

Wetland Reserve Easements in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley Communications Strategy 2017

Prepared by K Gregg Consulting



ACEP

Wetland Reserve
Easements (WRE)



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Arkansas NRCS,
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COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR WETLAND RESERVE EASEMENT PROGRAM IN THE MISSISSIPPI ALLUVIAL VALLEY

I. BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

There are five key elements of a Communications Strategy:

1. goals/objectives of communications (why - what is to be achieved?)
2. audience identification (who)
3. messaging tailored to audiences (what we say, information we convey)
4. tactics/tools/channels for reaching audiences (how)
5. evaluation to assess results and improve future performance

Major objectives of WRE communication

This communication strategy fundamentally seeks to achieve three things:

1. Increased awareness of the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program, particularly 2017 signup opportunities in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley portions of AR, LA, and MS, among farmers and other private landowners within this region.
2. Changed behavior, in the form of increased inquiries and applications to the WRE program.
3. Changed attitudes, in the form of increased appreciation among the public, policy-makers, and target WRE audiences for both the direct benefits to landowners as well as the direct and indirect benefits of WRE restorations to natural systems and communities where they occur.

Technically, objectives should be measurable. Although there are means of measuring awareness and attitudes, they are resource intensive and require a significant lead time for planning (before and after assessments, etc). For this outreach effort, proxy measures of awareness and attitudes will need to be used (e.g. the reach and media “pick up” of WRE stories). However, the good news is that the ultimate measure of success will be a change in behavior, which should be immediately measurable in the form of applications, WRE backlogs, and quality (as measured by ranking scores) of acreage enrolled in the WRE program in 2017.

Human dimensions

The social sciences have become increasingly important in understanding the “human dimensions” of natural resource management, and in this case they are important to increasing our understanding of target audiences, and to identify messaging, tactics, and channels for reaching out to these audiences.

Given these objectives, we conducted an extensive social science literature search for studies with relevance to landowner values and attitudes toward conservation, preferred forms of communication and learning about natural resource management, and preferred channels for obtaining such information. The focus was first on farmers within the target region, but to obtain the desired information, we quickly expanded the search to include additional literature related to nonindustrial forest landowners and minority or under-served farmers in the South, as well as farmers (particularly cotton, corn, and soy) in the Southern and Midwest states. Results from this literature search are summarized in three annotated bibliographies relating to Farmers, Nonindustrial private forest landowners, and minority/underserved farmers (see list of related materials attached to this Plan).

In addition, we conducted a series of Landowner Interviews (currently ongoing) with owners who had either participated in the Wetland Reserve Program, owned WRE properties, or who were active applicants to the program. These interviews serve a dual purpose:

- Collecting detailed case histories, success stories, and even photos/video about the Wetland Reserve Easement properties, to be used in developing outreach materials and strategies; and
- A social science method for insight into how actual members of our target audience view the program’s benefits, their reasons for participating, their methods for obtaining such information, and their language in describing the program and its benefits.

Finally, data on nonindustrial private landowners in AR, LA, and MS as well as minority farmers in the South, were analyzed to highlight landowner values in this region. These data were supplied by the [Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively](#) (TELE) program, which supplied various landowners “[profiles](#)” in each

[state using data from the National Woodland Owner Survey](#). We developed a [Spreadsheet Summary of TELE Landowner Profiles](#) for each state, addressing reasons for owning land, landowner concerns, and past & future management activities to identify broad patterns and concerns among these audiences.

Insights based on Social Science Research

Please consult the [WRE Summary of Social Science research](#) as well as annotated bibliographies for more detail and for the sources of information summarized below.

- *Diversify communications because no one media source is likely to reach all landowners in the region, and repetition through different channels is powerful. (In addition, we may be limited by the availability of mailing addresses vs. email addresses.)*
- *Make use of broadcast media to the extent possible.*
- *Promote peer-to-peer learning, as this provides a trusted and key source of information for many producers. Explicitly ask producers to share information obtained during the course of local NRCS meetings.*
- *Messaging about Wetland Reserve Easements must emphasize the financial advantages in combination with environmental/recreational/moral benefits. Wildlife conservation is sometimes an important factor, sometimes not, but financial concerns are always present.*
- *Based on landowner interviews and the analysis of TELE landowner profiles, wildlife should always be a focus of WRE communications. A legacy for the next generation and wildlife are two of the most highly ranked reasons for owning land.*
- *Use print magazines and social sites to appeal to recreational audiences and to provide more in-depth information to farmers/landowners.*
- *Select one to two social media channels for quick and widespread distribution of information.*
- *Be aware of some potential pitfalls in messaging. Specifically, expanding forest can be perceived as threatening to local identity in some Delta farming communities, but wildlife recreation provides a common ground for communications.*

