



Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



# Restoring America's Wetlands

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program  
Wetland Reserve Easements







# 30 Years of Wetland Easements

Congress first authorized the Wetland Reserve Program in the 1990 Farm Bill as a pilot in nine states. The first enrolled acres were restored in 1993. The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated the program into the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to streamline program administration and make it easier for landowners to participate in the program. ACEP includes two components – Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE).

Since the program was authorized, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has worked with landowners to voluntarily enroll and restore nearly 2.9 million acres of wetlands and associated habitats on private and tribal lands into easements and contracts.

## The Impact

Wetlands are one of nature’s most productive ecosystems. Restored wetlands produce a wide range of benefits, including:

- ◆ Improved habitat for migratory birds and other wetland dependent wildlife
- ◆ Enhanced water quality due to the wetland’s filtering of sediments and chemicals
- ◆ Reduced flooding as wetlands can act 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
- ◆ Carbon sequestration
- ◆ New educational, scientific, and recreational opportunities for local schools and recreationists, such as birders and hikers
- ◆ Protected ecologically important open space

The greatest potential for wetland restoration exists on private lands since most of the nation’s wetlands 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.

With NRCS financial and technical assistance, landowners and conservation partners continue to leverage resources to restore wetlands to their natural functions.



## The Numbers

For 30 years, NRCS has used its wetland easement program, now the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easements component, to enroll record numbers of acres to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on private and tribal lands which were previously degraded due to agricultural uses. During that time, private landowners and conservation organizations enrolled nearly 2.9 million acres through almost 16,000 agreements.

NRCS and landowners use wetland conservation easements to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every enrolled acre.

Source: NRCS Easement Program Data, farmers.gov - <https://www.farmers.gov/data/easements/overview>, 1/17/23.

## Wetland Successes

The cumulative benefits of wetland conservation work have resulted in tremendous environmental, social, and economic impacts nationwide. For example, wildlife habitat created from wetland easements has helped prevent listing under the Endangered Species Act and accelerate the recovery of at-risk species.



## Marion County, Oregon

Through a wetland easement with NRCS, Dave Budeau restored and protected wetlands on his property. The land was dominated by one grass species, bentgrass, which can be invasive in the Oregon’s wetlands. Budeau wanted to transform his land from a one-species landscape, or monoculture, to a wetland haven that provides sanctuary to a variety of wildlife, including a threatened Oregon fish. The restoration work created ideal habitat for the Oregon chub, which was listed as endangered at the time as the loss of key wetland habitat had pushed the chub to the brink of extinction. As a result of NRCS conservation efforts in the region, the Oregon chub has since been removed from the Endangered Species Act list.

“Every year it seems like a new bird shows up,” said Dave Budeau. “I’ve also seen red-legged frogs, long-toed salamanders, and amazing invertebrate diversity.”





Lake County, Montana

The Foust family decided to restore their wetlands to improve wildlife habitat and water quality that had been degraded due to agricultural practices. Over the years, canals and ditches intercepted and interrupted the natural flow of the river. The Foust family worked with NRCS to enroll land into a wetland easement to restore and protect their wetland areas along the Flathead River. The Foust farm is part of a critical wildlife migratory corridor stretching from Canada to Mexico as well as a migratory corridor for grizzly bears in Montana. The restored wetland is a mosaic of hills, floodplains, terraces, and land masses that provides a resting and staging area for migrating waterfowl.

“ We are no longer trying to make farmland out of wetlands,” said Arnold Foust. “The combination of a river system, warm water springs, crops, and crop residue provides unique wildlife habitat.”



Starke County, Indiana

Mark Magura and his wife, Amy, have worked hard to restore more than 200 acres of former farmland back into a wetland and wildlife oasis through NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Wetland Reserve Easement component. The restoration included tree plantings and prairie establishment through planting native grasses and forbs as well as restoring 16 acres of hydrology to benefit the wetland. Land that had for years been home mostly to corn and soybeans is now flourishing with wildlife.

“ We're just stewards,” Mark Magura said. “No one really owns the land. By enrolling it in a wetland permanent easement, we can allow this to be present for years to come.”





Winnebago County, Iowa

A collaborative effort among local, state, and federal government agencies, and nonprofit conservation groups has helped landowners restore nearly 1,000 contiguous acres of uplands and wetlands to form a wetland complex in the Prairie Pothole region. Potholes naturally produce moist soil plants which are valuable sources of forage and cover for waterfowl. The wetland complex includes 14 conservation easements that restored once problematic cropland frequently subject to seasonal ponding into a haven for wildlife and recreational opportunities. Similarly, uplands adjacent to these pothole wetlands provide habitat for bird nesting and rearing.

“Enrolling our land into an easement was one way for our family to get money for our farm now and still have the farm,” Bob Buffington, landowner near Forest City, Iowa, said. “It worked out well for our family.”



Franklin Parish, Louisiana

Bonner Wiggers, his brother, son, and nephews farm more than 3,000 acres in eastern Louisiana, an area where bottomland hardwood forests are common. After clearing 1,100 acres of land several years ago and trying to grow a profitable crop unsuccessfully, members of the Wiggers Family Partnership decided to enroll 500 acres into an NRCS wetland easement. Later, they enrolled the remaining 600 acres of marginal land into another NRCS easement. After planting bottomland hardwood trees and installing water control structures, along with other conservation practices, the land is rich in wildlife, including waterfowl and other migratory birds, and a place for recreation for the whole family.

“We see deer, squirrels, bobcats, bald eagles, the occasional Louisiana black bear, and we have also heard from folks who have seen cougars in the area,” Bonner Wiggers said. “Knowing that this land is going to be here and only get better for my son and grandson is a wonderful feeling.”



Mississippi River Alluvial Valley, Louisiana

On the brink of extinction in 1992, the Louisiana Black Bear was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. At that time, more than 80 percent of Louisiana black bear habitat was lost. The bottomland hardwood forests of the Louisiana Delta had been cleared for row crop production and homes and roads were built. With most of the critical Louisiana black bear habitat on private lands, the fate of the bear was in the hands of private landowners who committed to voluntary protection and restoration of the historic bottomland hardwood ecosystem. NRCS worked with private landowners who voluntarily enrolled land into Wetland Reserve Easements to restore and provide long-term protection on more than 225,000 acres. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders to monitor black bear population numbers, restore black bear habitat, and protect the subspecies for the long term, the Louisiana black bear has now recovered and was removed from the Endangered Species Act list in 2016.

“The recovery of the Louisiana black bear is an exciting and encouraging announcement for our state and for our country,” said Bobby Jindal, former Louisiana Governor. “We wouldn’t be here without tremendous partnerships among state and federal agencies and private landowners. I am grateful for their hard work.”



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service