United States Department of Agriculture

# Saving the Nation's Wetlands

## Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
## Wetland Reserve Easements

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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# 25 Years of Wetland Easements

## Impacts of Farm Bill Program on Wetlands

Wetlands are one of nature's most productive ecosystems. They clean and recharge groundwater; reduce the damaging impacts of floods; enhance wildlife habitat; sequester carbon; and create diverse recreation opportunities such as hunting, fishing, birdwatching and canoeing.

The greatest potential for wetland restoration exists on private lands, since 75 percent of the nation's wetland are located on private and tribal lands. Thousands of landowners have voluntarily taken big and small actions every day to protect, restore and enhance wetlands and wildlife habitat.

For more than 20 years, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service's former Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was used to enroll record numbers of acreage to protect, restore and enhance wetlands on private lands. During that time, private landowners and entities such as land trusts and conservation organizations enrolled 2.7 million acres through 14,500 agreements for a total NRCS and partner investment of $4.3 billion in financial and technical assistance. NRCS and its partners used the former WRP to ensure they achieved the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every enrolled acre.

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated WRP into the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program's Wetland Reserve Easement component to streamline program administration and make it easier for landowners to participate in the program. With NRCS financial and technical assistance, states, non-governmental organizations and tribes will continue to leverage resources to achieve maximum benefits with wetlands restoration and protection and wildlife habitat.

The cumulative benefits of this wetland conservation work have resulted in tremendous environmental, social and economic benefits nationwide.

For example, wildlife habitat created from wetland easements can help prevent listing under the Endangered Species Act and accelerate the recovery of at-risk species. Both the Oregon chubb and Louisiana black bear were delisted due to the many landowners who enrolled their land into conservation easements.

In Florida, ranchers are actively engaged in conservation projects to protect the Everglades, the primary source of drinking water for 7 million Floridians. Ninety-five percent of the 100,000 acres enrolled into easements during the past five years in Florida were located in the Northern Everglades Watershed.

Conservation wetland easements will continue to serve as a critical tool in a landowner's toolbox for wetland restoration, protection and enhancement.

## Wetlands and Wildlife

Up to one-half of all North American bird species feed or nest in wetlands.

## Wetland Benefits

Easements that restore wetlands produce a wide range of benefits valued by humans. Some of the more important benefits include:

- More habitat for fish and wildlife that includes threatened and endangered species
- Higher water quality due to the wetland's filtering of sediments and chemicals
- Less flooding from wetlands acting as small reservoirs catching runoff water from farm fields
- Higher groundwater recharge rates in nearby shallow aquifers
- More biological diversity within the wetland and nearby areas
- New educational, scientific and recreational activities for local schools and recreationists such as birders and hikers
- Ecologically important open space protected for several decades or more

# Wetlands in Action

**NRCS provides assistance directly to private landowners and Indian tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the Wetland Reserve Easement program. The landowner voluntarily limits future use of the land, yet retains private ownership. NRCS and the landowner work together to develop a plan for the restoration and maintenance of the wetland.**

## Targeted Efforts to Restore Wetlands Helped Louisiana Black Bear Recover

On the brink of extinction in 1992, the Louisiana black bear was added to the threatened and endangered species list.

At the time of listing, more than 80 percent of suitable Louisiana black bear habitat was lost. The bottomland hardwood forests of the Louisiana Delta were cleared for row crop production; roads, homes and towns were built; and humans began encountering the shy, but curious, Louisiana black bear more often. The habitat fragmentation, or isolation of suitable patches of hardwood bottoms, affected the bears' ability to travel for food, to find mates or simply to relocate to a more desirable spot to live.

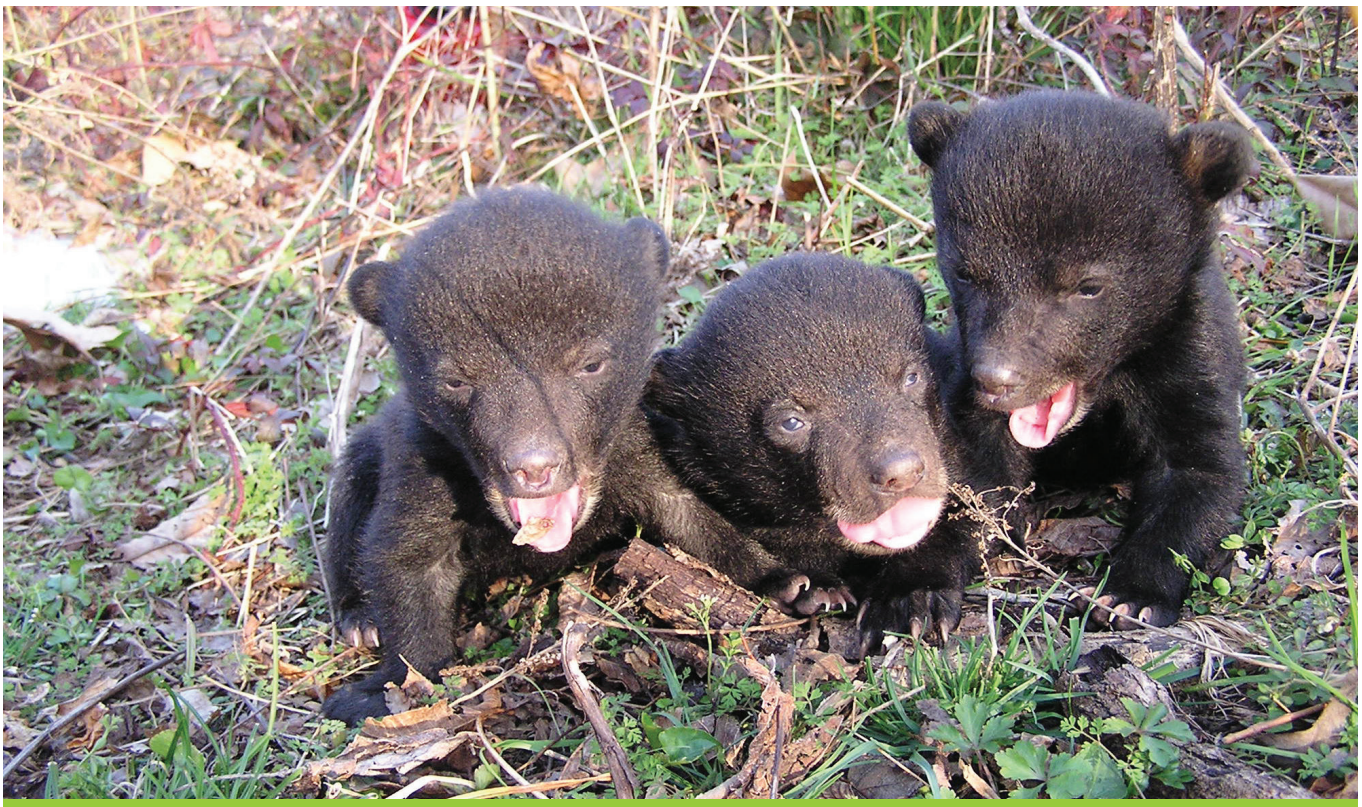
Affectionately named the "Teddy Bear" after President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot one on a south Mississippi hunting trip, the Louisiana black bear is one of 16 subspecies of American black bears.