- *Extension is a key source of information for farmers. Extension, as well as NRCS employees themselves, will be key intermediaries to help carry the WRE message and should be a focus of outreach efforts.*
- *The concerns of African American landowners are somewhat different from majority producers, but the motivations tend to be the same.*

II. RECOMMENDED CORE WRE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM

The following program is proposed to be undertaken in partnership with, under the guidance of, and with routine feedback from the WRE Tri-State partnership team and the NRCS state public affairs offices in AR, LA, and MS. *Key information or participation required from NRCS is denoted in orange.*

Objective 1

Deliver increased and more in-depth information to inform farmers, private landowners, and natural resource recreationists in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley of AR, LA, and MS about the advantages of the WRE program and to encourage sign ups.

Objective 2

Increase general and decision-maker awareness, understanding, and support for the WRE program in AR, LA, and MS

There is significant overlap among the audiences, messaging, tactics, tools, and channels to be used in achieving both of these communications objectives, so each of these communications strategy components is only described once. In general, signup announcements and some of the more detailed WRE program information can be used to achieve objective 1, while some of the more regional analyses of program participation/government inputs can be used for decision-maker audiences to achieve objective 2. Beyond that, most news stories about WRE successes, program benefits, and landowners will serve to achieve both objectives.

Audiences

Private Landowners - Farmers, ranchers, and landowners in the MAV.

Recreationals - includes both landowners who primarily own and manage their land for hunting, fishing, and enjoyment of nature, as well as non-landowners who benefit from private recreational land use in the MAV.

Historically under-served farmers - small landholders and minority farmers who are disproportionately underrepresented in many Farm Bill conservation programs. This audience could also include nontraditional farmers such as those focusing on organic or sustainable agriculture.

NRCS - NRCS state offices and USDA Service Centers.

Extension - Extension departments of the land grant and 1890 land grant universities in each state.

Farm service organizations - includes county level soil & water conservation districts, cooperatives, forestry associations, and others such as commercial feed stores.

Farm support businesses - Businesses that sell seeds, equipment, and other farm supplies where farm news information may often be posted.

Partners - Currently engaged partner organizations, such as TNC, DU, and state wildlife agencies.

Conservation community - Additional agencies and NGOs who share conservation objectives as a focus of their work (e.g. NWF).

Rural realtors - Real estate agents who broker rural properties within the MAV and who are largely unfamiliar with the WRE program, but could benefit from knowledge of this program as a sales point for clients, thereby serving as a conduit to recreation/conservation landowners or prospective landowners.

Elected government - legislative/executive bodies that must support the program/project conservation mission in order for it to succeed (e.g. Congress, state governors, state legislatures).

Interested public - a fundamentally non-science/non-conservation audience that nevertheless constitutes an important constituency for conservation in the U.S. In addition to the recreational audience, these can include birders, photographers, wildlife enthusiasts, members of conservation organizations, etc.

Messaging

Messaging for each audience will be developed in detail as communications products are developed. The messaging will be guided by the social science research cited above, the “New Enrollment Outreach Messaging Summary” developed by the WRE team, and direct feedback from the team as well as selected private landowner WRE participants. Benefits and opportunities associated with the Wetland Reserve Easement program will be stressed, with the following emphases, depending on audience:

- a. landowner economic benefits such as retiring marginal agricultural land (prone to flooding), decreasing risk, and the increased geographic area rate caps (GARC) for LA and MS;
- b. wildlife values, especially waterfowl and deer hunting, “bringing nature back” and aesthetic benefits;
- c. ecological context and benefits for WRE easement/reforestation within the largely deforested MAV; “giving back”; emphasis on “ecosystem services” or “nature’s benefits” from wetland reserve easements;
- d. how to apply/qualify for WRE (for occasional more detailed communications):
 - Referrals for more information: link to website/USDA Service Center/name and telephone number
 - Eligible land types
 - Size of enrollments
 - Easement options
 - Easement limitations and monitoring
 - Landowner rights
 - Compatible use agreements
 - What property restoration will look like
- e. WRE restoration and program enrollments within the context of each MAV state and possibly the entire MAV region, i.e. how easements contribute directly or indirectly to communities and economic well-being. We could provide overall/statewide economic effects, statistics on extent/acreage of enrollments, dollar value of benefits provided to constituents, economic estimates of recreational values, etc. This may be particularly appropriate for the 700,000-acre celebration. However, this may be too time intensive to merit the effort, but we have begun a table of [Sources Describing MAV Landowners](#) for this purpose.

