

HOOSIER FARMLAND WILDLIFE NOTES

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Farm Income Through Conservation: The Wetlands Reserve Program

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Indiana has lost over 85% of its original wetlands. This means that our lands have lost some of the functions that wetlands provide:

- storage of flood waters and their gradual release
- filtration of excess nutrients and contaminants
- capture of eroding sediments
- recharge of groundwater aquifers
- habitats for wetland wildlife
- opportunities for outdoor recreation

Because of the economic and ecological importance of wetlands, substantial efforts are being made to conserve this resource. A part of this effort is the Wetlands Reserve Program.

The Wetlands Reserve Program - WRP

The Wetlands Reserve Program, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is a voluntary program that offers landowners payments for restoring and protecting wetlands on their property. Lands that are likely to be successfully restored to wetlands are the focus of the program. Often these lands have marginal or poor cropping potential. In return for granting a conservation easement, landowners are offered compensation for their land and for the cost of wetland restoration. **The landowner retains title to the land, control of access to the land, and use of the land** as long as that use is compatible with

the goal of wetland restoration. If the wetland is not degraded, landowners may harvest timber, hunt, or fish the wetland area. Enrollment of lands under this program is continuous, landowners may enter lands in the program at any date. The Wetlands Reserve Program has proven a popular option for the management of potential wetlands. Since 1994, 6,522 acres have been enrolled as wetlands reserves in Indiana. Given the economic incentives of this program, and technical assistance available, the Wetlands Reserve Program is a practical alternative to the farming of wet areas.

Eligible Lands for Wetlands Reserves

A variety of lands with the potential for restoration to wetlands are eligible for enrollment. These include:

- agricultural lands with restorable wetlands, such as prior converted croplands, farmed wetlands, and pastured wetlands
- lands adjacent to wetlands, such as upland buffer areas
- previously restored wetland areas with less than 30 year easements
- areas along streams or waterways that link existing wetlands
- certain CRP lands that were enrolled prior to November of 1990

Enrolling Lands as a Wetlands Reserve

Enrolling land in the Wetlands Reserve Program begins by contacting the NRCS for an application to participate. The NRCS, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, determines the eligibility of your land, which can be enrolled under one of three options:

- permanent easement
- 30-year easement
- 10-year restoration agreement

The land is then ranked and a preliminary restoration plan developed. The ranking of areas takes into account proximity to existing habitat, wildlife value, hydrology, vegetation, operation and maintenance requirements, geographic location, easement cost, and years since cropping. The restoration plan includes a description of restoration practices and costs to implement the plan. Obligations of the landowner and commitments from the NRCS are detailed in the plan and agreed upon before the land is entered. The NRCS then ranks all applications. Once applications are tentatively accepted, the land is appraised by a certified appraiser. The landowner has several options for entering land as a wetlands reserve and compensation varies according to option.

Option	Compensation for land value	Compensation for conservation
Permanent Easement	100% of appraised value, up to \$1,000 per acre	100% of costs for conservation practices
30 Year Easement	75% of appraised value, up to \$750 per acre	75% of costs for conservation practices
10 Year Restoration		75% of costs for conservation practices

The landowner is responsible for implementing the wetland restoration plan. However, because of the interest in conserving wetlands, other agencies and organizations are willing to contribute technical assistance, loan equipment, provide labor, and provide additional cost-share dollars to landowners willing to restore wetlands on their lands. A publication describing technical assistance available to the landowner can be obtained from the Purdue University Extension Service: *FNR-87, Forestry and Wildlife Management Assistance Available to Indiana Landowners: Providers, Organizations, and Programs*. Wetlands provide benefits important to all Hoosiers; The Wetlands Reserve Program can make achieving wetland restoration feasible for the landowner.



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