

**Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 General Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (General WREP)
Announcement of Funding, Proposal Requirements, and Review Criteria**

Agency: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Boise, Idaho

Action: Notice of request for proposals through the General WREP.

Dates: Eligible partners may submit proposals for General WREP by email and hardcopy; all proposals must be received on or before **Friday, February 10, 2012**.

Address: Applicants must submit electronic proposals to Clint Evans at Clinton.Evans@id.nrcs.usda.gov and two hard copies to Natural Resources Conservation Service, 9173 W. Barnes Drive, Suite C, Boise, Idaho 83709-1574 to the Attention of Clint Evans. If submitting more than one proposal, submit each proposal separately.

For Further Information Contact: Clint Evans by phone at 208-378-5703 or by email at Clinton.Evans@id.nrcs.usda.gov.

Overview: General WREP is a component of WRP through which NRCS enters into agreements with eligible partners to target and leverage resources to carry out high-priority wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement activities and improve wildlife habitat on eligible lands. WREP partners are required to contribute financial or technical assistance match as detailed below. All projects funded through WREP must meet all WRP eligibility and program requirements. All WREP transactions will be processed through normal contracting procedures.

Only States and local units of government, Indian Tribes, and nongovernmental organizations are eligible to submit a proposal and enter into agreements with NRCS. A nongovernmental organization is an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986. Individual landowners may not submit WREP proposals through this submission process. However, once a WREP project has been approved and announced, eligible landowners may apply for WREP through their local NRCS office. As part of the agreement, approved partners may also help facilitate the submission of landowner applications, provide additional technical or financial assistance to landowners, and provide other resources as defined in the agreement.

Benefits to the partners in WREP agreements include—

- Involvement in wetland restorations in high priority areas.
- Ability to cost-share restoration or enhancement components beyond those required by NRCS.
- Ability to participate in management or monitoring of selected project locations.
- Opportunity to utilize innovative restoration methods and practices.

Availability of Funding: NRCS is announcing the availability of up to \$15 million in financial assistance (FA) funds or \$2 million in technical assistance (TA) funds through the FY 2012 General WREP. Funds are available nationwide to eligible participants through approved partnership projects.

Under General WREP, NRCS enters into multiyear agreements with eligible State and local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and Indian Tribes to target and leverage resources to carry out high-priority wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement activities and to improve wildlife habitat and water quality. Eligible partners should submit complete proposals to the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist or director.

FY 2012 General WREP Funding Options and Match Requirements: In FY 2012, NRCS will make General WREP funds available for either a FA or TA agreement option, which have specific activity and match requirements as follows:

FA Option: NRCS will make \$15 million in FA funds available for agreements that will either result in new enrollments of eligible land under a permanent easement, a 30-year easement, a 30-year contract on acreage owned by Indian Tribes, or a restoration cost-share agreement, or will result in implementation of restoration or management of existing easements. This option provides FA funds only; there will be no TA funds provided to the partner through this option. FA funds will be provided either directly to the eligible landowner through an appropriate agreement or contract or will be provided to the partner for actual implementation of restoration or management practices or activities. Under this FA option, partners are required to provide one of the following matches:

- (a) Cash-only contributions of at least 5 percent of the restoration costs
- (b) In-kind-only contributions of at least 20 percent of the restoration or management costs
- (c) A combination of in-kind and cash contributions of at least 20 percent of the restoration or management costs

TA Option: NRCS will make \$2 million in TA funds available for agreements that will provide technical assistance services to expedite closing, restoration or management design or planning, or monitoring of existing enrollments. This option provides TA funds only. TA funds must only be used to further existing enrollments; the funds are not to be used for technical assistance activities that would result in new enrollments. General WREP technical assistance activities may include easement acquisition related services, title package review and assembly, contracting services, restoration or management designs or planning, construction stakeout and supervision, or conducting monitoring. For TA proposals, partners are required to provide a match of at least 50 percent cash or in-kind services.

