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 Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service



**LOUISIANA
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Louisiana Wetlands News

Second Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) Sign-up Announcement

JANUARY 1994

The second USDA Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) sign-up has been set for February 28 through March 11, 1994. The WRP program will again be administered by USDA's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS).

Louisiana landowners are again eligible for the program this year along with 19 other states including Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

The national program goal for FY 1994 is enrollment of 75,000 acres with allocated funds totalling \$66.575 million. Lands enrolled in WRP will be converted to wetland habitat aimed at providing wetland associated functions and values, such as wildlife habitat, water purification, and flood storage.

The WRP was last funded in FY 1992 when more than 450,000 acres were offered for enrollment consideration on 2,337 farms located in the nine participating states (including Louisiana). Because of a 50,000-acre limitation that year, only 49,888 acres on 265 farms were tentatively accepted. In Louisiana, intentions were signed for more than 119,000 acres, but only 14,075 acres were ultimately enrolled because of limited funding and acreage goals.

It is expected that many of these same tracts will be offered again this year.

Under the program, permanent easements are purchased from participating landowners offering farmed wetlands, prior converted wetlands, and riparian areas that link wetlands. Participants agree to accept no more than fair market value for their land in return for a lump sum payment and cost-share assistance for implementing wetland restoration practices. Specified compatible uses are permitted on the restored acreage by the landowner and any successive owner of the land. USDA's Soil Conservation Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service help ASCS determine the eligibility and environmental quality of the land offered.

Land offered will be rated using: 1) habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, 2) wetland functions, 3) wetland operations and maintenance, 4) location significance, and 5) physical conditions of the site. States will use these five factors, in addition to the estimated per-acre cost of the easement, to rank acceptable WRP intentions.

Additionally, a WRP land valuation computer program is available to help landowners determine the fair market value for their land using income capitalization appraisal techniques. To obtain a publication and computer software for this program, contact your parish Cooperative Extension Service Office. Interested landowners should contact their local ASCS office for further information.



THE LOUISIANA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE PROVIDES EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN PROGRAMS AND EMPLOYMENT. LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY AND A. & M. COLLEGE, LOUISIANA PARISH GOVERNING BODIES, SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY, AND UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE COOPERATING

Gulf of Mexico Program (GMP) Public Education Meetings

The LCES, LSU Sea Grant, and the Governor's Office of Coastal Activities will be sponsoring seven Gulf of Mexico Program public education meetings in early 1994. These meetings are held to help constituents better understand the organizational structure and the goals and objectives of the GMP. In late 1992, all of the governors from the Gulf Coast states (including Governor Edwards) signed a signatory document pledging support for several GMP environmental initiatives. *These include the following five-year environmental challenges:*

- Significantly reduce the rate of loss of coastal wetlands;
- Achieve an increase in Gulf Coast seagrass beds;
- Enhance the sustainability of Gulf commercial and recreational fisheries;
- Protect human health and food supply by reducing input of nutrients, toxic substances, and pathogens to the Gulf;
- Increase Gulf shellfish beds available for safe harvesting by 10%;
- Ensure that all Gulf beaches are safe for swimming and recreational uses;
- Reduce by at least 10% the amount of trash on beaches;
- Improve and expand coastal habitats that support migratory birds, fish, and other living resources; and
- Expand public education/outreach efforts tailored for each Gulf Coast parish.

Karen Gautreaux, technical assistant within the Governor's Office of Coastal Activities, is jointly coordinating this initiative and will be actively involved in this effort.

The seven educational meetings set for 1994 will be a good first step in meeting the education/outreach challenges listed above. The meetings are set to begin at 7 p.m. and last about two hours. Meeting dates and locations are:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>
Tuesday, Feb. 8	Belle Chasse (Municipal Auditorium)
Wednesday, Feb. 9	Thibodaux (Nichols State Univ. - Plantation Suite, Student Union)
Thursday, Feb. 10	Franklin (St. Mary Parish Library)
Wednesday, Feb. 16	Crowley (Crowley Building & Loan)
Thursday, Feb. 17	Cameron (Police Jury Annex) Courthouse Square
Tuesday, Feb. 22	Hammond (Southeastern Louisiana University, 133 Univ. Center)
Wednesday, Feb. 23	Baton Rouge (LDWF Building) Quail Drive

Written information about the GMP will be provided at each meeting, and the agenda will provide ample time for obtaining and recording public comments and questions. A synopsis of each meeting will be compiled and provided to the Governor, the GMP staff, and meeting attendees.

Issues addressed by the GMP will no doubt interest farmers, ranchers, fishermen, landowners, local government, petrochemical industries, and the general public.

