

Wetlands Reserve Program Policy Recommendations

from

Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Wildlife Mississippi

Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Wildlife Mississippi have long recognized the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) as one of the broadest and most important USDA conservation programs. It is especially important to landowners in Mississippi and the entire Lower Mississippi River Valley. For example, 681,823 acres have been enrolled in WRP in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, representing 30.5 percent of the program's entire enrollment and approximately \$1 billion in WRP expenditures in these three states. WRP, which is widely used to restore previously drained wetlands, provides landowners with much needed financial assistance toward retaining and restoring their land. Restored wetlands revive lost habitats, help to reduce flooding, process nutrients, and capture sediment. They provide habitat for migratory birds and resident wildlife, which in many cases have diversified local rural economies as wildlife enthusiasts utilize restoration areas. Additionally, the "ecosystem services" benefits from WRP go far beyond the individual sites.

Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Wildlife Mississippi have collaborated to identify and support the following prioritized Farm Bill policy changes that would significantly improve WRP.

- 1. Fund the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program at equal to or greater than levels recommended in the Senate Agriculture Committee's Agriculture Reform, Food, and Jobs Act of 2013, without specifically designating a percentage of the funds for agricultural or wetland easements.** WRP has been a tremendous private lands conservation success story for more than 20 years and Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana lead the nation in acres enrolled. Adequate funding ensures WRP will continue to accrue conservation and landowner benefits in the Lower Mississippi River Valley and throughout the nation.
- 2. Exclude Land Capability Classes IV - VIII, with Subclass designation w, from the WRP county/parish caps.** Soils in these classes frequently flood and retain moisture at levels that severely impair or prevent farming. This exemption would allow owners of such land to have the option to enroll in WRP. These sites are ideally suited for WRP in that they offer broad conservation benefits when restored to wetlands and are the least economical to farm, thereby saving in potential publicly-funded disaster assistance.
- 3. With consolidation of programs under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, allow the wetland easement portion to be referred to as the "Wetland Reserve."** Maintaining similar nomenclature to WRP will save significant dollars and staff time that would be necessary to change current publications, websites, and other media. Additionally, the Wetland Reserve brand has a strong, positive image and is well known as an important conservation program.
- 4. Make the ownership eligibility requirement for WRP equal to other conservation programs by returning the 7 year ownership rule to 1 year as in the 2002 Farm Bill.** Waivers to the 7 year ownership rule were rarely denied and therefore the rule had limited impact other than increasing paperwork and delaying enrollment. If lands meet all other WRP eligibility requirements, they should be able to enroll in WRP since conservation benefits are gained regardless of how long someone has owned the land.

