



IFAS EXTENSION

Improving, Restoring, and Managing Natural Resources on Rural Properties in Florida: Sources of Financial Assistance¹

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Interested in conserving natural resources, such as wildlife habitat, on your land? Federal and State Governments have several programs to respond to a broad range of natural resource challenges faced by landowners. These programs help landowners to reduce soil erosion, protect wetlands and wildlife habitat, and promote forest and farmland productivity and protection. These challenges are addressed through land rentals, technical assistance, cost-shares, and incentive payments.

At the federal level, the 2002 Farm Bill included a number of provisions and incentives for helping landowners to protect and enhance natural resources. At the state level, during 2004 the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) introduced the Landowner Incentive Program. Emphasis is on improving habitat for listed species or species at risk. The USFWS also administers the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program at the state level to help landowners improve or restore unique habitats. The

purpose of this paper is to inform landowners about government programs available to help conserve natural resources.

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Additional information regarding conservation and assistance for management of natural resources in Florida is available on the University of Florida IFAS, Cooperative Extension Electronic Data Information Source (EDIS):

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- Paying Private Landowners to Conserve Wildlife Habitat: A Unique Approach to Conservation (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW138>)
- Improving, Restoring, and Managing Natural Resources in Florida: Sources of Technical Assistance for Rural Landowners (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW218>)
- Improving, Restoring, and Managing Natural Resources in Florida: Sources of Technical Assistance for Urban Homeowners (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW212>)
- Conservation Options for Private Landowners in Florida (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW194>)
- Conservation Easements: Options for Preserving Current Land Uses (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FR149>)
- Evaluating Private Lands for Conservation of Wildlife (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW195>)

2002 Farm Bill Programs

Forest Land Enhancement Program

The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) replaces two previous landowner cost-share programs—the Forest Incentives Program (FIP) and Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP). The program, authorized under the 2002 Farm Bill, is administered by the Florida Division of Forestry (DOF). The program is available to landowners on a 50-50 cost-share basis. Eligible practices include, but are not limited to, site preparation, tree planting, and prescribed burning activities. All practices have established rates determined in a manner similar to those that were established under FIP and SIP. Cost-shared practices must be maintained at least 10 years.

Eligibility

Landowners who own at least 10 acres but no more than 10,000 acres of land and who have a written multiple-resource practice plan are eligible to receive funding assistance under FLEP. A maximum of \$10,000 will be available for each qualifying landowner per year as reimbursement for incurred

expenses for approved practices. Although funds were not appropriated for FLEP in 2004, there have been indications that the program will be funded again in future years.

How to Apply

Landowners can obtain applications from all Division of Forestry offices. DOF foresters provide technical assistance to landowner and or the local contact person for participating landowners. Your county forester is listed in the State Government section of your phone book or on the Web at: http://flame.fl-dof.com/apps/county_forester.php. For more information about FLEP and other assistance programs, see the DOF Web site at: http://www.fl-dof.com/forest_management/cfa_flep.html.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Authorized through 2007, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary, long-term cropland retirement program. It provides participants (farm owners, operators, or tenants) with an annual per-acre rent plus half the cost of establishing permanent cover (usually grass or trees). In exchange, the participant will not farm on environmentally sensitive cropland for 10-15 years. Cost-sharing is up to 50% of total costs.

How CRP Works

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers CRP. Payments are provided on a contractual basis to owners. Eligible lands are conserved and improved for soil, water and wildlife. Eligible land includes pastureland devoted to appropriate vegetation, including trees, for enhancing water or soil quality and wildlife habitat. Although limited haying and grazing is permitted, trees planted on land under CRP contract cannot be harvested or commercially sold unless expressly permitted in the contract. Pine straw harvesting is also prohibited under a CRP contract.

Ranking CRP Offers

Interested landowners must apply to participate in the CRP. Applications for CRP contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), which evaluates CRP contracts and applications based on the following criteria:

- wildlife habitat benefits resulting from contract acreage;
- water quality benefits from reduced erosion, runoff, and leaching;
- on-farm benefits from reduced erosion;
- benefits that will likely endure beyond the contract period;
- air quality benefits from reduced wind erosion; and
- cost.

