



The Wetlands Reserve Program

Restoring America's Vanishing Wetlands

The continental U.S. has lost more than 50 percent of its wetlands and continues to lose these habitats at the alarming rate of nearly 220 acres a day. However, the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), one of the most popular and highly successful federal wetlands conservation programs, is offsetting some of those losses.

WRP is a voluntary, nonregulatory, incentive-based program for private landowners and working farmers and ranchers to protect and restore wetlands on their property while also removing marginal croplands from production. Eligible landowners receive financial incentives to restore, protect and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture while retaining land ownership.

WRP provides the following societal benefits:

- improved water quality
- improved water quantity
- reduced flood damage
- groundwater recharge
- enhanced fish and wildlife habitat

Landowner demand for this program outstrips available funding by at least 3:1. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers WRP. It's funded through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

WRP at a glance

WRP was authorized in the 1990 federal farm bill and reauthorized in the 1996 and 2002 farm bills. The program may authorize enrollment up to 250,000 acres annually through 2007 with a maximum of 2,275,000 acres nationwide.

Three enrollment options are available:

1. permanent (perpetual) easements that NRCS pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetlands
2. 30-year easements that the landowner receives 75 percent of what would be

paid for a permanent easement and 75 percent of the restoration costs

3. 10-year restoration cost-share agreements to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat in which participating landowners receive 75 percent of the cost of restoration and an easement is not filed on the property.

Participating landowners control access to the land and may lease the land for hunting, fishing and other undeveloped recreational activities for financial gain. WRP funds and any associated lease revenue provide a source of income to landowners and reduce future disaster assistance payouts, saving taxpayers money.

All states and Puerto Rico have active WRP projects. Enrolled lands are mostly marginal, high-risk, flood prone, restorable agricultural wetlands. As of FY 2006, there were almost 10,000 projects enrolled nationally, encompassing more than 1.8 million acres, including 79 percent in permanent easements.

The top 10 states in terms of enrollment are Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida, California, Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, Texas and Illinois. One-third of this acreage - nearly 590,000 acres - is in Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. In the eight Great Lakes states, more than 344,000 acres are enrolled in WRP, yet there remains a waiting list of 117,000 acres.

The average cost per acre for WRP is approximately \$1,470 (includes both easement and restoration costs), and the average project size is 192 acres. As of 2005, a backlog of 461,700 acres nationwide existed for this very popular program.

The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) is administered under WRP. The emphasis of WREP is restoring and protecting habitat for migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife. WREP allows NRCS to form special partnerships with state agencies

and private organizations to improve or expand WRP delivery. This includes easement acquisition and activities associated with wetland restoration, creation or enhancement. NRCS may also use WREP for easement management assistance. WREP funding is appropriated annually and may be targeted at individual states, specific enrollment practices or the development of cost-saving partnerships. Presently, WREP is available nationwide.

What does WRP mean to North America's wildlife?

The Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley includes portions of Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana and Mississippi. It's one of the most important waterfowl wintering areas in North America, wintering at least 5 million ducks and geese annually.

The Prairie Pothole Region states of North and South Dakota, Montana, Iowa and Minnesota, have nearly 230,000 acres enrolled in WRP. This acreage has helped to restore wetland/grassland complexes important to breeding and migrating waterfowl, as well as pheasants and other wildlife.



Reforested WRP lands immediately provide habitat for wildlife. White-tailed deer numbers increase on WRP lands within 1-2 years of planting, and as the forest matures, eastern wild turkeys return to the land, providing outstanding hunting opportunities.

Non-game wildlife benefits of WRP are also substantial. Many species of neo-tropical migrant songbirds are declining throughout their

range. Many are considered "area sensitive," meaning they require large, unbroken tracts of forestland to maintain stable or growing populations. Through WRP reforestation efforts, many existing mature tracts of bottomland hardwood forest are now reconnected and aiding the recoveries of area-sensitive species like Swainson's warblers and swallow-tailed kites.

WRP is also important to the recovery of the Louisiana black bear, a threatened species in Louisiana and Mississippi. Black bears are also area-sensitive. WRP reforestation is also contributing to the recovery of their populations.

Reforested lands also filter runoff and retain floodwaters, thereby enhancing water quality for a variety of fish and mussels, including the endangered pallid sturgeon, and the pink mucket and the fat pocketbook mussels.

In Missouri, Illinois, Nebraska and other mid-latitude states, WRP provides crucial wetland habitat during both fall and spring migration. Research shows the availability of nutritious food during spring migration directly relates to the number of young produced that year for many bird species. In the Great Lakes, California's Central Valley, the Pacific NW and the Chesapeake Bay, WRP is a key program for restoring wetlands in these important waterfowl breeding, migration and wintering areas.

Why have landowner enrollments in WRP dropped so dramatically?

In 2006, NRCS modified the WRP appraisal valuation process. New WRP appraisals now follow the "Yellow Book" and reflect the lesser of three values:

1. the difference in the appraised market value of the whole (larger) parcel before the easement is placed (*before* value) and the appraised market value of the whole parcel after the easement is placed (*after* value)
2. the geographic area cap
3. the landowner offer

The price of the easement is the *before* value minus the *after* value before any restoration.

This change is resulting in lower WRP easement offers to landowners in many states. Fewer landowners are accepting WRP offers, and program costs have increased. With WRP set to expire later this year, these changes have created an unfavorable climate for WRP enrollment among this nation's landowners, farmers and ranchers.

Why should we be concerned about the potential loss of WRP?

Despite the efforts of conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited, state and federal wildlife agencies and countless private landowners, the U.S. continues to lose more than 80,000 wetland acres annually. WRP, more than any other program, has the potential to further offset these losses and shift from a net loss to a net gain of wetlands.

WRP is also the primary way for meeting President Bush's goal of creating, improving and protecting at least 3 million acres of wetlands by 2009. Without WRP, private landowners will no longer have access to federal cost-share assistance to protect and restore up to

250,000 critical wetland acres to help meet this goal. In addition to the direct negative impacts on waterfowl and the other 900 species of wildlife that depend on wetlands to fulfill some portion of their life cycle needs, fewer wetlands means an increased threat of flooding, reduced groundwater recharge, water supply shortages and diminished water quality.

How do we secure the future of WRP?

WRP is one of Ducks Unlimited's highest priorities for the 2007 federal farm bill. DU seeks to maintain an annual WRP allocation of at least 250,000 acres, with a nationwide enrollment cap of 3,525,000 acres. WRP will disappear in October 2007, unless Congress reauthorizes it and the acreage cap is increased.

Even if WRP is reauthorized, the easement appraisal problem must be fixed to restore an agricultural focus to the program, financial competitiveness and landowner acceptability. Additional funding for technical and financial assistance is also necessary in amounts sufficient to meet landowner demand.

