

What is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)?

CREP is the country's largest private national land conservation program. This is a voluntary program that aims to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and establish conservation with the introduction of native vegetation. In return, landowners are paid an annual rental rate along with potential incentives during a contract period of 14-15 years.

What is the purpose of Harney Valley Groundwater CREP?

Due to the significant increase in drought and permitted groundwater development for irrigated agriculture, the Harney Basin has experienced substantial groundwater declines, negatively impacting many groundwater users and natural resources. The Harney Valley Groundwater CREP (HVG CREP), administered by the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) and the U.S. Farm Services Agency (FSA), offers incentives to eligible groundwater irrigators within the Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern (GHVGAC) who voluntarily cancel their groundwater rights to reduce consumptive water use. The goal of HVG CREP is to enroll 20,000 acres of groundwater-irrigated cropland, conserving 40,000-50,000 acre-feet of water per year, helping the basin move towards a more sustainable level of groundwater use. **Enrollment will open in February 2025.**



Benefits of CREP

- **Income for landowners:** After a groundwater right is voluntarily cancelled and received by OWRD, CREP will provide a steady income through annual rental rates. The base rental rate prior was \$185 per acre/per year for 15 years, **currently OWRD staff is working with FSA create a rental rate for 2025, it is expected to be between \$350-450 per acre/per year.** Additional incentives are available, such as a signing incentive payment based upon how much land is enrolled, up to \$10,000 for enrolled land impacting groundwater dependent ecosystems such as springs and wetlands. Landowners can configure their payment plans to meet their needs, for example, a portion of payment can come as a lumpsum upon cancellation of a groundwater right.
- **Environmental benefits:** Reducing groundwater usage will help slow the rate of groundwater level decline in the Harney Basin aquifer, reduce the use of herbicides and pesticides to improve water quality, lower energy use, and restore natural habitat for wildlife.
- **Technical Assistance:** FSA and the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will work with the landowner to develop and provide technical assistance for the implementation of an approved conservation plan. If needed, FSA will assist with part of the acceptable cost of establishing the conservation practice. Other technical assistance grants are available from OWEB and the High Desert Partnership.
- **Cost Share:** A cost share payment of up to \$2,500 can be provided for permanent well abandonment.

Grazing

CREP can allow the ability to use grazing as a mid-contract management tool. Limited grazing may be possible after ample vegetation is established. Grazing practices will only occur outside of the ground nesting season (March 1st-July 15th).

CREP Monitoring Program

The success of the Harney Valley Groundwater CREP program will be measured by the amount of reduced groundwater use. Accountability for reduced groundwater use will depend on visual observation, periodic measurement of groundwater levels at enrolled lands, reported pumpage data, and satellite-based evapotranspiration. OWRD will conduct a program review every other year with assistance from the Harney Valley Groundwater CREP steering committee, who will provide recommendations for program improvement.

Do I Qualify for CREP?

Your land may be eligible if:

- Your land is located within the Greater Harney Valley Groundwater Area of Concern (an area closed to issuance of new groundwater rights by Oregon Administrative Rule 690-512).
- You have documented the annual consumptive use of groundwater for at least 2-acre-feet per acre in 4 of the 5 previous years as identified by either measured use or satellite-based evapotranspiration.
- You have owned the land for at least one year.
- You are using a permit or certificated groundwater right in which the application and water use are in compliance with the terms and conditions on the associated water right issued by OWRD.



What does enrollment in CREP look like?

1. After your FSA CREP application is accepted, a site visit will be conducted to confirm that your land is eligible for the program.
2. Landowner will sign an affidavit to voluntarily cancel primary and supplemental groundwater rights associated with enrolled land.
3. A consultation with FSA, OWRD and NRCS to determine the appropriate conservation plan for your land and payment for establishing conservation practices.
4. Technical assistance to implement conservation plan and conversion of irrigation well to stock well or abandonment.
5. Temporary limited irrigation is allowed for 2-4 years to ensure permanent coverage of native vegetation and legume.
6. Continued technical assistance from FSA and OWRD, along with implementation of the monitoring program to verify contract accountability.

Questions about CREP?

If you have questions or comments about CREP, please contact Graham Thomas at 971-283-5085 or email graham.k.thomas@water.oregon.gov.