Rental and Practice Payments

Several types of financial incentives are available in CRP contracts:

1. **Rental Payments:** In return for establishing long-term conservation on private lands, CRP provides annual rental payments to participants. CRP bases rental rates on the quality of the soils within your county and the average price paid per acre, in your county, for the crop you are growing. The maximum CRP rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted.
2. **Maintenance Incentive Payments:** CRP annual rental payments may include an additional amount up to \$5 per acre per year as an incentive to perform certain maintenance obligations. In Florida, this additional payment is commonly provided for establishing firebreaks around pine stands.

3. **Cost-share Assistance** is provided to participants who establish approved cover, such as trees and native grasses, on eligible cropland. The cost-share assistance can be an amount not more than 50% of the applicant's costs in establishing approved practices.

4. **Other Incentives:** CRP may offer additional financial incentives of up to 20% of the annual payment for certain continuous sign-up practices. This would be a one-time payment for certain practices that are approved after the contract begins. Examples of these include, but are not limited to: riparian buffer establishment, wind break establishment, farmable wetland practices, wetland buffers, wildlife habitat buffers and wetland restoration.

Eligibility

To be eligible for CRP enrollment, a producer must have owned or operated the land for at least 1 year prior to the end of the CRP sign-up period. Eligible land must be either

- cropland (including field margins) that is planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity 4 of the previous 6 crop years from 1996 to 2001, and which is physically and legally capable of being planted to an agricultural commodity; or
- marginal pastureland that is enrolled in the Water Bank Program (<http://www.cfda.gov/>) or suitable for use as a riparian buffer or for similar water quality purposes. A riparian buffer is land situated along a river or creek.

In addition to the eligible land requirements, cropland must meet one of the following criteria:

- have a weighted average erosion index of 8 or higher;
- be acreage that is not currently under a CRP contract; or
- be located in a national or state CRP conservation priority area.

How to Apply

General CRP sign-up is offered only during designated sign-up periods. For information on upcoming sign-ups, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or on the Internet at <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

In addition to the general CRP sign-up period, environmentally desirable land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time. Certain eligibility requirements still apply but offers are not subject to competitive bidding. USDA representatives determine if the land is environmentally desirable. Contact your local USDA Service Center to see if you qualify.

For more information on CRP, contact your local FSA office or visit FSA's Web site at: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/daftp/cepd/crp.htm>.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program provides assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water and air quality on their land. Through EQIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides assistance to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. The program enhances environmental benefits and helps farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental requirements. The overall objectives of EQIP are to

- reduce nonpoint source pollution, such as nutrients, sediment, pesticides, or excess salinity in impaired watersheds, consistent with Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) where applicable;
- reduce emissions, such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters that contribute to air quality impairment violations of National Ambient Air Quality Standards (<http://www.epa.gov/air/criteria.html>);

- reduce soil erosion and sedimentation; and
- promote habitat conservation for at-risk species.

How EQIP Works

Based on the above objectives, the Chief of NRCS allocates available EQIP funds to NRCS state conservationists. They identify the priority natural resource concerns in their State and this guides which applicants are awarded assistance. The State conservationist, with advice from a State Technical Committee, decides how funds will be allocated. The local designated conservationist, with the advice of local work groups, adapts the State program to the local conditions. As a result, EQIP can be different between states and even between counties.

Applications for EQIP are ranked based on the environmental benefits and costs. More information regarding state and local EQIP implementation can be found at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/>.

Practice Payments

Cost-sharing may pay up to 75% of the costs of grassed waterways, filter strips, manure management facilities, capping abandoned wells, and other practices important to improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. The EQIP cost-share rates for limited resource producers and beginning farmers and ranchers may be up to 90%.

Incentive payments may be provided to promote certain land management practices. Nutrient management, manure management, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, and wildlife habitat management are all possibilities. Incentive payments may be provided for up to three years.

Eligibility

People engaged in livestock or agricultural production are eligible for the program. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, private nonindustrial forest land, and other farm or ranch lands. To be eligible to participate, applicants must

- be an agricultural producer;

- be in compliance with the highly erodible land provisions of the Farm Bill <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/helc/> and all wetland conservation regulations enforced by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/wetlands/index.htm>;
- provide the Social Security number of all individuals who will benefit from the assistance; and
- develop an EQIP plan of operations, including:
 - specific conservation and environmental objectives to be achieved;
 - one or more practices used to achieve the conservation objectives; and
 - the schedule for implementing conservation practices.

