

Fact Sheet

March 2003

Wetlands Reserve Program

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that 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 program provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture. WRP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program. Funding for WRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Benefits

WRP participants benefit by:

- Receiving financial and technical assistance in return for restoring and protecting wetland functions and values;
- Seeing a reduction in problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas; and
- Having incentives to develop wildlife recreational opportunities on their land.

Wetlands benefit the Nation by providing fish and wildlife habitat; improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reducing flooding; recharging groundwater; protecting biological diversity; as well as providing opportunities for educational, scientific, and recreational activities.

How WRP Works

Landowners and Tribes may file an application for a conservation easement or a cost-share

restoration agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to restore and protect wetlands. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land, but retain private ownership.

The program offers three enrollment options:

Permanent Easement. This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payments for this option equal the lowest of three amounts: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the landowner. In addition to paying for the easement, USDA pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetland.

30-Year Easement. Easement payments through this option are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. USDA also pays 75 percent of restoration costs.

For both permanent and 30-year easements, USDA pays all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance.

Restoration Cost-Share Agreement. This is an agreement (generally for a minimum of 10 years) to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays 75 percent of the cost of the restoration activity. This enrollment option does not place an easement on the property. Other agencies, conservation districts, and private conservation organizations may provide additional assistance for easement payments and wetland restoration costs as a way to reduce the landowner's share of the

costs. Such special partnership efforts are encouraged.

NRCS and its partners, including conservation districts, continue to provide assistance to landowners after completion of restoration activities. This assistance may be in the form of reviewing restoration measures, clarifying technical and administrative aspects of the easement and project management needs, and providing basic biological and engineering advice on how to achieve optimum results for wetland dependent species.

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov Internet site at: www.sc.egov.usda.gov. Enter Natural Resources Conservation Service in the Agency field, Wetlands Reserve Program in the Program Name field, and CCC-1250 in the Form Number field.

Eligibility

To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 12 months prior to enrolling it in the program, unless the land was inherited, the landowner exercised the landowner's right of redemption after foreclosure, or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

To be eligible for WRP, land must be restorable and be suitable for wildlife benefits. This includes:

- Wetlands farmed under natural conditions;
- Farmed wetlands;
- Prior converted cropland;
- Farmed wetland pasture;

- Farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- Range land, pasture, or production forest land where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored;
- Riparian areas which link protected wetlands;
- Lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values; and
- Previously restored wetlands that need long-term protection.

Ineligible Land. Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985; lands with timber stands established under a Conservation Reserve Program contract; Federal lands; and lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for WRP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations. The final rule for this provision has not yet been published.

Uses of WRP Land

On acreage subject to a WRP easement, participants control access to the land and may lease the land for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a participant may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock, or harvest wood products. Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

For More Information

If you need more information about WRP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.