

Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program Montana Pilot Project - Reserved Grazing Rights *Draft Nov 2009*

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands. This program has been a valuable conservation tool and has secured over 2 million acres of wetland and associated upland habitat. However, the program has not been attractive to many Montana operators because of grazing restrictions. Specifically, USDA purchases grazing rights and has the option to allow grazing under a compatible use agreement. However, many landowners do not want to sell their grazing rights with the understanding that they may be granted back. The Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) with reserved grazing rights is a new pilot project that maintains grazing rights on lands enrolled in this wetland conservation program.

The focus of the program is to conserve wetlands providing habitat for fish and wildlife; improve water quality; reduce flooding; recharge groundwater; protect biological diversity; and provide opportunities for livestock management.

Montana's program has focused on:

- Restoration and enhancement of wetlands, riparian, and upland habitat;
- Improved habitat for migratory birds;
- Improved habitat for threatened and endangered plants and animals; and
- Restoration and enhancement of riparian areas.



Photo by Tom Hinz. Portion of the restored Odell Spring Creek in the Madison Valley

Here's the Deal

The WREP with reserve grazing rights offers an opportunity to restore degraded or altered wetlands while maintaining ownership and access controlled by the landowner. The program offers the following enrollment options:

- 1. Permanent Easement is a conservation easement in perpetuity. USDA pays 75% of the easement fair market value and up to 100% of the restoration costs.**
- 2. 30-Year Easement is an easement that expires after 30 years. USDA pays up to 50% percent of the easement fair market value and up to 75% 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.

To be eligible the landowner must complete a simple nonbinding application. The site must include restorable wetland features and associated water rights or previously restored wetlands lacking long-term protection.

The wetland area to be restored is the central component of the project but the site may incorporate 1 to 6 acres of upland for every acre of wetland. The amount of upland acreage included in the program is a voluntary option for the landowner determined in cooperation with NRCS and must be contiguous with the wetland area. The ratio of upland acreage to wetland acreage will be justified based on its ecological relationship to the wetland area.

For the entire WREP site, wetland and upland, the landowner will receive a 1 time payment of 50% or 75% of the fair market value depending on the type of easement. This payment is calculated by a statewide appraisal system that establishes average values by region.

The landowner retains the right to graze the site under a prescribed grazing plan. The Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations (WRPO) will be developed to ensure that the grazing restores and maintains wetland functions and values with an emphasis on wetland dependent wildlife. The grazing management plan will be developed with the landowner using 75% of the stocking level for the NRCS ecological site description of the site as the platform of the plan. The grazing management plan is a living document that can be adapted over time as conditions change. Other management activities (i.e. haying) may be performed under compatible use authorizations if the activity is consistent with or promotes the ecological and wildlife goals of the site.

100% of the restoration costs are covered by WREP in the permanent easement option and 75% under the 30 year easement. This includes all aspects of the planning, designing, implementing and final treatments. The WREP covers the costs of surveys, restoration design and engineering, implementation and earth moving, equipment, plantings, seeding and fencing.



Photo by Tom Hinz. Shooting stars blooming in a wet meadow near Ringling, Montana

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