If an EQIP plan of operations includes an animal waste storage or treatment facility, the participant must provide for the development and implementation of a comprehensive nutrient management plan. NRCS works with the participant to develop the EQIP plan of operations. This plan becomes the basis of the cost-share agreement between NRCS and the participant. Cost-share payments to landowners under these agreements can last up to 10 years. The 2002 Farm Bill limits the total amount of cost-share and incentive payments paid to an individual or entity to an aggregate of \$450,000, directly or indirectly. This sum applies to all contracts entered into during fiscal years 2002 through 2007.

How to Apply

Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov Web site: <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>.

For more information about EQIP, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is

available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmland/2002/>.

Grasslands Reserve Program

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) helps landowners and operators restore and protect grassland while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. The program emphasizes support for grazing operations, plant and animal biodiversity, and land containing shrubs and forbs that face threat of conversion to other land uses.

How GRP Works

Applications may be filed for an easement or rental agreement with NRCS or FSA at any time. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land while retaining the right to conduct

- common grazing practices;
- hay production, mowing, or harvesting for seed production (subject to certain restrictions during the nesting season of bird species that are in significant decline or those that are protected under Federal or State law, see <http://endangered.fws.gov/wildlife.html>);
- fire rehabilitation; and
- firebreak and fence construction.

The program offers these enrollment options:

1. **Permanent Easement.** This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Payments for this option equal the fair market value, less the grazing value of the land encumbered by the easement. These values will be determined using an appraisal.
2. **Thirty-year Easement.** FSA or NRCS will provide an easement payment equal to 30% of the fair market value of the land, less the grazing value of the land for the period during which the land is encumbered by the easement.

For both easement options, FSA or NRCS will cover all administrative costs associated with recording the easement. This includes appraisal fees, survey costs, title insurance and recording fees.

Easement payments may be provided, at the participant's request, in lump sum or annual payments (equal or unequal amounts) for up to 10 years.

1. **Rental Agreement.** Participants may choose a 10-year, 15-year, 20-year, or 30-year contract. FSA or NRCS will provide annual payments in an amount that is not more than 75% of the grazing value of the land covered by the agreement for the life of the agreement. Payments will be disbursed on the agreement anniversary date each year.
2. **Restoration Agreement.** If restoration of grassland habitat is determined to be necessary by NRCS, a restoration agreement will be incorporated within the rental agreement or easement. Up to 90% of the restoration costs will be covered on lands that have never been cultivated. Up to 75% of the costs are covered on restored grasslands. Participants will be paid upon certification of the approved practice(s) by NRCS or an approved third party.

Eligibility

Landowners who can provide clear title to their land are eligible to participate in either easement option. The Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for GRP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75% of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

Eligible land includes grassland or land that contains forbs or shrubs (including improved rangeland and pastureland), grassland or land that historically has been dominated by grassland, forbs, and shrubs and has potential to provide habitat for animal or plant populations of significant ecological value.

For More Information

For more information about GRP, including application procedures, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the Web at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/GRP/> and <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/GRP/default1.htm>.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) provides technical and financial assistance to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands. The program provides landowners financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal land from agriculture. The NRCS administers the program.

How WRP Works

Landowners and Tribes may file an application for a conservation easement or a cost-share restoration agreement with the NRCS to restore and protect wetlands. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land, but retain private ownership.

The program offers enrollment options:

1. **Permanent Easement.** This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payments equal the lowest of three amounts: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the landowner. In addition to paying for the easement, NRCS pays 100% of the costs of restoring the wetland.
2. **30-Year Easement.** Easement payments through this option are 75% of what would be paid for a permanent easement. NRCS also can pay 75% of restoration costs.

For both permanent and 30-year easements, NRCS 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.

1. **Restoration Cost-Share Agreement.** This is an agreement, generally for a minimum of 10 years, to restore degraded or lost wetland habitat. NRCS can pay 75% of the cost of the restoration activity. This enrollment option does not place an easement on the property. Other agencies, conservation districts, and private conservation organizations may provide additional financial assistance. Such special partnership efforts are encouraged.

