

# USDA <sup>1996</sup> Farm Bill *Conservation Provisions*

October 1996

## Fact Sheet

United States Department of Agriculture

### **Wetlands Reserve Program**

*The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program to restore and protect wetlands on private property. It is an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.*

#### **How Does WRP Benefit You?**

You will:

- Receive financial compensation;
- Enhance wetland values that benefit you and society;
- Reduce problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas;
- Practice conservation stewardship; and
- Provide recreational opportunities.

#### **Wetland Functions and Values**

- Providing fish and wildlife habitat;
- Improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals;
- Reducing flooding;
- Recharging groundwater;
- Protecting biological diversity; and
- Furnishing educational, scientific, recreational, and esthetic benefits.

#### **Background**

Congress authorized WRP under the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by the 1990 and 1996 Farm Bills. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program in consultation with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other Federal agencies. Funding for WRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

#### **Sign-up**

States were authorized to begin a continuous sign-up as of October 1, 1996. Check with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office for the sign-up schedule in your State.

#### **How the Program Works**

Landowners who choose to participate in WRP may sell a conservation easement or enter into a cost-share restoration agreement with USDA to restore and protect wetlands. The landowner voluntarily limits future use of the land, yet retains private ownership. The landowner and NRCS develop a plan for the restoration and maintenance of the wetland.

The program offers landowners three options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, and restoration cost-share agreements of a minimum 10-year duration.

*Permanent Easement.* This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payment will be the lesser of: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the

landowner. In addition to paying for the easement, USDA pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetland.

*30-Year Easement.* This is a conservation easement lasting 30 years. Easement payments are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. USDA also pays 75 percent of restoration costs.

*Restoration Cost-Share Agreement.* This is an agreement (generally for a minimum of 10 years in duration) to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays 75 percent of the cost of the restoration activity. This does not place an easement on the property. The landowner provides the restoration site without reimbursement.

Other agencies and private conservation organizations may provide additional assistance for easement payment and wetland restoration costs as a way to reduce the landowner's share of the costs. Such special partnership efforts are encouraged.

## Eligibility

*Landowner.* To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 1 year prior to enrolling the land in the program unless the land was inherited or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

*Land.* To be eligible for WRP, land must be restorable and be suitable for wildlife benefits. This includes:

- Wetlands farmed under natural conditions;
- Farmed wetlands;
- Prior converted cropland;

- Farmed wetland pasture;
- Farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- Rangeland, pasture, or production forestland where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored;
- Riparian areas which link protected wetlands;
- Lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values; and
- Previously restored wetlands (Conservation Reserve Program [CRP] land is eligible if it meets WRP requirements).

*Ineligible Land.* Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985; lands with timber stands established under a CRP contract; Federal lands; and lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

## Uses of WRP Land

A landowner continues to control access to the land—and may lease the land—for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a landowner may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock or harvest wood products. Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

## Cooperating Agencies

Additional information on WRP is available from USDA Service Centers, State Cooperative Extension offices, and local conservation districts.

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# RESTORING AMERICA'S WETLAND HERITAGE—IT'S IN YOUR HANDS.

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