Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 General and Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (General and MRBI ACEP-WREP) Announcement of Funding, Proposal Requirements, and Review Criteria

Agency: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Action: Notice of request for proposals through the General or MRBI ACEP-WREP.

Dates: Eligible partners may submit proposals for General and MRBI ACEP-WREP by email and hardcopy; all complete proposals must be received on or before **Monday, May 16, 2016.**

Submittal: Applicants must submit electronic proposals to Morgan Bennetts, State Program Specialist, at **morgan.bennetts@la.usda.gov** and two hard copies to **ATTN: Morgan Bennetts, Programs, USDA-NRCS, 3737 Government Street, Alexandria, LA 71302**. If submitting more than one proposal, submit each proposal separately. **Applications will not be accepted by FAX or online.**

For Further Information Contact:

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Overview: WREP is a component of ACEP-WRE through which NRCS enters into agreements with eligible partners to target and leverage resources to address high-priority wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement activities and improve wildlife habitat on eligible lands. Potential partners may submit WREP proposals for an individual landowner project, watershed, or geographic area. WREP partners are required to contribute financial or technical assistance match as detailed below. All projects funded through WREP must meet all ACEP-WRE eligibility and program requirements. All WREP transactions will be processed through normal NRCS contracting procedures.

Only States and local units of government, Indian Tribes, and nongovernmental organizations are eligible to submit a proposal and enter into WREP agreements with NRCS. For the purposes of WREP, 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 agreement has been entered into by NRCS and the partner, eligible landowners may apply for WREP through their local NRCS office. As part of the WREP 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 protection, restoration, and enhancement in high priority areas.

- Ability to cost-share restoration or enhancement components beyond those required by NRCS.
- Opportunity to leverage funding to critical resource concerns.
- Opportunity to target outreach and enrollment based on priorities identified by partners and supported by NRCS.
- Opportunity to use innovative restoration methods and practices.
- Ability to maximize habitat benefits on new and existing enrollments.

Availability of Funding: NRCS is announcing the availability of up to $13 million in financial assistance (FA) funds or $2 million in technical assistance (TA) funds through the FY 2017 General and MRBI WREP. For General WREP, funds are available nationwide to eligible participants through approved partnership projects. For MRBI WREP, funds are available in the watersheds identified on the enclosed MRBI map. Funding beyond FY 2017 is subject to change based on availability of funds or other factors that may influence NRCS funding decisions. Proposals will be selected and agreements will be executed by the date listed on the enclosed timeline.

Under General and MRBI 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 on new or existing enrollments. Eligible partners should submit complete proposals to the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist or director.

FY 2017 General and MRBI WREP Funding Options and Match Requirements: In FY 2017, NRCS will make General and MRBI WREP funds available for either an FA or TA agreement option, which have specific activity and match requirements as follows:

FA Option: NRCS will make $13 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 will result in implementation of restoration or management of existing WRP or ACEP-WRE 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. Restoration may be achieved through payments to other parties who conduct the restoration activities. Under this FA option, partners are required to provide a combination of in-kind and cash contributions of at least 25 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 easements. This option provides TA funds only. TA funds must only be used to further existing easements; TA funds must not be used for technical assistance activities that would result in new enrollments.

General and MRBI 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. Under this TA option, partners are required to provide a combination of in-kind and cash contributions of at least 50 percent of the restoration or management costs.

The FA and TA proposal options may not be combined. Partners interested in both a technical assistance services type agreement to further existing WRP or ACEP-WRE enrollments and a financial assistance agreement intended to enroll new projects or implement restoration on existing WRP or ACEP-WRE enrollments must submit separate proposals. The proposal must request NRCS program funds for obligation during the first quarter of FY 2017 (see enclosed timeline). Proposals that request funding starting after FY 2017 will not be evaluated or considered under this solicitation.

Proposals that include additional partner resources above the required match may 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 ACEP-WRE.

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, cost, 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) by the date listed attached timeline for final review and selection. Prior to submission of recommended proposals to NHQ, State Conservationists and directors may 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 than the amount requested in the proposal and may require adjustments to the proposal as a condition of recommendation for 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 determine other project implementation requirements.

