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## **USDA Conservation Reserve Program Riparian Buffer Strips Clinton County Drain Commissioner Incentive**

The Clinton County Drain Commissioner's office has been promoting landowner participation in the USDA Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program for several years. We have seen the positive effects on drains or reaches of drains that are protected by CRP buffer strips. Buffer strips help to protect against erosion down drain slopes and provide a filter to remove sediment from sheet flows before entering the drainage channel. Other benefits include easier access to drains for maintenance and inspection activities and increased wildlife habitat. Farmers often use the buffer areas as headlands to maneuver equipment.

The existence of buffer strips along drains improves water quality by greatly reducing the amount of sediment reaching the channel. The reduction in sedimentation results in less frequent and less expensive maintenance activity. Knowing this, the Drain Commissioner's office has provided incentive to potential participants and participating landowners by reducing apportionment percentages on parcels in the CRP buffer strip program. This is in addition to the financial incentive provided by the USDA. Because participation in the program is for a specified period of time, the need for annual inspections to verify the existence of the practice is reduced. For instance, if a landowner installs buffer strips without participating in the program, there would be no financial incentive for the landowner to continue the practice and the buffer strip could be removed at any time. A site visit would be required each time the drainage district was assessed to verify the existence of the buffer strip.

The FSA provides information annually to the Drain Commissioner. That information is then used to update the countywide map that readily identifies parcels in the program. When a drainage district is assessed, the Drain Commissioner is easily aware of parcels with buffer strips and can adjust the assessment formula to reduce the apportionment for the parcel.

There are drawbacks to this method. While rewarding the participants with reduced percentages is positive, it has the effect of penalizing all other property owners in the district, regardless of whether their parcel contributes sediment to the drain. For instance, if an apportionment is reduced by 10% for a participating parcel, that 10% is then spread to all of the non-participating parcels in the district. It does not consider that a residential parcel or an agricultural parcel already using good conservation practices is protecting the drain without participation in the CRP.

A modified method that would include increasing percentages on parcels that are not using good soil conservation practices may be more equitable. This could insure that those causing the need for the maintenance work would be responsible for a greater share of the cost. The Drain Commissioner could then address problem areas without negatively affecting non-problem areas. This method however, would be difficult to track as conservation practices on a parcel could easily change from year to year. It would be nearly impossible and financially impractical to track and record such practices on an annual basis.