Tactics/tools/channels

The primary tactic for achieving greater awareness, inquiries, and signups for the WRE in 2017 will be a significantly increased level of outreach and information dissemination, on a regular basis throughout the year, conducted in cooperation with the NRCS public affairs offices in AR, LA, and MS. Currently, the NRCS typically conducts one or two announcements concerning WRE signups each year, using a wide-ranging “shotgun” approach to disseminate the announcement to as many local county-level soil & water conservation district office, news media, university, partner, and landowner outlets as possible. The announcements are brief and general, without illustration or examples.

1. The “Wetland Reserve Brand”

This communications strategy proposes to build on NRCS WRE announcements by regularly developing pdf documents, for print and for electronic media, that illustrate some of the key messages for our target audiences on a rotating basis. We propose to develop a “WRE brand” and template for such announcements. The templates will include a recognizable design, photos, quotes from landowners or experts, accessible language to appeal to target audiences, and possibly data graphics, when appropriate. Once approved, the templates can be used to incorporate new landowners, photos, quotes, graphics, and WRE payment rates and other details specific to each state. The template will also aid in developing multiple announcements in a time- and cost-effective manner. The frequency of such communications will be determined by the available time and budget of the 2017 campaign. (For an excellent example of the type of accessible marketing to be used in these communications, see this [“before and after” TELE marketing blog post.](#))

2. Branded Communications Products

- a. Develop informational WRE factsheets/brochures/news releases.
- b. Work with on-the-ground staff to develop WRP success stories/peer testimonials (print and/or video).
- c. Using information developed in a and b, develop stories to be shared via agricultural and recreational mass media identified in the list of WRE communications channels noted below.

- d. Use the Conservation Finance Center (www.conservationfinancecenter.org) conservation calculators or assist NRCS in design and layout of an economic worksheet for landowners that will allow them to compare programs; *economic comparisons must be developed by NRCS.*
- e. Develop 1-page high level briefs with graphics to display *program results data provided by NRCS.*
- f. Provide context for the significance of WRE to each state and the MAV region overall, to the extent data are available and time allowing. For example, information on total easement acreage restored, federal investments, the economic benefits provided through outdoor recreation, and reduced risk through retirement of marginal agricultural lands can be provided in outreach materials for AR, LA, and MS.

3. Social Media

For each WRE brand announcement that is developed, appropriate-length social media posts for Facebook and twitter, including photograph (possibly video), will also be developed. These posts will be shared directly with a host of appropriate Facebook media channels directly via the [K Gregg Consulting Facebook page](#) (view list of FB pages by clicking “liked by this page”). Twitter posts can be shared via [K Gregg Consulting twitter](#), and possibly the [Gulf Coastal Plains & Ozarks twitter account](#). In addition, *social media posts need to be shared by NRCS, local conservation districts, and partners directly through their available social media channels.*

Further, the WRE communications team will agree on an appropriate hashtag/slogan to be used in conjunction with all WRE outreach products. (As an example, see [#OptOutside article](#) and [#OptOutside on Facebook](#).) To the extent that video and/or webinars are produced, YouTube can be used to post and disseminate the recordings.

Best practices for social marketing

(from Gharis et al., 2014, Expanding the Reach of Extension Through Social Media, Extension Journal, Inc.)

- Use images to amplify your Facebook updates.
- Focus on 1-2 social media applications and do them well.

- Focus on social media where you expect your customers to be.
- Make real life connections.