Sadly, when the bear was listed there were only three black bear breeding populations left in Louisiana, isolated from each other with as few as 200 bears left. With the vast majority of land in the critical Louisiana black bear habitat privately owned, the fate of the "Teddy Bear" would lie in the hands of private individuals committed to voluntary protection and restoration of the historic bottomland hardwood ecosystem.

In the 23 years since the listing of the Louisiana black bear, NRCS has worked with private landowners who have voluntarily enrolled and restored over 215,000 acres in wetland easements in the prime habitat areas for the bears. Add to that more than 232,000 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program, as well as additional habitat management activities by these landowners in the 14 parishes or counties, and nearly half a million acres of habitat have been restored.

The primary habitat corridors have been reconnected, and there are as many as 1,000 Louisiana black bears roaming the hardwood bottoms of the state with four breeding populations and a 99 percent chance of maintaining those numbers.

Because of proactive steps by private landowners to restore and improve habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the Louisiana Black Bear from the list.



Restoring Louisiana black bear populations is part of a broader effort to restore the nation's wetlands.

# Wetland Successes

## Restored Wetlands Provide Critical Habitat for Migratory Birds, Many Other Species

When wildlife take up residence on your land, it is nature's way of telling you that all is well. This is definitely the case for landowners Jim and Lyn Des Marais, who are now working to restore a 500-acre wetland in Vermont.

As part of restoring the wetland, the duo is plugging ditches, enabling water to flow again naturally throughout the wetland. In addition, they will create depressions in the landscape to enhance habitat for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds and amphibians.

The Des Marais wetland is ideal for birds because the farm offers a variety of habitats, including hay and grasslands, and as a result, the diversity of the birds is extensive. The wetland is home to ducks, rails, herons, bald eagles, peregrine falcon and other woodland hawks. They have also spotted bobolinks, meadowlarks, golden-winged warblers, blue herons, bald eagles, kingfishers and swallows.

## Wetlands Improve Wildlife Habitat, Water Quality

A unique wetland north of Charles City is helping to filter out upland sediment and other chemicals from ag runoff flowing into the Little Cedar River, and fulfilling a family's goals by preserving the land and providing a wildlife haven on their farm.

The 200-acre farm in northeast Iowa has been in the family since the 1940s. To preserve the family farm, Carol Savage enrolled a large portion of it – 140 acres – into a permanent wetland easement.

The wetland restoration includes 12-acre pool of water that attracts waterfowl and other migrating birds and nesting animals.

The wetland also helps improve water quality. "We are basically eliminating the potential for nutrients and sediment to runoff into the river because there is no agricultural activity, and we have all of these management practices protecting water quality," Savage said.

Once restored, the Des Marais wetland will be Vermont's largest privately owned wetland easement. Photo by Amy Overstreet.

Geese fly over the constructed wetland. Photo by Jason Johnson.

## Conservation Easement Helps Protect Fish

Oregon landowner, Dave Budeau, wanted to restore and protect a wetland. When the wildlife biologist searched for a new home in 2003, his passion for wildlife and nature led him to purchase what may have seemed to some as an unfriendly plot of land for wildlife.

The pasture in Marion County, Ore., that caught Budeau's eye was dominated by one species of plant, bentgrass. Bentgrass can be invasive in the state's wetlands, but Budeau knew the land could be transformed into a wetland haven that gives sanctuary to a variety of wildlife, including a threatened Oregon fish.

Through ACEP, Budeau began restoring the wetlands in 2008, converting an existing pond and other low-lying areas into wetlands. The restoration work created the ideal habitat for the Oregon chub.

Scientists with NRCS and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service monitored the depth and temperature of Budeau's ponds for two years to ensure they provided suitable habitat before introducing 623 chub in 2010. By May 2012, more than 10,000 chub lived in the ponds.

Wetlands like the ones on Budeau's property were integral to the increasing chub population. This small minnow was the first fish in the history of the Endangered Species Act  to be removed from the list of threatened and endangered list because of recovery.

"This is the (conservation) easement we all dreamed of," Budeau said. "It turned out as good as I could have ever expected."

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