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

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) Whether the proposal is General or MRBI. Type of funds being requested: FA or TA. 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 3 consecutive years, beginning in FY 2017.
  - (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 within the project area 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 desired individual 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. No guarantee for funding beyond FY 2017 original awarded amount.

(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. Match requirements for WREP are as follows:

  (i) WREP partners requesting *financial assistance* are required to contribute a match of at least 25 percent, which may be cash, in-kind, or a combination of cash and in-kind.

  (ii) WREP partners requesting *technical assistance* are required to contribute a match of at least 50 percent cash or in-kind services or a combination of cash and in-kind. TA funds must only be used to further existing WRP or ACEP-WRE enrollments; the funds are not to be used to enroll new projects.

Proposals that include additional partner resources may 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 ACEP-WRE.

(f) Total budget for the project, including all partner resources that will be leveraged for the project and the amount of WREP being requested for project broken out by fiscal year with totals. Include a description of the amount of funds needed annually for FA or TA funds and the anticipated activities and outcomes broken out by year. All funding beyond FY 2017 is subject to change based on availability of funds or other factors that may influence NRCS funding decisions.

(g) A description of non-Federal resources that will be available for implementation of the proposal. Proposals that include additional non-Federal resources may 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 and outcomes 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, contributions by the partners, and other identified evaluation criteria.

(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, veterans, and limited-resource farmers or ranchers.

(j) A description of the wetland protection, restoration, and enhancement activities and associated outcomes 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 complete proposals by the date listed on the enclosed timeline 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 EPD by the date listed on the enclosed timeline 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, veterans, and limited-resource farmers or ranchers within the area covered by the agreement (Targeting and Outreach).
(5) Facilitate the submission of landowner applications in priority landscapes (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 signup for WREP (Project Readiness).

(9) Provide for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting 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 wetland 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 WRP or ACEP-WRE enrollments, provide an estimate of costs for the management activities and what the proposed activities and associated outcomes 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 into a WREP 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 NRCS and partner contribution, as well as 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 WRE.

