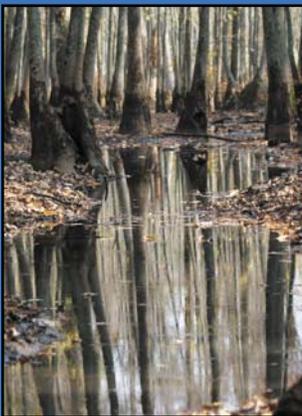




Geese make their descent into a WRP site.



David Fowlkes inserts boards into a water control structure.



A tupelo swamp in the Big Woods of Arkansas.



Photos by Creston Shrum

David Fowlkes, Conservation Agronomist, and Jerry Hogan, Field Representative with The Nature Conservancy, discuss work on a wetlands project.

Wetlands project connects fragmented bottomland forest

The Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Wetlands Reserve Program is partnering with The Nature Conservancy to restore thousands of acres in the Big Woods of Arkansas – a 550,000-acre corridor of floodplain forest along the Mississippi River.

Of the 550,000 acres of bottomland forest still standing, about 300,000 acres is contiguous. The remainder exists as islands among agricultural fields -- less than 10 percent of Arkansas' original 8 million acres of forested wetlands remain.

A 404-acre WRP project in Woodruff County is designed to tie some of the fragmented areas together by converting the agricultural fields back to wetlands.

"This practice is a win-win situation for everyone involved -- especially for the wildlife that inhabit these areas," said Jerry Hogan, a Field Representative for The Nature Conservancy.

"We have installed four levies and planted approximately 70,000 trees," said

David Fowlkes, Conservation Agronomist at the Jonesboro Technical Service Center.

"By incorporating five water control structures into the plan, we can control the water level with flashboard risers to flood fields for waterfowl and shorebirds," Fowlkes said. "By dropping the water slowly we can create several different ages of forage for the birds."

Shallow water areas with mounds also provide semi-permanent to permanent water on the site for a variety of birds, amphibians and other animals.

"Our goal with each WRP project is to return the land to its natural state," Fowlkes said.

To accomplish this, a mixture of bottomland hardwood species was planted to provide cover and a food source for the wildlife.

The NRCS and The Nature Conservancy are working on five other WRP projects in the Big Woods area to restore nearly 6,000 acres.

2005 Wetlands Reserve Program

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner.

The program provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture. WRP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill).

Benefits

WRP participants benefit by:

- ◆ Receiving financial and technical assistance in return for restoring, protecting and enhancing wetland functions and values;
- ◆ Seeing a reduction in problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas; and
- ◆ Having incentives to develop wildlife recreational opportunities on their land.

Wetlands benefit the nation by providing fish and wildlife habitat; improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reducing flooding; recharging groundwater; protecting biological diversity; as well as providing opportunities for educational, scientific, and recreational activities.

Eligibility

To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 12 months prior to enrolling it in the program, unless the land was inherited, the landowner exercised the landowner's right of redemption after foreclosure, or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

To be eligible for WRP, land must be restorable and be suitable for wildlife benefits.

This includes:

- ◆ Wetlands farmed under natural conditions;
- ◆ Farmed wetlands;
- ◆ Prior converted cropland;
- ◆ Farmed wetland pasture;
- ◆ Farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- ◆ Range land, pasture, or production forest land where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored;
- ◆ Riparian areas which link protected wetlands;
- ◆ Lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values; and

County	Contracts	Funding Approved
Chicot	1	\$1,116,215
Conway	1	\$363,445
Jackson	2	\$513,950
Lee	4	\$632,790
Little River	1	\$1,004,161
Monroe	4	\$1,727,200
Nevada	1	\$5,000
Perry	2	\$223,588
Phillips	2	\$503,528
Randolph	1	\$314,300
St. Francis	7	\$3,934,224
Van Buren	1	\$11,000
White	5	\$910,877
Woodruff	8	\$3,578,545
Total	40	\$14,838,823

- ◆ Previously restored wetlands that need long-term protection.

Ineligible Land. Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985; lands with timber stands established under a Conservation Reserve Program contract; federal lands; and lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

Uses of WRP Land

On acreage subject to a WRP easement, participants control access to the land and may lease the land for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a participant may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock, or harvest wood products.

Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

For More Information

If you need more information about WRP, contact your local USDA Service Center or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>.