USDA NRCS
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USDA Celebrating the Millennium

Wetlands Reserve Program
Restoring America's Wetlands

Wetlands
Reserve
Program

What Is the Wetlands Reserve Program?

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is the Nation's premier wetlands restoration program. It is a voluntary program that offers landowners the means and the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) manages the program as well as provides technical and financial support to help landowners who participate in WRP.

Wetlands Reserve Program:

- Is a voluntary program offered nationwide.
- Offers payment, based on the agricultural value, for wetlands that have previously been drained and converted to agricultural uses.
- Pays up to 100 percent reimbursement for restoration costs.
- Lets landowners retain control of access—no public access is required.
- Lets landowners maintain ownership of land—they have the right to hunt, fish, trap, and pursue other appropriate recreational uses.
- Allows for land, including any easement, to be sold.
- Provides additional benefits for the entire community:
  - improved water quality
  - enhanced habitat for wildlife
  - reduced soil erosion
  - reduced flooding
  - improved water supply.

Landowner Use and Responsibility

In all cases, the landowner retains ownership and responsibility for the land, including any property taxes based on its reassessed value as wetland or nonagricultural land. The landowner controls access to the land; has the right to hunt, fish, trap, and pursue other appropriate recreational uses; and may sell or lease land enrolled in WRP.

The landowner may request uses which are compatible with protecting and enhancing the wetland and associated upland habitat. For example, NRCS may approve haying, grazing, or harvesting of timber under certain conditions, depending on amount, method, timing, and duration. Landowners may make compatible-use requests throughout the life of the easement or agreement.

Restored wetland in Iowa.

Eligibility

Landowner

To offer a conservation easement, you must have owned the land for at least 1 year prior to enrollment, with limited exceptions. To participate in a 10-year restoration cost-share agreement, you need only show evidence of ownership.

Land

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

- Wetlands cleared and/or drained for farming, pasture, or timber production.
- Lands adjacent to restorable wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values.
- Previously restored wetlands that need long-term protection.

Native plants (swamp milkweed) restored on WRP wetlands and uplands.

- Upland areas needed to provide an adequate ecological buffer or that otherwise contribute to defining a manageable boundary.
- Drained wooded wetlands where hydrology will be fully restored.
- Existing or restorable riparian habitat corridors that connect protected wetlands.
- Lands substantially altered by flooding where there is a likelihood of successful wetland restoration at a reasonable cost.

Ineligible Land

- Wetlands converted after December 23, 1985.
- Certain Conservation Reserve Program contract lands where trees have been successfully established.
- Federal lands.
- Lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

Volunteers planting trees in Louisiana to restore wetlands.

Landowner Options

WRP offers three options to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands and associated uplands: permanent easements, 30-year easements, or 10-year restoration cost-share agreements.

Permanent Easements

This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. The easement is attached to the property deed, ensuring that future owners of the property will preserve the wetland for generations. USDA will pay 100 percent of the cost of the restoration and legal costs to establish the easement. In addition, the landowner receives a payment for a permanent easement which will be the lesser of:

- The geographical area rate cap (available from your local NRCS office),
- The appraised agricultural value of the land, or
- An amount offered by the landowner.

30-Year Easements

These easements expire at the end of 30 years. Easement payments are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement and 75 percent of the restoration costs. USDA will pay legal costs associated with establishing the easement.

Wetland easement project in Washington.

A site in St. Lawrence County, New York, before restoration (at left) and as a restored wetland four years later (below).

Restoration Cost-share Agreements

This is a 10-year agreement (special circumstances may warrant a longer term) to restore degraded or destroyed wetlands and associated upland habitat. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the cost of the restoration. No easement is placed on the property and there is no easement or other land incentive payment.

How To Enroll

Landowners may sign up any time at the local NRCS office or USDA Service Center. Periodically during the year, NRCS will rank all eligible applications and submit them to the agency's national office for funding consideration.

1. Sign-up

Begin by making an appointment with your local NRCS office. At that time, you may:

- Review eligibility and easement requirements.
- Submit a signed application form. (This is only an application, not a commitment by the landowner.)
- Provide a copy of the property deed. Indicate a desired compensation figure for the easement, if any.

Restoring a wetland in Oklahoma.

2. Preliminary restoration plan and cost estimate

NRCS will visit the site and evaluate the land's eligibility, in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Then, the landowner—with input from NRCS, FWS, the State wildlife agency, and the local conservation district—develops a preliminary plan for restoring the wetland. The plan includes types of practices, any necessary structures, and estimated costs associated with restoration. The purpose of the plan is to examine the proposed restoration measures so that reliable cost estimates can be used for ranking and the landowner can decide if the restoration fits with his/her future plans for the land.

3. Competitive selection

Applications will be ranked to ensure that the most environmentally and economically valuable wetlands are restored with the funds that are available.

4. Notification of acceptance

All applicants will be notified of the status of their application, and whether it has been tentatively accepted. If accepted under the easement options, NRCS will determine the agricultural value of the land

Installing flashboard risers in Mississippi.

intended for WRP. The landowner will then be offered a payment amount for either the permanent or 30-year easement option.

5. Easement or agreement process begins

Easements
Once the landowner accepts the offer by signing the Option Agreement, the easement acquisition process begins. NRCS will acquire title insurance and other actions necessary to record the easement. The easement is then recorded, the landowner paid, and the wetland restored according to the restoration plan.

Forested wetland in Arkansas. (Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Agreements
Once the project is approved for funding, the landowner signs an agreement that allows NRCS to proceed with restoration implementation, either independently or with the landowner's assistance. The agreement also specifies the source of the landowner's 25 percent share of the costs.

Benefits of Wetlands Conservation

Source of income
Wetlands restoration frequently can be targeted to marginal lands that tend to be higher risk in terms of agricultural income. Payments the landowner receives from easements may supplement income from the more productive agricultural lands on the farm. Often, these payments provide landowners with the necessary financial resources to continue farming.

Water quality improvement and sediment filtration
Wetlands filter and collect sediment from runoff water, helping prevent mud from clogging lakes and reservoirs farther downstream.

Habitat for wildlife
Wetlands provide migration, breeding, nesting, and feeding habitat for millions of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wildlife. Wetlands are home to thousands of

WRP signs are available for project areas.

different plant and animal species, many of which are threatened and endangered. Wetlands also provide important winter cover for pheasants and other upland wildlife.

Flood reduction

Many wetlands store water temporarily, allowing the water to percolate into the ground or evaporate. This temporary storage reduces the peak water flow after a storm.

Water supply

Wetlands are reservoirs for rainwater and runoff, providing needed water for wildlife and improving soil moisture for forage production. Wetlands also help recharge groundwater aquifers.

Recreation and aesthetics

Many individuals and organizations are interested in, and sometimes willing to pay for, wetland recreation activities such as wildlife watching and hunting. Wetlands, and the ecological diversity they provide, add beauty to any landscape.

Yellow headed blackbird in South Dakota wetland.

For More Information

For information on conservation programs that protect and restore wetlands, contact your local conservation district or USDA Service Center. General information on USDA conservation programs is available on the World Wide Web:

Natural Resources Conservation Service: www.nrcs.usda.gov

Wetlands Reserve Program: www.wl.fb-net.org

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Cover Photo: Wetland restoration project in New York.
(Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)