

WRE RECOMMENDATIONS WETLAND CONSERVATION POLICY COALITION

The United States has lost more than half of its original wetlands; it continues to lose more than 80,000 acres of these valuable resources each year. The U.S. Congress has long recognized the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) as highly effective USDA conservation programs. Originally authorized in the 1991 Farm Bill, and now part of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), the program is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and provides support to assist landowners with wetlands protection, restoration and enhancement efforts.

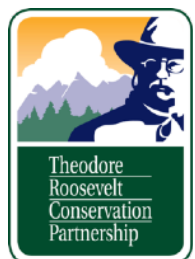
ACEP-WRE not only restores previously converted wetlands, but also provides landowners and producers a financially viable alternative to farming land with low or negative profits and still retain property ownership, all while reducing expenditures of commodity and crop insurance programs. In addition to these measurable benefits, ACEP-WRE also creates habitat for migratory birds and resident wildlife, which diversifies local, rural economies as sportsmen and other wildlife enthusiasts recreate on these lands.

Celebrating 25 Years of Wetland Restoration Success



In the 25 years of WRP and ACEP-WRE implementation (1992-2017):

- Almost **3 million acres** have been restored and protected.
- Assistance has been provided to over **15,000 WRP/E landowners and producers**.
- **Demand for WRP/E exceeds funding** with less than 25% of eligible applications funded.
- The **2017 backlog of unfunded applications** comprises more than 1,000 applications representing 180,000 acres/\$400 million.
- WRP/E is **highly popular in the Mississippi River Valley states** where more than 50 percent of the program acreage exists.



Wetland Conservation Policy Coalition

ACEP-WRE Policy Recommendations

The partners of the Wetland Conservation Policy Coalition have collaborated to identify and support the following priorities to significantly strengthen ACEP-WRE:

NRCS staff working with private landowners.



1. Provide at least \$500 million annually for ACEP and work toward restoring funding for the program to the historic \$780 million level.

During the 2008 Farm Bill (2009 – 2013), funding for programs now under ACEP averaged \$780 million annually.

2. When scoring future WRE funding, Congress should ask the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to consider the savings from foregone crop insurance and commodity program payments for cropland that has been enrolled in WRE.

Enrollment of cropland in WRE avoids insurance and commodity payment costs at an average savings of \$53 per acre per year. Enrolling 100,000 acres of cropland annually (the historic WRP/E average) over 10 years saves \$292 million.

3. As in the 2014 Farm Bill, there should be no mandatory designation of specific percentages of ACEP for agricultural versus wetland easements.

The relative importance and utilization of agricultural and wetland easements vary throughout the country from state to state. Discretion for use of ACEP funding should remain flexible and continue to be based on landowner demand.

4. Eliminate the 10% county cap on total WRP/E acres, while maintaining the 25% county cap for combined acres of WRP/E and Conservation Reserve Program.

This exemption would allow more landowners to enroll in WRE without exceeding the 25% cap on total cropland enrolled.

5. Exempt WRE conservation payments from the AGI eligibility requirement.

The trend of farm consolidation is continuing and voluntary conservation by producers should not be restricted by AGI, which may not reflect the financial status of the landowner or producer and ignores the conservation benefits to enrolling the parcel of land. The current AGI restriction has had a negative effect on WRE enrollment and conservation in general and should be eliminated.

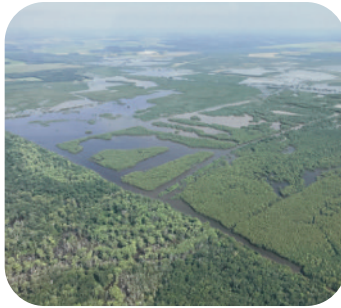
6. Retain the following ACEP-WRE authorization from the 2014 Farm Bill:

- Wetland Reserve Enhancement Option
- Spending WRE funding on existing easements (WRP and WRE)
- 24-month ownership eligibility requirement
- County cap exemption for cropland in Land Capability Classes IV – VIII with subclass w (wettest soils)
- “No Year Funding”
- “Wetland Reserve” as the program identity
- Eligibility for CRP acres already planted in trees



WRP/E habitat contributed to recovery and delisting of the Louisiana Black Bear.

Land enrolled in WRP adjacent to mature forested wetlands.



Bald eagle sightings and nests have been documented on WRP/E easements.

Hunters and anglers have a major economic impact in rural America; WRP/E increases habitat.



Planting native tree species restores bottomland hardwoods and forested wetlands.

WRP/E has a positive impact on water quality in the Gulf of Mexico where ~40% of U.S. seafood is produced.



Many species of shorebirds, songbirds, waterbirds, and waterfowl thrive in WRP/E wetlands.