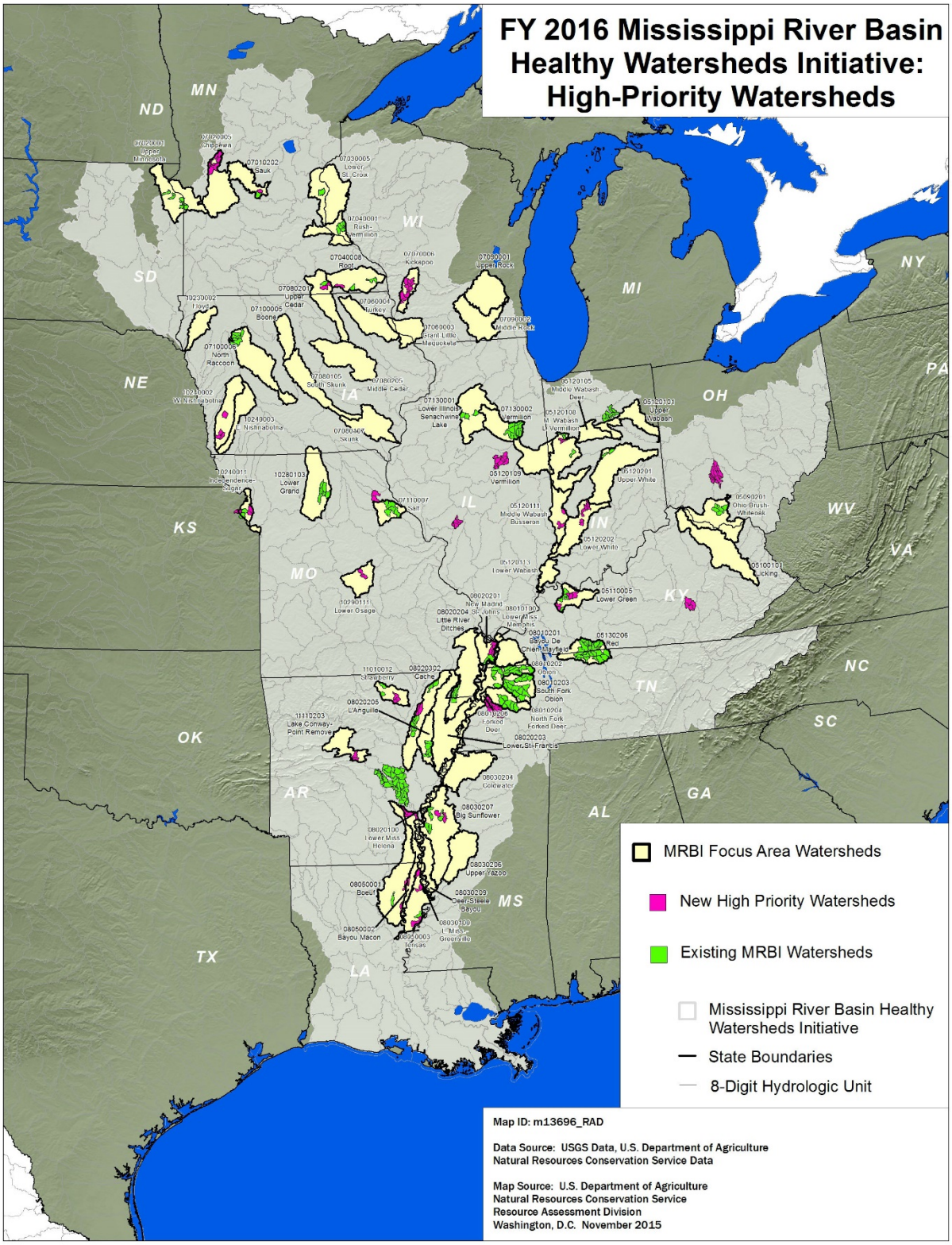
Landowner Applications and Eligibility Requirements: Once NRCS selects a partner's proposal, landowners within the selected project area may submit an application directly to NRCS for participation in WRE. Individual landowner applications will be evaluated and ranked along with other applications in the WREP project area, 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 WRE 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 WRE and are listed in 7 CFR Section 1468.30. 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 WRE regulation, 7 CFR Part 1468, 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 WRE statute and reflected in the ACEP-WRE interim regulation at 7 CFR Part 1468, Subpart C. Proposals must conform to the WRE guidelines for restoration and management of lands subject to a WRE easement.

Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 Timeline for WREP: Entering into New Agreements and Obligations

WREP FY 2017 New Enrollment Actions	Completion Date*	Notes
Proposal deadline for partner submissions to States	May 16, 2016	Partners will submit completed proposals to States for consideration and ranking.
States will submit highest eligible proposals to NHQ EPD for consideration	May 30, 2016	States will work with partners to finalize budget and review with partners. Post proposal spreadsheets to EPD SharePoint site. EPD will check completeness and eligibility
National Review Board ranks and prioritizes proposals and makes recommendation to Chief	June 27, 2016	National Review Team gathers input from State Conservationist Review and evaluate proposal Provide rankings to Review Board Rank and prioritize proposals Evaluate budgetary impacts Develop recommendations for Chief Chief makes proposal selection and EPD communicates decisions back to States.
States work with partners to affirm awarded amount is accepted by partners	July 11, 2016	States communicate with partners to ensure awarded proposal amount is sufficient to implement proposal.
States announce approved General and MRBI WREP proposals for FY 2015	July 18, 2016	Public announcement News release Departmental coordination Letter of selection States finalize proposal packages with partners
Send to Grants and Agreements for review	August 1, 2016	NHQ G&A specialist reviews agreement package for completeness and delegation of authority approval RC's delegate approval authority State Conservationist works with partners to establish agreements Track partnership agreement progress Review requested flexibilities
States to provide a copy of signed agreement to NHQ and send to NAPST for fund obligation	September 12, 2016	Obligate funds before end of 1st quarter of FY 2017.


FY 2016 Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative: High-Priority Watersheds
MRBI Focus Area Watersheds
New High Priority Watersheds
Existing MRBI Watersheds
Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative
State Boundaries
8-Digit Hydrologic Unit
Map ID: m13696_RAD
Data Source: USGS Data, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service Data
Map Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Resource Assessment Division
Washington, D.C. November 2015
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