictions and mowing recommendations are presented by the type of permanent vegetation being established or already present, either grasses or trees & shrubs, and the type of Conservation Practice (CP) being installed -- either within HEL Fields or Buffers.

GRASSES

HEL Fields:

CP1, CP2 & CP4D – Establishing Introduced or Native **Cool-Season** grasses. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: These grasses normally become established in just one or two growing seasons. It is usually recommended to mow these areas every three to four weeks during the growing season, and mowing close to the ground does not damage these grasses. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1st to July 31st *. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-contract Management activities or other recommendations.

CP2 & CP4D – Establishing Native **Warm-Season** Grasses. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: It often takes two to three growing seasons for these grasses to become established. It is usually recommended to mow these areas every three to four weeks during the growing season; however, mowing closer than **eight inches** to the ground will damage these grasses. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1st to July 31st *. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-contract Management activities or other recommendations.

CP 10 – Grasses Already Established. There is **NO ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD** for mowing, only the MAINTENANCE PERIOD: No mowing is allowed from April 1st to July 31st *. Refer to the Conservation Plan for Mid-contract Management activities or other recommendations.

Buffers:

CP8A – Establishing a Grassed Waterway. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS**

CP15A – Establishing a Contour Grass Strip. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS**

CP21 – Establishing a *riparian* (Grass) Filter Strip. **NO MOWING RESTRICTIONS** for strips 30 ft. wide or narrower.

TREES & SHRUBS

HEL Fields:

CP4D – Establishing Trees & Shrubs within grass fields. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: Mowing (and herbicide application) is recommended both early and late in the growing season for two or three years after planting. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

Buffers:

CP22 – Establishing a Riparian (Forest) Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD: Mowing (and herbicide application) is recommended both early and late in the growing season for three or four years after planting. MAINTENANCE PERIOD: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

CP29 – Establishing a *riparian* Wildlife Habitat Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT & MAINTENANCE PERIODS: **NO MOWING** is allowed on up to the first fifty feet enrolled, measured from the water side of the buffer.

CP30 – Establishing a *riparian* Wetland Buffer. ESTABLISHMENT & MAINTENANCE PERIODS: **NO MOWING** is allowed.

* The Farm Service Agency (FSA) may approve **spot** mowing before July 31st, one year at a time, **only for state listed noxious weeds**. The mowing restriction in early PA CREP contracts ends July 15th (please refer to your PA CREP Conservation Plan).