



WETLANDS CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Background

A national shift from substantial wetlands losses to wetlands protection has occurred over the past 50 years, driven by changing public perception, scientific understanding, and policy direction. On Earth Day 2004, the President announced a national Wetlands Initiative to accelerate wetlands gains over the next 5 years.

The USDA National Resources Inventory (NRI) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Status and Trends publication have been consistent in reporting steady declines in wetlands conversion in recent decades. The most recent wetlands results, from the 2002 annual NRI, show a slight "net gain" of wetland acres due to agriculture between 1997 and 2002, and net losses from all sources nearing zero.

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to enable eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. This program offers landowners an opportunity to establish, at minimal cost, long-term conservation and wildlife habitat enhancement practices and protection through permanent easements, 30-year easements, and restoration cost-share agreements.

The WRP focuses on: (1) enrolling marginal lands that have a history of crop failures or low yields; (2) restoring and protecting wetland values on degraded wetlands; (3) maximizing wildlife benefits; (4) achieving cost-effective restoration with a priority on benefits to migratory birds; (5) protecting and improving water quality; and (6) reducing the impact of flood events.

WRP was authorized in the 1990 farm bill and initiated in 1992 as a pilot program in nine States. The pilot was expanded to 20 States in 1994 and WRP became a nationwide program in 1995. The 2002 farm bill expanded the WRP statutory enrollment cap to 2,275,000 acres and authorized annual acreage enrollment of 250,000 acres. Acreage enrolled for fiscal year (FY) 2003 was 213,820 acres; for FY 2004, 189,144 acres; for FY 2005, 146,111 acres. For FY 2006, 150,000 acres is authorized. The President's budget for FY 2007 proposes to enroll 250,000 acres. NRCS had active projects in all States and Puerto Rico and a total enrollment of 1,825,694 acres at the close of FY 2005. In FY 2005, \$267 million was obligated.

In addition to the WRP, the Department also restores, enhances, and protects wetlands through programs such as: the Small Watershed/Watershed Rehabilitation Program; the Wildlife Habitat

Incentives Program; the Emergency Watershed Program; and the Conservation Reserve Program's (CRP) Farmable Wetlands Pilot.

General Opinions Expressed

- Many commenters supported a fully funded WRP, and many would like to see it expanded even further to preserve the Nation's wetlands.
- Some commenters were concerned with the idea of a permanent land retirement program as it would reduce the amount of land they could use for other purposes.
- Some commenters stated that the additional income received from WRP allows some struggling farmers and ranchers to stay in business.
- Some see a strong Conservation Title in the 2007 farm bill as an opportunity to shift away from the standard of plowing and sowing everywhere to a policy of farming the best land while conserving the rest in programs such as WRP.
- Several noted that although enrolling land in WRP easements has achieved some success, the overall feeling is that wetlands are still being lost to production.
- Several California commenters stated that WRP needs to be reformed so that "fair market value" paid for easements is not limited to "fair agricultural market value."
- Not only can we not afford to lose any more wetlands to production and development, but we have to gain back some of those areas for improved soil and water quality.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- Recommend that WRP and CRP acreage be considered as working lands.
- Revise the WRP to ensure better long-term effects.
- Better ensure long-term protection of wetlands.