4. Dissemination of WRE communications

- A. **Broad or “shotgun” campaigns** to disseminate WRE communications to existing NRCS audience lists and at NRCS-organized local meetings. Due to the sensitive nature of private landowner information (addresses/email) held by the NRCS and the Farm Services Agency (FSA), these data cannot be shared by the offices who hold them. For this reason, *dissemination of the WRE brand announcements to landowners and NRCS news media contacts will depend on close cooperation and dissemination through the NRCS and FSA, spearheaded by state NRCS public affairs offices, along with assistance from state fish & game agencies.* Dissemination may be via hard copy/printed material or via electronic media (news releases, e-news, email, website posting), depending on the nature of the list. Broad distribution will include some or all of the following:
- NRCS news media lists* (includes newspapers, radio, television, universities, congressionals, etc.)
 - NRCS partner lists*
 - NRCS county soil & water conservation district lists*
 - FSA lists of landowners with a farm record*
 - NRCS lists of existing WRP/WRE landowners*
 - In addition, depending on the availability of FSA cooperation in mailing announcements to registered farms in the MAV, it may be necessary to obtain landowner addresses from county assessor’s offices. This is unlikely to be a quick process.
 - State fish & game private landowner lists (e.g. Arkansas’s list of large landowners in MAV counties)
- B. **Targeted campaigns**, focused on sharing information with Extension, the conservation community, rural realtors, and wildlife recreation audiences can be conducted directly by K Gregg Consulting. These will include:
- Request for assistance in disseminating information to Extension agents/departments within the land grant/1890 land grant universities in AR, LA, and MS. A particular focus of this effort will be the MSU Natural Resource Enterprises program, which has already led extensive

- private landowner outreach campaigns in the MAV states in collaboration with an extensive list of partners. We have developed a [List of Contacts](#) for each of the above mentioned programs and are in the process of reaching out to them.
- b. Direct dissemination of news announcements and stories on spec (submitted without a guarantee of publication) to specialty magazines focused on hunting/outdoor recreation.
 - c. Outreach to rural realtors to determine the best approach for disseminating information about WRE to them.
- C. **Landowner outreach**, i.e. identification of landowners within the MAV in flood-prone areas, as determined by a DU GIS analysis is another potential avenue for identifying targets for direct mail.
- D. **Webinars** may be developed for very specific audiences, such as Extension agents (“get the latest details about WRE in your state”) or Rural Realtors (“learn the benefits of WRE as a selling point to prospective buyers”). A potential enticement for realtor attendance may be gaining continuing education credits for such webinars through Real Estate Associations, if feasible.
- E. **The TriState 700,000-acre celebration**, to be held in September 2017, will be a good opportunity for both disseminating information/communications products about WRE, as well as a source of interviews, photos, and video of landowners and experts who have participating in the program.

5. Channels

To expand the NRCS “shotgun” approach for disseminating WRE signup announcements and to implement targeted communications, we developed a list of appropriate [WRE Communications Channels](#), with highest priority channels identified for reaching both Objective 1 and Objective 2 audiences. This list includes news and social channels of various conservation, farm, and extension organizations, as well as magazines and other publications targeted to recreational audiences, and many media outlets. It is likely that

this list has significant overlap with NRCS state public affairs office lists.
(*NRCS can use this list to augment their outreach lists*).

Evaluation

- *Outcome measure*: Number of applications in the years outreach campaigns occur; increase in applications over past years; and some measure of the quality of applications (average ranking or number of highest ranked applications). A desire under the program is to promote applications of larger crop acreages that would be eligible for wetland restoration. (Although not all WRE enrollments can be directly ascribed to WRE outreach efforts, it is a safe assumption that most will have been influenced by outreach to some degree. Our aim is to increase applications by increasing and diversifying the forms of WRE outreach).
- *Process measure*: Number of stories, testimonials, factsheets etc. developed.
- *Process measure*: Number of different channels through which communications are disseminated.
- *Process measure*: Google/e-news analytics for web-based channels (to the extent available; it does not appear these are available to NRCS state offices; however, some analytics may be available through [Govdelivery](#), which is the service that NRCS uses for electronic mailings.).
- *Outcome measure*: Success in maintaining or increasing WRE appropriations in subsequent years. (Again, success can only be partially ascribed to WRE communications.)

Explanation of "Process" vs. "Outcome" Measures

Communications evaluation measures generally fall into one of two categories: process or outcome measures. Process measures generally show how effectively we reached our audience or how much work was accomplished. Outcome measures aim to show how effectively we convinced or motivated the audience to change attitudes or take action, i.e. they are focused on results.

