

Twenty years of wetlands conservation

By Janet Lagler

Natural Resources Conservation Service

More than 11,000 of America's private landowners have voluntarily enrolled over 2.3 million acres into the Wetlands Reserve Program. The cumulative benefits of these wetlands reach well beyond their boundaries to improve watershed health, the vitality of agricultural lands, and the aesthetics and economies of local communities.

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts.

This program offers landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection.

The goal of NRCS is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program.

Lands eligible for WRP: wetlands farmed under natural conditions, farmed wetlands, prior converted cropland, farmed wetland pasture, certain lands that have the potential to become a wetland as a result of flooding, rangeland, pasture, or forest production lands where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored, riparian areas that link protected wetlands, lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values, wetlands previously restored under a local, state, or federal program that need long-term protection

Maintaining Eligibility

To maintain eligibility, participants must certify that they have not produced crops on wetlands converted after Dec. 23, 1985, and that they did not convert a wetland to make agricultural production possible after Nov. 28, 1990.

Any activity that alters natural wetlands, making possible the production of an agricultural commodity or forage crop is prohibited.

These conversion activities may include: filling, draining (surface ditching or subsurface tiling), land leveling, clearing woody vegetation where stumps are removed, diverting run-off water from a wetland (i.e. building a diversion).

Enrollment Options

Permanent Easement: A conservation easement in perpetuity, USDA pays 100 percent of the easement value and up to 100 percent of the restoration costs.

30-Year Easements: An easement that expires after 30 years, USDA pays up to 75 percent of the easement value and up to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

Restoration Cost-Share Agreement: An agreement to restore or enhance the wetland functions and values without placing an easement on the enrolled acres, USDA pays up to 75 percent of

the restoration costs.

30-Year Contract: A 30-year contract option is only available on tribal lands. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

Through the program, NRCS provides technical assistance to help landowners voluntarily restore and protect wetland ecosystems.

Landowners may select either a permanent or 30-year easement, retaining ownership of the land once the easement is in place.

Under the easement options the USDA will pay all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and the title insurance. Under the voluntary easement the landowner retains the rights to: control of access, title and right to convey title, quiet enjoyment, undeveloped recreational uses, subsurface resources, and water rights.

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner.

The voluntary program provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture.

How to Apply

If you are interested in applying for WRP, please review the documents listed below as they will need to be completed when you apply.

The following form is available on the USDA Service Center e-Forms website: www.USDA.gov Form NRCS-CPA-1200, Conservation Program Application

For more information about WRP, please contact your local NRCS at 352-4776 ext. 3