The FA and TA proposal options may not be combined. Partners interested in both a technical assistance services type agreement to further existing enrollments and a financial assistance agreement intended to enroll new projects or implement restoration on existing WRP projects must submit separate proposals. The proposal must request NRCS program funds for obligation during FY 2012 (October 1, 2011–September 30, 2012). Proposals that request funding starting after FY 2012 will not be evaluated or considered under this request.

Proposals that include additional partner resources will be given higher consideration in the selection process. Contributions provided by the partners to achieve additional ranking points can be in the form of technical or financial assistance for the protection, restoration, and

enhancement of the wetland. Contributions may also be in the form of assistance with management and monitoring activities. Partners may also provide incentives to landowners to participate in WREP; however, incentive payments are not considered as part of the match requirement. Incentives include signup bonuses, practice incentive payments, or similar activities not funded through WRP.

WREP FA is delivered to eligible landowners and partners in approved project areas through easement acquisition, conservation program contracts, cooperative agreements, contribution agreements, or Federal contracts. Restoration may be achieved through payments to other parties who conduct the restoration activities.

Proposal Submission, Review and Notification: The potential partner must submit two hardcopies of the proposal, typewritten or printed on 8½-inch by 11-inch white paper and one electronic copy to the appropriate State contact listed above. The entire project proposal, not including letters of support, must not exceed 15 pages in length, including summary, responses to the information requested in the “Proposal Requirements” section of this announcement, maps, reference materials, and other supporting documents. The proposal must follow the format and address all criteria outlined in this announcement and the “Proposal Requirements” section in order to be considered.

The proposal must include sufficient detail to allow NRCS to evaluate the partner’s priority resource concerns, objectives, and expected outcomes. NRCS will review, evaluate, and rank proposals based on the criteria set forth in this announcement. The final proposal is the only document NRCS will use in the evaluation process. The State Conservationist or director will conduct the initial evaluation of the proposal and will then forward recommended proposals to the NRCS National Headquarters (NHQ) for final review and selection. Prior to submission of recommended proposals to NHQ, State Conservationists and directors will contact affected partners to provide input into the proposal if changes are needed. Potential partners should note that, depending upon available funding and agency priorities, NRCS may offer less financial or technical assistance or fewer acres for enrollment than the amount requested in the proposal and may require adjustments to the proposal as a condition of recommendation or approval.

If a project is multistate in scope, the proposal must be sent to the State Conservationist or director in which the majority of the project area is located; however, the partner is also responsible for obtaining input from all affected State Conservationists or directors in developing the proposal.

Partners whose proposals are selected will receive an official letter of notification. Upon notification of selection, the partner should contact the appropriate State Conservationists or director to develop the required partnership agreement and other project implementation requirements.

Incomplete proposals or those that do not meet the requirements set forth in this notice will not be considered, and notification to this effect will be mailed to the applicant. Partner submissions of proposals that are not selected will also be notified by mail. Partner proposals may be withdrawn by written notice to the appropriate State Conservationist or director at any time prior to selection.

Proposal Requirements: The proposal must include all of the following:

- (1) **Proposal Cover Sheet and Summary.** The first few pages of the proposal must include—
 - (a) Project title.
 - (b) Project director or manager name, telephone, mailing address, and email address.
 - (c) Name and contact information for lead partner submitting the proposal and other collaborating partners.
 - (d) Short, general summary of project, including—
 - (i) Potential acres to be enrolled in the project area.
 - (ii) A description of the purpose and goals of the proposed WREP project.
 - (iii) The geographic location including the States, and counties. Include a general location map.
 - (iv) Proposed project start and end dates that do not exceed 4 consecutive years, including FY 2012.
 - (v) The project objectives and resource concerns to be addressed.
 - (vi) Total amount of WREP financial or technical assistance being requested.
- (2) **Project Natural Resource Objectives and Actions.** The proposal must—
 - (a) Identify and provide detail about the natural resource concerns to be addressed and how the proposal's objectives will address those concerns. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented, and include a timeline for completion.
 - (b) For each objective, identify the actions to be completed to achieve that objective and address the identified natural resource concern. Specify which actions are to be addressed through this project using WREP assistance, and which are being addressed through alternate non-Federal funding sources or other resources provided.
 - (c) Identify the total acres that require wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement.
- (3) **Detailed Project Description.** Information provided in the proposal must include—
 - (a) A description of the partner's history of working cooperatively with landowners on conservation easements.
 - (b) A description of the watershed characteristics within the designated focus area covered by the proposal including a detailed map that indicates the project locations. The description should include information related to land use types, vegetation, soils, hydrology, potential sources of water quality impairments, occurrences of at-risk species, proximity to other protected areas, and a summary of resource concerns.
 - (c) A description of the partners and the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of the partners. Proposals that include resources from partners other than the lead partner must include a letter or other documentation confirming the commitment of resources.
 - (d) A description of the project duration, plan of action, and project implementation schedule. Project proposals may not exceed 4 years.
 - (e) A description of the financial or technical assistance resources that are requested both in total and annually through WREP, and the non-Federal resources provided by the partners that will be leveraged by the Federal contribution. WREP requires partners to contribute one of the following matches:
 - (i) WREP partners requesting *financial assistance* are required to contribute an in-kind-only match of at least 20 percent of the restoration costs toward the project for new projects or 20 percent of the management costs for existing projects, which may be in-kind or a combination of in-kind and financial, or a cash-only match of at least 5 percent of the restoration costs toward the project.

- (ii) WREP partners requesting *technical assistance* are required to contribute a match of at least 50 percent cash or in-kind services. TA funds must only be used to further existing enrollments; the funds are not to be used to enroll new projects. General WREP technical assistance activities may include easement acquisition related services, title package review and assembly, contracting services, restoration or management designs or planning, construction stakeout and supervision, or conducting monitoring.

Proposals that include additional partner resources will be given additional consideration in the selection process. Contributions provided by the partners to achieve additional ranking points can be in the form of technical or financial assistance for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of the wetland. Contributions may also be in the form of assistance with management and monitoring activities. Contributions above the match requirement may be cash or in-kind equipment or services. Partners may provide incentives to landowners to participate in WREP; however, incentive payments will not be considered part of the match requirement. Incentives include signup bonuses, practice incentive payments, or similar activities not funded through WRP.

- (f) Total budget for the project, including all partner resources that will be leveraged for the project and the amount of WREP financial assistance being requested for project broken out by fiscal year with totals. Include a description of the amount of funds needed annually for easement acquisition and wetland restoration and enhancement activities.
- (g) A description of non-Federal resources that will be available for implementation of the proposal. Proposals that include additional non-Federal resources will be given higher consideration in the selection process. Proposals must include a letter or other documentation confirming the commitment of resources from each partner. The partner must clearly state how they intend to leverage Federal funds along with partner resources. Landowner contributions in the implementation of agreed-to wetland restoration and enhancement practices may not be considered any part of a match from the potential partner for purposes of WREP. Partners will also be required to submit a plan for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting progress made toward achieving the objectives of the agreement.
- (h) An estimate of the percentage of potential landowners, or an estimate of the percentage of acres likely to be enrolled within the project area, compared to the total number of potential landowners or acres located in the project area. A statement of how the partner will encourage participation to guarantee success of the project. It is not necessary for a target area to involve multiple landowners to be selected. Projects will be evaluated based on the ecological merits of the proposal and contributions by the partners.
- (i) A statement describing how the partner will provide outreach, especially to encourage participation by Indian Tribes, beginning farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, and limited-resource farmers or ranchers.
- (j) A description of the wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement activities to be implemented during the project timeframe, and the general sequence of implementation of the project. Activities may include those efforts undertaken by the partner and those that the partner requests NRCS to address through financial support.