III. AUGMENTING OUTREACH WITH SPECIALIZED MEDIA SERVICES

To the extent that funds are available, a number of new channels for disseminating WRE signup information could be tested experimentally using additional funds available for outreach. These include:

1. **Press releases using a news service such as [Newswire](#) or [PR Web](#).** This may be a good option to use in conjunction with the TriState WRE celebration or to share professionally developed video (see below) because these news services can add value to existing NRCS press release/news lists in several ways:
 - They facilitate the incorporation of news/stories in a vast variety of media, including television, with large lists of subscribers from major news outlets and individual reporters.
 - They disseminate to major search engines such as google and yahoo.
 - They allow targeting by industry and region.
 - They allow tracking of news pickups, providing links to where the news was picked up as well as analytics on open and click rates within news campaigns.
 - They incorporate social media beyond Facebook and Twitter, including in some cases a variety of blogs, LinkedIn, Pinterest and more.
 - They provide rss feeds and syndication (i.e. the news release remains listed on the site, to be found and referred to indefinitely).

2. **Radio/Television public service announcements:** This is something that may or may not need to be pursued if news releases have sufficient reach to broadcast media. Radio news shows focused on farming, hunting, or conservation issues are another potential source for disseminating WRE news and announcements. This bears further research, depending on feedback from the WRE communications team.

3. **Professional video of landowner peer testimonials:** Developing a professional quality video that showcases results and wildlife response to Wetland Reserve restorations, as well as interviews of landowners who have benefited from the Wetland Reserve Program could provide a very effective means of inspiring interest from others. This is because peer testimonials are one of the most trusted and powerful means of conveying information to

farmers and other landowners. For this purpose, a long video would not be needed, in fact briefer (~5 minutes) would probably be better. This would potentially allow the development of more than one video (e.g. one per state), and short videos are more appropriate for sharing via social media. Such videos could be permanently archived on YouTube.

Evaluation

- *Process measure:* Response as measured by number and type of media pickups, along with open and click rates is provided by professional news services. Another means of assessing the whether a professional news service provides value added to traditional NRCS/state agency press releases would be spot checks of WRE news story pickup in local media, such as regional newspapers, that have proven difficult to engage in the past.
- *Process measure:* The number of views of a YouTube video testimonial subsequent to broad dissemination could provide a measure of its reach.
- *Outcome measure:* Response as measured by number of calls/inquiries about WRE could be used in a one to two-week time frame after press or radio/television ads. However NRCS means for assessing this response is unclear.

SUMMARY LIST OF PRIMARY WRE COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES

- Development of a WRE brand and social media hashtag slogan (possibly pertaining to the 25-year anniversary celebration of WRE in the MAV).
- Regular WRE-brand pdf communications (in the form of factsheets, stories, etc.) to be disseminated via print and electronic means through NRCS channels and possibly using professional news service.
- NRCS website updates/page links associated with program announcements (to the extent feasible).
- Work through/expand the WRE Communications Network, which includes communications experts of partnering entities such as Ducks Unlimited.

- Seek to leverage the communications channels of others, including social media. Directly ask for news to be included in partners' publications, blogs, social media, and other news. Seek to share news/announcements through channels such as Extension magazines.
- Submit stories for publication in magazines and other news channels with appeal to our primary target audiences: private landowners, recreationals, and historically under-served farmers. These could include Farm Bureau, hunting, and minority-focused publications.
- Webinars or video, including potentially professionally produced video, to be posted on YouTube time and shared via multiple channels, time and budget allowing.
- Develop a WRE program announcement calendar for each state:
 - * determine pertinent signup deadlines and announcement times;
 - * determine lead times required for delivering communications products in time for NRCS/FSA dissemination.
 - * identify additional landowners/experts for peer testimonials or success stories; build a "pipeline" for future outreach and communications development.



LIST OF ASSOCIATED MATERIALS

Social Science

- [Social Science Literature Summary](#) (relative to private landowners/farmers in the MAV and other regions, as appropriate)
- Annotated bibliographies of social science research pertaining to Farmers, Nonindustrial Private Landowners, and Minority/Organic Farmers in the MAV (request link)
- Folder containing all social science papers summarized in the bibliographies, with pertinent sections highlighted (request link)

- Landowner Interviews (request link)

- [TELE Landowner Profile summary spreadsheet](#)
- [TELE Landowner Profile factsheets that were analyzed](#)

Contacts for Outreach (to assist in getting the word out)

- [Extension Contacts](#)
- [1890 Land Grant Universities communications departments](#)
- [USDA Strikeforce and Conservation District contacts](#)

Communications Channels & Audience Information

- [Spreadsheet of Prioritized Communications Channels for WRE in MAV Outreach](#)
- [Spreadsheet of Sources Describing MAV Farmers & Landowners](#)