

United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency

Proposed Finding of No Significant Impact

Proposed Expansion of Indiana Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA), in coordination with the Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), has prepared a Draft Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) to evaluate the potential environmental consequences from the Proposed Action to expand the existing Indiana Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to a targeted enrollment of up to 100,000 acres in 38 watersheds in all or portions of 92 counties in the state of Indiana. The Proposed Action would also add USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) *Conservation Practice (CP) 9, Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife*, to the inventory of eight CPs currently available to eligible landowners under the existing Indiana CREP. The expanded CREP, if implemented, would continue to be administered by the FSA.

The Draft PEA, incorporated by reference in this Proposed Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500–1508); FSA NEPA regulations (7 CFR Part 799); and FSA Handbook, *Environmental Quality Programs for State and County Offices, 1-EQ Revision 3*.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to expand the existing Indiana CREP to a statewide program. The Proposed Action is needed to 1) improve water quality in streams, rivers, and other watercourses by reducing the amount of sediment, pesticides, and nutrients in agricultural runoff, 2) enhance wildlife habitat, including habitat for federally and state-listed threatened and endangered species, and 3) reduce nonpoint source nutrient losses. Specific objectives of the Proposed Action include:

- increasing the acres of wetlands in the watersheds for erosion control, sediment reduction, stormwater retention, and nutrient uptake,
- protecting a minimum of 4,000 linear miles of watercourses through the installation of buffer practices,
- enrolling up to 100,000 acres of eligible cropland including frequently flooded agricultural lands and restorable wetlands, and
- reducing the amount of sediment and nutrients in agricultural runoff by 4,900 tons per year for sediment, 4,800 tons per year for phosphorus, and 9,400 tons per year for nitrogen.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

Under the Proposed Action, the Indiana CREP would be expanded to a targeted enrollment of up to 100,000 acres in 38 watersheds in all or portions of 92 counties in the state. The Proposed Action would also add *CP9* to the inventory of eight CPs currently available to eligible landowners under the existing Indiana CREP. Owners of eligible lands would voluntarily enter into contracts with

the federal government and ISDA for 14 to 15 years, agreeing to remove enrolled lands from agricultural production and plant them to an approved CP. Participating landowners would receive annual rental payments for the duration of the contract, as well as cost share payments for establishing CPs and incentive payments for certain conditions. The 11 watersheds and 8 CPs currently included in the Indiana CREP would continue to be included in the expanded program, if implemented.

The Draft PEA evaluates two alternatives for implementing the Proposed Action: the Proposed Action Alternative, under which the Indiana CREP would be expanded as described above; and the No Action Alternative, under which the Indiana CREP would not be expanded and would continue to be administered as it currently is. Potential effects from the Proposed Action are analyzed in the Draft PEA for the following environmental resources: biological resources, cultural resources, water resources, air quality, soils and topography, other protected resources, socioeconomics and recreation, and environmental justice. The following resources were dismissed from detailed analysis in the Draft PEA because the Proposed Action would have no potential to affect them: geology and topography, Prime and Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Statewide Importance, noise, coastal zone management, sole source aquifers, and visual quality and aesthetics.

Summary of Potential Effects

Based on the analysis presented in the Draft PEA, the Proposed Action would have no significant effects on the environment. Generally, the Proposed Action would have beneficial effects on resources evaluated in the Draft PEA through the establishment of native vegetation and wetlands that would provide and enhance habitat for plants and wildlife, improve air and water quality, promote soil retention and minimize soil erosion, and enhance recreational and economic opportunities throughout the state. Adverse effects would primarily be limited to increased noise, human activity, and the generation of small quantities of air pollutants during installation and periodic maintenance of the CPs. These effects would be temporary, similar to activities that commonly occur on agricultural lands, and widely distributed in relatively small areas throughout the state; therefore, any adverse effects would not be significant.

At this time, the location and size of lands that would be enrolled under the Proposed Action are not currently known. Therefore, resources are evaluated in the Draft PEA at the statewide level. Once eligible lands are identified, site-specific environmental evaluations would be initiated by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and provided to FSA for review and completion in accordance with FSA Handbook, *I-EQ*, prior to entering contracts.

Public Involvement and Consultation

The Draft PEA and Proposed FONSI are being made available for a 30-day public review period from May 28, 2024 to June 27, 2024. A Notice of Availability announcing the availability of the Draft PEA for public review was published in the *Indianapolis Star* and *Times of Northwest Indiana*. Letters announcing the availability of the Draft PEA for review and requesting comments were also sent to federal, state, and local agencies, organizations, and Native American tribes with ancestral ties to lands in Indiana. An electronic version of the Draft PEA and Proposed FONSI is available for review and download on FSA's website at <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Indiana/index> and ISDA's website at <https://www.in.gov/isda/divisions/soil-conservation/>

conservation-reserve-enhancement-program/. Printed copies of the Draft PEA are available at local county USDA Service Centers upon request. Addresses, driving directions, and contact information for local USDA Service Centers in Indiana are available on USDA's website at <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=in&agency=fsa>.

In parallel with the NEPA process, FSA is consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act to determine the Proposed Action's potential effects on federally listed threatened and endangered species and cultural resources, respectively. FSA is also consulting with Native American tribes having ancestral ties to lands in Indiana to identify potential effects on sites of cultural, historic, or religious importance. This consultation is documented in the Draft PEA. Comments on the Draft PEA will be addressed in the Final PEA, as applicable.

Finding of No Significant Impact

In accordance with NEPA and FSA's regulations implementing NEPA at 7 CFR Part 799, I find the Proposed Action is not a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. Signature of this Finding of No Significant Impact concludes the NEPA process for the Proposed Action evaluated in the attached PEA.

Approved:

Samantha Garrison
Agricultural Program Specialist
USDA Farm Service Agency

Date