For more information about the GMP public education meetings, contact your local Extension Service office.

New Agreement to Make SCS the Lead Agency for Wetlands Determinations on Agricultural Lands

On January 6, 1994, a new memorandum of agreement (MOA) was signed among the four federal agencies with wetlands protection responsibilities. It recognizes the Soil Conservation Service as lead agency for delineating wetlands on agricultural lands. This action was supported by most agricultural interests and should provide for more effective coordination among federal agencies with wetlands protection responsibilities. Additionally, this was one of the many recommendations listed in the Clinton Administration's August 24, 1993, report on proposed revisions to federal wetlands policy.

Under the MOA, SCS will make wetland delineations for all agricultural lands whether or not the person who owns, manages, or operates the land is a participant in USDA programs.

Agencies signing the MOA include the departments of Agriculture, Interior, and Army, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Under the agreement, farmers will be able to rely on SCS wetland maps to determine the extent of wetlands under both the Farm Bill (Swampbuster provisions) and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

Previously, farmers participating in USDA farm programs received wetland delineation maps from SCS for Swampbuster purposes only. If, a farmer, however, needed a 404 permit for work in wetlands, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) or the EPA generally would require an additional wetland delineation from their respective agency. Farmers will now be able to rely on a single wetland determination by SCS for Swampbuster and Section 404 purposes. All agencies will begin using the 1987 COE Wetland Delineation Manual to make wetland determinations.

Regardless of what agency makes the determination, 404 permits will continue to be required for certain non-exempt activities conducted in designated wetlands. Farming activities that are exempt from Section 404 include:

- Established (ongoing), normal farming activities including plowing, harvesting, seeding, minor drainage, and cultivating

- Maintenance (but not construction) of drainage ditches
- Construction and maintenance of irrigation ditches
- Construction and maintenance of farm or stock ponds
- Construction and maintenance of farm roads, in accordance with best management practices

The COE should always be contacted before these activities are conducted in wetlands and other waters to verify applicability of the exemptions. All activities conducted on land classified as Prior Converted Cropland (PC) are exempt from Section 404 permitting requirements.

One of the critical points in the MOA is the definition of "agricultural lands." Ag lands are defined in the MOA as:

"...lands intensively used and managed for the production of food or fiber to the extent that the natural vegetation has been removed and cannot be used to determine whether the area meets applicable hydrophytic (wetland) vegetation criteria in making a wetland delineation."

Areas that meet this definition may include intensively used and managed cropland, hayland, and pasture land. Agricultural lands do not include range lands, forest lands, wood lots, or tree farms.

Additionally, lands where the natural vegetation has not been removed, even though that vegetation may be regularly grazed or mowed and collected as forage (such as uncultivated prairies and marsh pastures), are not considered agricultural lands for MOA purposes. The COE will continue to make determinations on non-agricultural lands.

"Swampbuster" Provisions of the Farm Bill

Public concern for preserving and restoring wetland associated functions and values has had a pronounced impact on both the 1985 and 1990 Farm

Bills. Concerns over increased flood damage, reduced water quality, and lost wildlife habitat have directly affected farm policy. Farmers now risk losing all USDA program benefits (disaster payments, cost-share programs, marketing loans, etc.) if they plant an agricultural commodity on a converted wetland that was converted by drainage, dredging, leveling or any other means after December 23, 1985; or if they convert a wetland for the purpose of or to make agricultural commodity production possible after November 28, 1990.

Prior-converted croplands (cropland converted before December 23, 1985) are not wetlands under the EPA and Corps of Engineers definitions. As a result, activities in prior-converted croplands are not regulated under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA). Lands designated as prior-converted cropland must meet these conditions:

- 1) The area was drained, dredged, filled, leveled, or otherwise manipulated for the purpose of, and continues to be used for, production of an agricultural commodity;
- 2) This manipulation or conversion occurred before December 23, 1985;
- 3) The area has undergone generally extensive and relatively permanent modifications to its hydrology and vegetation; and
- 4) The area has not been abandoned.

Abandonment occurs after five years have elapsed without any agricultural commodity being produced. Any crop rotation must include the planting of an agricultural commodity once every five years. If abandoned, land may be reclassified as a wetland and become subject to Swampbuster and COE Section 404 regulatory jurisdiction.

For more information about Farm Bill wetland provisions, contact your parish Extension Service Office.

Wetlands: Definition and Delineation

Since the 1970s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and the U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency (EPA) have used the same definition of wetlands for regulatory purposes:

"Wetlands are areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs and similar areas."