NRCS and its partners, including conservation districts, will continue to provide assistance to landowners after completion of restoration activities. This assistance may be in the form of reviewing restoration measures, clarifying technical and administrative aspects of the easement and project management needs, and providing basic biological and engineering advice on how to successfully establish wetland species.

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 and 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;
- prior converted cropland;
- farmed wetland pasture;
- farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- rangeland, pasture, or production forestland 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
- previously restored wetlands that need long-term protection.

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 with 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. 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.

How to Apply

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications can also be found on USDA's e-gov Web site at: <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>.

If you need more information about WRP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information is also available on the Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/WRP/>.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program provides cost-share incentives for the development, enhancement, and restoration of habitat for both game and nongame wildlife species, on all land uses. An emphasis is placed on projects which improve conditions for species in decline or enhance or restore imperiled ecosystems. Through a cooperative effort, the NRCS, the USFWS and the FWC provide

technical assistance in the planning and application phases of eligible practices. Also, if the landowner agrees, private, nonprofit organizations may provide assistance or additional funding to help complete the project.

In addition to technical assistance, the USDA will pay up to 75% of the State Average Installation Cost of approved wildlife habitat management practices. The maximum total cost-share is \$20,000 for the length of the contract period. Cost-share payments may be used to establish new management practices or replace ineffective management practices. WHIP funds cannot be used for mitigation or on land designated as converted wetland.

Practices Offered and Contract Life Span

WHIP provides funding for wildlife habitat development and maintenance, brush management, prescribed burning, creating wildlife openings and fish stream improvements. Contracts are active for 5 to 10 years.

Eligibility

To qualify for the WHIP in Florida, landowners must have proof of land ownership and a wildlife habitat plan must be prepared with the help of a wildlife biologist. Private lands, tribal lands, and state and county lands are all eligible for the program. The following are not eligible for the WHIP:

- Federal land;
- land currently enrolled in the Water Bank Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, or similar programs;
- land subject to an Emergency Watershed Protection Program floodplain easement;
- land in violation of the highly erodible land (a.k.a., sodbuster) and wetland (a.k.a., swampbuster) provisions of the Food Security Act;
- Owners who do not meet the adjusted gross income provisions of the 2002 Farm bill;

- and land where USDA determines impacts from on- or off-site conditions make the success of habitat improvement unlikely.

How to Apply

Applications are accepted through a continuous sign-up process. Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through Florida NRCS Web site at <http://www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/>.

For more information about WHIP, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information is also available on the Web at the aforementioned FL NRCS Web site.

Other Assistance

Landowner Incentives Program

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is cooperating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to implement a new private landowner assistance program called the Landowner Incentives Program (LIP). Florida's LIP is a voluntary program designed to provide technical and financial support to those private landowners interested in improving habitat conditions on their properties for species at risk. There are no acreage limitations and any private (nongovernmental) landowner is eligible to receive up to \$20,000 in cost-shares for approved habitat improvement practices. Cost-shares require a 50% non-federal match and are reimbursed based on established flat rates for each approved practice.

How to Apply

Applications will be accepted on a continuous basis. FWC biologists conduct needs assessments on the highest ranked properties and recommend appropriate and beneficial practices to landowners based on the application evaluation and site visit.

Landowners have twelve months to complete approved wildlife management practices. Six-month extensions may be approved on a case-by-case basis.

Landowners will be reimbursed for approved practices completed and reviewed by a FWC biologist. To receive reimbursement, landowners must complete the approved practice as specified in the practice standards and must submit invoices and/or documentation supporting total expenditures for each practice.

For an application or more information on the Landowner Incentive Program, visit the Commissions LIP Web site at <http://www.wildflorida.org/lip/> or contact the LIP Coordinator at 850-488-3831.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Administered by the USFWS, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is a voluntary private lands initiative developed to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners and other partners who conduct habitat restoration and improvement activities on their land. The focus of the Partners Program in Florida is on restoration of native habitats (i.e., longleaf pine sandhill, scrub), restoration of degraded streams and wetlands, and eradication of invasive, exotic species. The Partners Program also provides technical assistance to the USDA and landowners participating in conservation programs administered by USDA under the Farm Bill.

For more information about and state contacts for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, see the Web site at <http://partners.fws.gov/>.

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