State Conservationist or Director Proposal Review: Partners must submit proposals to the appropriate State Conservationist or director who will evaluate proposals for—

- (1) Potential duplication of efforts with other projects or existing programs.
- (2) Adherence to, and consistency with, proposal requirements and program regulation, including requirements related to land and landowner eligibility and other program requirements.
- (3) Expected benefits for project implementation in their States.
- (4) Other issues or concerns of which the State Conservationist or director is aware that should be considered.
- (5) General recommendation for denial or approval of the project.

If a project is multistate in scope, the State in which the majority of the project area is located will be the lead State responsible for reviewing the proposal and submitting recommendations to NHQ. The lead State will ensure that the other affected States have been fully informed of the proposals and provided an opportunity for input.

National Review and Selection of Proposals: The appropriate State Conservationist or director will evaluate proposals and forward recommendations, with justification, to the NRCS Chief or designee for review and selection. The Chief will give a higher priority to proposals that—

- (1) Have a high potential to achieve wetland restoration (Resource Concerns).
- (2) Have a high potential to significantly improve wildlife habitat (Resource Concerns).
- (3) Provide innovation in wetland protection, restoration, management, and enhancement methods and outcome-based performance measures and methods (Resource Concerns).
- (4) Provide for outreach to, and participation of, Indian Tribes, beginning farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, and limited-resource farmers or ranchers within the area covered by the agreement (Targeting and Outreach).
- (5) Facilitate the submission of landowner applications (Targeting and Outreach).
- (6) Significantly leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources and coordinate with other local, State, tribal, or Federal efforts (Program Cost).
- (7) Demonstrate the partner's history of working cooperatively with landowners on conservation easements (Partnership Details).
- (8) Demonstrate the partner's ability to have landowners sign up this fiscal year (Project Readiness).
- (9) Provide for monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the restoration or management activities (Partnership Details).
- (10) Provide for matching financial or technical assistance funds to assist landowners with the implementation of the Wetlands Reserve Plan of Operations and associated contracts (Program Cost).
- (11) If proposal is for FA funds for new enrollments, provide evidence that wetland restoration and enhancement activities will be completed within 2 years of easement closing (Timeline).
- (12) If proposal is for TA funds associated with expediting closing, restoration planning, or monitoring of existing easements, provide evidence of qualifications, experience, and readiness of staff to complete technical assistance activities (Project Readiness).
- (13) If the proposal is for the management of existing enrollments, provide an estimate of costs for the management activities and what the proposed activities will include, as well as which target habitat or species will benefit from the proposed activity (Program Cost).

Partnership Agreement: Upon proposal selection, NRCS will enter an agreement with a partner as the mechanism for partner participation in WREP. At a minimum, the agreement will address—

- (a) The role of the partner.
- (b) The role of NRCS.
- (c) The format and frequency of reports that is required as a condition of the agreement.
- (d) The plan of work and budget to identify other funding sources (if applicable) for financial or technical assistance.
- (e) The specified project schedule and timeframe.
- (f) Whether the agreement will serve as an obligating document or whether funds will be obligated under a separate agreement with the partner or with a third party.
- (g) Other requirements deemed necessary by NRCS to achieve purposes of the WRP.

Landowner Applications and Eligibility Requirements: Once NRCS selects a partner's proposal, landowners within the selected project area may submit an application directly to NRCS for participation in WRP. Individual landowner applications will be evaluated and ranked along with other applications in the watershed or geographic project area, when applicable, to ensure that the properties selected for funding will achieve project objectives.

All projects funded through WREP must meet all WRP eligibility and program requirements and all transactions will be processed through normal contracting procedures. The land eligibility criteria for WREP are the same as for WRP and are listed in 7 CFR Section 1467.4. Wetland restoration and enhancement actions will be designed to improve water quality and maximize wildlife habitat benefits and wetland functions and values in accordance with the WRP regulation, 7 CFR Part 1467, and NRCS conservation practice standards and specifications. Additionally, the successful restoration of land and the resultant wetland values must take into consideration the cost of such restoration, as required by the WRP statute and reflected in the WRP regulation at 7 CFR Section 1467.4. Proposals must conform to the WRP guidelines for restoration and management of lands subject to a WRP easement.