Basically, wetlands are areas where the frequent and prolonged presence of water at or near the soil surface drives the natural system including the kinds of soils that form, the plants that grow, and the fish and/or wildlife communities that use the habitat.

Swamps and marshes are well-recognized wetland types, but there are many specific wetland types, such as bottom hardwoods, that have drier or more variable water regimes than those well-recognized by the public.

When the upper part of the soil is saturated with water at growing season temperatures, soil organisms consume the oxygen in the soil, and conditions unsuitable for most plants quickly develop. Such conditions also cause development of soil characteristics (color and texture) representative of "hydric soils." The plants that can grow in such conditions are called "hydrophytes" (cypress trees, marsh grasses). Together, hydric soils and hydrophytes are useful field indicators of the presence and declination of wetlands.

The actual presence or absence of water itself (ponding, flooding, or soil saturation), however, is a less reliable indicator of the presence of wetlands. Except for wetlands flooded by Gulf tides, the hydrology of wetlands fluctuates as a result of rainfall patterns, dry seasons and droughts. Some of the most well-known wetlands, such as many bottomland hardwood swamps, are often dry. Likewise, many upland areas are very wet during and shortly after wet weather. Such natural fluctuations must be taken into account when identifying areas subject to federal wetlands jurisdiction. Similarly, the effects of upstream dams, drainage ditches, levees, irrigation, and other modifications must also be considered.

EPA and the COE use the 1987 Corps of Engineers Wetlands Delineation Manual to delineate wetlands for the Clean Water Act Section 404 permit program. Section 404 requires a permit from the COE for the discharge of dredged or fill material into the waters of the United States, including wetlands. The 1987 Manual will remain in use pending review of public comments on the 1991 proposed Manual and the ongoing National Academy of Sciences study of wetland delineation.

The 1987 Manual organizes wetland field identification into three categories with specific threshold criteria. These categories include 1) soils, 2) vegetation, and 3) hydrology. With this approach, an area that meets all three criteria is considered a wetland.

Reference: EPA Fact Sheet # 9, March 1993.

Highly Erodible Land (HEL) Provisions of the Farm Bill

Public concern for improved water quality and soil conservation has been directly addressed in Highly Erodible Lands (HEL) provisions of the 1985 and 1990 Farm Bills. These provisions require that farmers have a fully implemented conservation compliance plan for all highly erodible fields by December 31, 1994 (the end of this year). If conservation plans are not fully applied by the end of 1994, farmers may lose eligibility for USDA benefits including:

- cost-share programs
- disaster payments
- annual programs
- price supports
- marketing loans
- commodity purchases
- crop insurance
- short- and long-term loans

Most producers now participating in USDA-ASCS programs have been notified by SCS and have

approved HEL conservation compliance plan(s) on file. Many small producers and tenant farmers, however, may not be aware of these requirements and may not have an approved plan in place. HEL Conservation Compliance Plans must be developed and implemented by all annual crop producers (including annually cultivated/planted pasture lands), even if no USDA program crops are produced.

Applicable penalty ("Sodbuster") provisions include disaster payments often used by producers who normally do not participate in USDA benefit programs.

For more information about the HEL (Sodbuster) Provisions of the Farm Bill, contact your parish Extension Service or SCS office.

American Wetlands Month May 1994

The Wetlands Protection Section of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Region 6 office invites everyone to join organizations and individuals throughout the country in a national commemoration of our nation's wetlands. Louisiana is increasingly recognizing and appreciating important wetland functions and values related to improving water quality, flood protection, wildlife and fisheries habitat, and groundwater recharge. Although public understanding is increasing, wetland losses continue in both coastal and inland wetland areas.

In an effort to encourage better wetlands management and protection, everyone must have a clear understanding and appreciation of the benefits wetland provide. American Wetlands Month has been established to help foster that understanding. During the month of May many activities will be conducted by numerous organizations to celebrate the values of wetlands. Some of the activities include:

- * Local and/or state proclamations declaring May as American Wetlands Month;
- * Wetland tours in local communities recognizing important regional wetland sites;
- * Fishing tournaments recognizing wetland values;

- * Wetland clean-up days that include 4-H clubs, scout troops, or other civic organizations;
- * Wetlands photo or poster contests;
- * Promoting the availability of wetland related educational materials.

Anyone interested in learning more about American Wetlands Month or wanting wetland-related educational information should contact my office in Baton Rouge.

