

If You Own Agricultural Land, Consider a Conservation Easement

Most of Oklahoma's agriculture land owners have a certain bond with their property. For many, it's been in their family for generations and they would love nothing more than to see it remain protected. If that sounds like you, why not apply to enroll some or all of it into the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Land enrolled in ACEP is prevented from being developed or going to a non-agricultural use. These protected lands also provide public benefits including environmental quality, historic preservation, wildlife habitat, and protection of open space.

Oklahoma NRCS State Conservationist Gary L. O'Neill recently announced the agency is accepting applications for its ACEP Program, and those submitted by April 26, 2019, will be considered for FY2019 funding. NRCS will prioritize applications that protect agricultural uses and related conservation values of the land, and those that maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to agricultural use.

"USDA is committed to preserving working agricultural lands to help protect the long-term viability of farming across the country, as well as to restoring and protecting vital sensitive wetlands that provide important wildlife habitat and improve water quality," said O'Neill.

Land eligible for agricultural easements includes cropland, grassland, pastureland, and nonindustrial private forest land. Native American Tribes, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs are eligible to partner with NRCS to purchase conservation easements.

ACEP protects critical water resources and wildlife habitat and encourages private owners to maintain their land for farming. Through the voluntary sale of an easement, landowners limit future development to protect these key resources.

ACEP has two components, one for Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), and one for Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE).

- Under the ALE component, funds are provided to eligible entities that use ACEP funding to purchase permanent agricultural land easements that not only protect the future of the nation's food supply, they also support environmental quality, wildlife habitat, and historic preservation and protection of open spaces.
- Under the WRE component, funding is provided directly to landowners for the purchase of an easement and for restoration. Wetland reserve easements allow landowners to successfully restore, enhance, and protect habitat for wildlife on their lands, reduce damage from flooding, recharge groundwater, and provide outdoor recreational and educational opportunities. Eligible landowners may choose to enroll in

a permanent or 30-year easement. Eligible lands include farmed or converted wetlands that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored.

Applications for both ALE and WRE are accepted on a continuous basis.

To learn about ACEP and other technical and financial assistance available through NRCS conservation programs, visit the programs section of our website at www.nrcs.usda.gov, or contact your local USDA Service Center.

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