

Wetlands Reserve Program: A Partnership to Restore Wetlands and Associated Habitat¹

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The 1990 Farm Bill created the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to restore and protect wetland, which as of 2002 has enrolled over 1.4 million acres of wetland and upland habitat in 49 states and Puerto Rico. The program is administered by the U. S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service and delivered in cooperation with many partners from the private and government sector. The program targets converted or degraded wetlands, primarily cropland, with a high probability of successful restoration. It authorizes permanent and 30-year easements as well as 10-year agreements. Restoration costs from 75% to 100% are provided, depending on the length of the easement. Most of the acreage is enrolled with permanent easements, and the remaining are 30-year easements or 10-year contracts.

The primary emphasis of the program is conservation of migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and wetland-dependent wildlife. This is a wetlands program and is perceived to benefit primarily waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds. However, approximately half of the acreage is in existing or restored forest and grassland that provides habitat for a variety of non-wetland species. In selecting projects, priority is given to expanding the effective size of existing habitats such as private, state, or federal wildlife areas to decrease fragmentation as well as threatened and endangered species. In addition, sites that are potential habitat for threatened and endangered species or within bird conservation areas receive higher priority. Existing easements range in size from 1 ha to 4,000 ha, with even larger blocks of habitat consisting of multiple contiguous easements.

Although it is intuitive that converting cropland to wetlands, forest, and grasslands is good for birds and other wildlife, there are presently no quantitative studies on wildlife response to WRP restoration to validate this assumption. However, qualitative observations throughout the nation indicate the program is having major impacts upon birds. For example, in southeastern Oklahoma unusual or first time observations and nesting records for Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*), White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), Willow Flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii*), Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*), and Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) were made on the 7,500-acre Red Slough project (Steve Tully pers. comm). In Arkansas, over a half million waterfowl and 20,000 shorebirds were counted on the 7,000-acre Raft Creek Bottoms project following restoration (Jody Pagan, pers. comm.). In the lower Mississippi Valley, the program is restoring over 500,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forests and wetlands that are providing habitat for an array of songbirds, waterfowl, and wading birds. In Hawaii, the endangered Nene Goose (*Anser sandvicensis*) and Koloa Duck (*Anas wyvilliana*) are using WRP restoration projects (Terrell Kelley, pers. comm.).

Conservationists concerned with migratory bird habitat may play a significant role in establishing priority areas where the program will have the greatest impact and meet habitat restoration goals. The program allows landowners to conduct compatible uses such as haying, grazing, and timber harvesting when such activities further the long-term protection and enhancement of the wetland and do not adversely affect migratory birds. Each of these harvest practices can be a useful tool in specific situations to achieve habitat objectives if applied properly.

The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act extended the WRP and authorized the enrollment of another 1.2 million acres. When completed, this will double the habitat restored and protected by the program and will potentially have a great impact upon migratory birds.

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