USDA Wetlands Assistance for Landowners

Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP). ACP, administered by ASCS, provides cost-sharing assistance to farmers and ranchers for carrying out approved, enduring conservation and environmental enhancement practices on agricultural lands. SCS provides technical assistance to ACP participants for planning, design, layout, supervision and maintenance of practices, and certifies that the practices meet SCS standards and specifications.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP offers long-term rental payments and cost-share assistance to established permanent vegetative cover on cropland that is highly erodible or contributing to a serious water quality problem. By converting these areas to permanent grass and tree cover, soil erosion is reduced and both water quality and wildlife habitat are improved. CRP land eligibility has been expanded to increase water quality benefits. A variety of practices encouraged on CRP acres include planting introduced or native grasses, establishing forest tree stands or windbreaks, creating wildlife habitat or developing shallow water areas for waterfowl. SCS provides technical assistance to make land eligibility determinations, develop conservation plans, and assist with implementation and vegetation establishment and maintenance. CRP associated wetland benefits in Louisiana include more than 27,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods, 5,000 acres of shallow water habitat, and 1,700 acres of riparian hardwood tree plantings.

Small Watershed Program - Public Law 83-566. Under this program, cost-share assistance is available to watershed project sponsors for the acquisition of perpetual easements in wetlands and flood plains to

retain excessive floodwaters, improve water quality and quantity, and provide habitat for fish and wildlife resources.

Water Bank Program (WBP). Through WBP, cost-share and technical assistance are provided to protect, improve, or restore nesting habitat for wood ducks and mottled ducks in Louisiana. More than 43,000 acres (covering 508 tracts) are currently enrolled in the Water Bank program in Louisiana.

Water Quality Incentive Program (WQIP). WQIP is a voluntary incentive program that enables SCS to expand technical assistance aimed at reducing agricultural pollutants. Technical assistance concentrates on conservation practices (best management practices (BMPs)) that address wetland preservation, wildlife habitat improvement, and resource management. USDA enters into three-to five-year agreements with farm owners and operators to develop and implement plans to protect water quality. Eligible lands include wellhead protection areas within 1,000 feet of public wells, critical cropland areas with priority problems resulting from agricultural nonpoint sources of pollution, areas where agricultural nonpoint source pollution is adversely affecting threatened or endangered species habitats, and other environmentally sensitive areas identified by USDA, EPA, Fish and Wildlife Service, or state agencies. Through WQIP, USDA plans to enroll 10 million acres by 1995.

Wetland Reserve Program. Authorized by the 1990 Farm Bill, WRP provides a unique opportunity for farmers to retire marginal cropland through the granting of perpetual easements in exchange for lump-sum payments equivalent to market value of the land. WRP also provides for cost-share payments to landowners associated with wetland restoration on enrolled lands. In 1992, Louisiana processed bids covering more than 69,000 acres and accepted more than 14,000 acres into the program. As mentioned earlier, Louisiana will participate in a 1994 WRP sign-up beginning February 28, 1994.

A new publication, Private Lands Technical Assistance Handbook, summarizes these and many other incentive and technical assistance programs available to landowners interested in wetlands, water quality, and fish and wildlife habitat enhancement. This Handbook is jointly sponsored by the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service, Soil Conservation Service, and the Louisiana

Cooperative Extension Service. To obtain a free copy, contact your parish Extension Service office or call my office in Baton Rouge. Ask for Pub. 2536.

Reference: USDA Office of Public Affairs, April 26, 1993.

Constructed Wetlands Clean Agricultural Runoff

Scientists studying wetlands find that natural wetland vegetation can prevent many agricultural sources of pollution.

Wetlands serve as nature's natural water purification system by filtering nutrients, organic chemicals, heavy metals, and sediment from inflowing waters.

Scientists at the USDA National Sedimentation Laboratory in Oxford, Mississippi, have been evaluating constructed wetlands for application as water purification systems on dairy farms. After allowing wastewater to flow into a lagoon to allow solid contaminants to settle out, runoff water is pumped from the lagoon into the four parallel wetland cells. Giant bulrushes (Scirpus Validus) are planted at one-foot intervals in the cells to provide substrate for microorganisms that process or remove contaminants such as nitrogen, phosphorus, ammonia, and total suspended solids.

Since May 1991 the USDA team has been monitoring 18 water-quality indicators on a bi-weekly basis. After two years of operation, this system has proved very effective in removing two of the primary targets of the project - ammonia and coliform bacteria. Each cell processes 51 cubic feet of wastewater per day, reducing the ammonia level by about 91 percent and coliform bacteria by 96 percent. Even though the water is not drinkable, this system does go a long way toward reaching nonpoint contamination goals. The cells have no discharge over half of the time, and a hay meadow below the cells retains runoff and nutrients when discharge is required.

For more information about constructed wetlands, contact my office in Baton Rouge.

If you have any questions or if you want any additional wetlands and coastal resources related information, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,



Paul Coreil
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