

## The NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program

The restoration and protection of wetlands converted to agricultural use is the purpose of the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wetlands Reserve Program. During 2008, 1,236 acres in Michigan were enrolled in WRP bringing the state's total to 39,177 acres.

Over half of Michigan's wetlands have been drained and converted for agricultural use or other types of development. Wetlands serve a very important role in the landscape by improving water quality, flood storage and groundwater recharge. The loss of wetlands has increased the frequency and severity of flood events. An important function of wetlands is that they reduce sediment and nutrients in surface water before it enters our streams, lakes and rivers. Restoring wetlands is one of the best conservation practices available for improving water quality and quantity.

By enrolling in WRP, landowners with land that was formerly wetlands can convert these lands back to their original state. WRP provides financial assistance to restore and protect wetlands, and to enhance degraded wetlands. The landowner can enter into either a 30-year easement or permanent easement that will insure the land is maintained as wetland habitat. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, landowners have three enrollment options under WRP;

1. A *Permanent Easement* is a conservation easement in perpetuity. USDA pays 100 percent of the easement value and up to 100 percent of the restoration costs.
2. A *30-Year Easement* is an easement that expires after 30 years. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the easement value and up to 75 percent of the restoration costs. For both permanent and 30-year easements, USDA pays all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance.
3. A *Restoration Cost-Share Agreement* is an agreement to restore or enhance the wetland functions and values without placing an easement on the enrolled acres. USDA pays up to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

In order to enroll land in WRP, the land must be owned privately or by a tribe and cannot have changed ownership within the previous 7 years unless adequate assurances can be provided by the landowner.

Even with 39,177 acres of land in Michigan enrolled in WRP, the state has many more acres that are eligible. Restoring wetlands in our state will provide residents with numerous benefits outlined earlier in this article. The landowner will also be able to enjoy the abundance of wildlife that wetland habitats attract. If you would like more information about the WRP program, contact NRCS or your local Conservation District.

*The USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.*