

NRCS' reminds local farmers that the Wetlands Reserve Program, known as WRP, can help landowners manage wet areas on the farm and address conservation issues. WRP offers both sizable income opportunities and simple solutions for the farm. WRP is an ideal solution for farms with odd, wet areas or for farmers who have an interest in restoring wetland habitat on their property.



Meet Jack..

Jack Huffington owns 177 acres of bottomland in Clark County, IL. Historically, the area would flood three or four times a year, taking the crop and inputs with it. "The government would pay me to replant it once or even twice. In the end, we did a lot of work but we didn't make any money," he explains.

The answer was NRCS' Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). WRP paid Jack for an easement and lets him do what he needs to do—let that land be wet. Jack opted for a permanent easement. "Today I've got 80 acres of water, ponds, levees, and about 3,000 trees on the area. We're re-establishing a hardwood forest on the ground and it's going to be excellent," he explains.

The Clark County NRCS District Conservationist is pleased with the restoration and confirms that the diversity of birds and wildlife in the area is astonishing. "With WRP, he was able to let this be a wetland," says NRCS staff.

With the payment money he received for the easement, Jack was able to purchase more agricultural ground for a farm that works for him. "I took the money and bought better ground that was ten feet higher and wouldn't get washed out all the time," Jack explains. Today his tenant is able to farm land that is suitable for crop production. That land is a farm that can turn a profit. The wetland oasis he has created with WRP supports deer, egrets, geese, duck and eagles. "It's a great place. It's all natural and I love spending time out here."



Meet Cliff...

Cliff McMahan started using WRP ten years ago because he had sections of swampy ground that wasn't farmable. According to Cliff, it should never have been farmed in the first place. "We used to farm it, but we barely broken even," he says. He and his brother David own and farm about 1,500 acres in Union County, Illinois.

McMahan's reasons for going with WRP were two fold—economics and the environment. "We wanted the waterfowl and the cash helped pay the bills," he says. And while he claims he's not an environmentalist, his concern and appreciation of the wildlife that frequent his land is tremendous.

Rather than fight Mother Nature, Cliff's wetlands offer a solution and are now an important stop on the migration route for many waterfowl species. The variety of birds, cranes, herons, shorebirds, nesting eagles and trumpeter swans on his 200 acre wetland is impressive.

"I'm out here all the time. It's in my blood now," says Cliff. "Our place is a buffet for just about everything. We take a great deal of pride about what we've created here with the WRP."

According to Cliff, WRP is the best government program available. "I've been able to improve my ground and even increase the actual farm value with these wetland acres. It's my retirement savings account!"

NRCS WRP Coordinator Terry Wachter worked with Cliff to develop the wetland and achieve his goals. "Cliff has created a wonderful environment out here that he and his friends and family can enjoy. It's almost like he's got his own private refuge and the birds come here because it's such a sweet spot," says Wachter.



Meet Joyce...

"If I had it to do all over again, I'd study environmental sciences or wildlife," says Joyce. Well, she can't go back, but she's doing the next best thing. She's building her own wildlife sanctuary in Central Illinois. And she is loving every minute of it.

Joyce Winch is a hard-working landowner in Bureau County. She runs a trucking business and manages farmland for cash rent. Sixty of the 255-acre wetland is in grain crops. The set aside land is primarily sandy and mucky soils, land unprofitable for production agriculture.

"The surrounding area was swampland 100 years ago," Joyce explains. "Even with all the drains and ditches we put in, we were flooded out every year. We weren't making any money."

Winch and her family had always believed that on the farm, a certain percentage of the land should always be set aside for the environment, but Joyce wanted to do more than the hedgerows and wildlife food plots she left over winter. The answer was simple: NRCS' Wetlands Reserve Program.

"In 2000 I put over 200 acres into the WRP and we planted native grasses, flowers, and trees. I'm very happy with what I have here," she adds.

NRCS technical staff joined Winch in developing a wetland restoration plan and explained how the conservation easement program works. "They explained how seeds for wetland plants lie in the soil and are dormant but they come back if you leave things alone for awhile. After the first few years, she was amazed. "To see how every season brings different colors and different critters," Joyce explains. "It's like a nature experiment right here on my land. It's wonderful to just watch it evolve."

Joyce is a self proclaimed nature lover who takes pride in her wetland. She is protective of it and the wildlife that depend on it. Her son hunts the area occasionally, but the region is fenced in to protect the pheasant, deer, turkey, and ducks. Grass grows thick, providing quality food and cover for animals.

Local NRCS staff visit Joyce and view the WRP site annually to discuss issues or any new resource needs on the land. For her part in the WRP deal, Joyce received a one-time lump sum payment for the WRP easement. However, the economic side of the equation was only part of the decision to explore a permanent conservation easement. "Oh yes, the money came in handy for paying off the mortgage. I still pay taxes on it. That's the reality of it. But the end product is what's really worked out for me," adds Joyce.

The idea of opening up the land as a sanctuary still appeals to Joyce. She enjoys the oasis she has recreated and the knowledge she has gained managing it. When she retires from the trucking business she hopes to open the area up for school children for nature walks and an outdoor classroom.

"When we decided to go with WRP, we weren't just doing it for us or our family, but for the greater good," adds Winch.

For more information on WRP, contact NRCS staff at your County USDA Service Center

www.il.nrcs.usda.gov

NRCS ~ Helping People Help the Land

