

ILLINOIS CONSERVATION RESERVE IMPACT IMPACT

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The Federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has had a dramatic impact on the Illinois Nursery Program. In the first six (6) sign-up periods, over 8500 acres, out of a total of over 400,000 acres, have been signed up for tree planting. This ranks Illinois third out of the twenty (20) State Northeastern Area in acreage signed up for tree planting. Only Minnesota and Wisconsin, states with large conifer wood-using industries, have exceeded the Illinois totals.

Of the 8500 acre total, less than 5000 acres have been planted. Lack of available plant materials has been the major factor behind the inability to plant more acreage. Species demand has further compounded the availability problem. Illinois District Foresters are utilizing a large percentage of fine hardwoods rather than conifers to meet their plant material needs.

The use of fine hardwoods is an attempt to avoid the lessons learned from the large number of conifer plantings that occurred during the Soil Bank Program of the late 50's and 60's. while the use of conifers is not perceived as a problem in most Northeastern States, it is a problem in Illinois.

With the exception of a few isolated areas and a narrow band

across the Southern portion of the State, Illinois does not have a market for conifer wood products. Illinois has numerous stands of conifers that are unmarketable and will remain unmarketable for the foreseeable future. To prevent the compounding of this problem, Illinois has approached CRP with the goal of utilizing hardwood species. As these plantings mature the wood products will have a ready market through the State's vast hardwood industries.

This utilization of primarily hardwood species and their subsequent production problems initially slowed the planting of CRP lands. District Forester's efforts to stretch limited numbers of hardwood seedling through: 1) **Mixed** pine and hardwood plantings, 2) Acceptance of 300 trees per acre on selected sites, and 3) The use of wildlife food plots and edge plantings have been successful in increasing the number of acres that are being planted each year.

The drought of 1988 has not been helpful in closing the gap on completing CRP plantings. It has been estimated that more than 2500 acres of CRP lands planted in 1988 have failed as a result of this year's drought. Continued drought conditions may result in the failure of plantings completed in 1987.

Drought conditions have not only effected this year's efforts but may have put in motion forces that will effect future sign ups for CRP tree planting. Rising commodity prices may have a slowing effect on the willingness of landowners to put farmable lands into government set-aside programs-especially for a time period of ten (10) years. More importantly, the unpredictable weather conditions and the long-term forecast of continued

drought conditions may drive more landowners to sign up for CRP. CRP may be the only answer for a predictable income while eliminating or minimizing expenses.

The prospects for increased supplies of plant materials in Illinois are not very good. The State's Legislature has failed to increase nursery operating budgets and did not approve funds to develop additional seedbed production areas. When this is combined with drought conditions, that may limit availability of seed for next year's plant materials, the prospects for catching up look very bleak.

The expansion of the State's nursery program has not been Illinois's only approach to solving the seedling supply problems. The Department attempted to involve the private commercial nursery sector in the production of plant materials but the private sector failed to rise to the occasion. In February, following intensive negotiations with representatives of the commercial growers, the Department sought bids from private commercial nurseries for the production of eleven (11) million tree and shrub seedlings and various prairie related plant materials. Only six (6) bids were received and they ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime. No bids were received for conifer species or the prairie plant materials.

With the exception of two species, black walnut and Washington hawthorn, bids failed to meet specification or unit prices were excessively high. One vendor's unit costs ranged from \$900-\$1900 per thousand. The private sector's claim to produce plant materials at substantially lower costs than government run

nurseries failed to materialize

The commercial grower's association, the Illinois State Nurserymen's Association, was unable to convince the State's Legislature to approve funds that would have allowed the Department to enter into contractual agreements with private nursery operators. This lack of funding raises questions concerning the Department's ability to enter into contractual agreements for the production of black walnut and Washington hawthorn.

Current CRP plantings are utilizing a large percentage of available plant materials. This demand has caused a reduction in the availability of plant materials for traditional tree planting programs. CRP needs have been assigned a priority status in Illinois. This has led to a reduction in availability of plant likely in the short term-these traditional users are left with the inability to obtain needed plant materials.

As valuable as CRP can be, the failure to meet the plant needs of non-CRP users may have a long term effect on the ability to increase or maintain the State's wood resources. By using valuable hardwoods on CRP lands it is hoped that these lands will remain in forest crops at the end of the ten (10) year life of CRP. If these lands remain in forest crops this will become a valuable resource base for the State's wood-using industries. If the lands should be put back to row crops, the wood-using industries and the State's economy will have been dealt a very serious blow.