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Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program comes to Illinois

Illinois natural resource partners announce new effort to address wet and flood-prone lands along the Wabash River in southeast Illinois

SPRINGFIELD, IL- The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has teamed with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to announce a new effort to address wet and flood-prone lands along the Wabash River in southeast Illinois with long-term solutions.

The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) is a voluntary conservation program offering both financial and technical assistance to private landowners interested in restoring wetlands and increasing wildlife habitat. WREP is a part of the USDA Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) administered by the NRCS.

“There has been a great deal of flooding on farmland in the last few years,” says Bill Gradle, state conservationist for NRCS in Illinois. “Some acres were damaged badly enough to affect crop production. When fields along the river like this are flooded repeatedly, owners ask themselves if it’s still feasible to farm those fields. This program and this partnership project finally offer a reasonable--and profitable--answer to that question.”

This wetland restoration program is part of a larger, multi-state effort by TNC and Illinois Department of Natural Resources called the Wabash River Floodplain Corridor Project. The project was launched earlier this year in several Indiana counties that border the Wabash River, and private landowners in Illinois can now apply for similar program opportunities. Farmers with land located in the Wabash River floodplain in Lawrence, Clark, Crawford, Gallatin, Lawrence, Wabash, and White counties in Illinois who meet Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) requirements are eligible for participation.

“The goal of our program is simple: to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands and improve wildlife habitat,” said Illinois Department of Natural Resources Director Marc Miller. “With this project, we pull together committed landowners, federal funds, state support, and technical expertise of a unique group of resource professionals.”

“We are very pleased to be partnering with DNR and the USDA’s NRCS in Illinois. This project will improve water quality and habitat along Wabash River; the WREP will have additional benefits of improved flood water retention, improved habitat along this important migratory flyway, filtering of nutrients and sediments, and restoring floodplain habitat,” said Larry Clemens, Assistant State Director of Conservation Programs for The Nature Conservancy in Indiana. The organization is contributing \$495,000 over five years to this project.

WREP specifically targets sensible and proven conservation solutions in areas known to flood.

The goal of the program is to turn flooded cropland into a healthy and productive wildlife habitat corridor, securely protected on both the Indiana and Illinois sides of the Wabash River. Because WREP is a conservation easement program, it pays landowners for their commitments and their contributions to the ecological infrastructure of the landscape. Because the solutions established are long-term, the benefits will have lasting effects for years to come.

Eligibility for the Wabash Corridor WREP Project is the same as for the Wetlands Reserve Program. With help from this federal conservation program, NRCS leverages assistance from other partners to provide financial and technical assistance to eligible landowners.

Under WRP, land qualifies if it was considered a wetland area before it was converted to agricultural production. A limited amount of adjacent non-crop areas can be included in program contracts if they buffer or improve restoration potential of the site. The goal is to secure 5,000 acres of floodplain land in Illinois and Indiana over the next five years.

Interested landowners can find more information and apply by visiting NRCS at their local USDA Service Center. More information can be found on-line at: <http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/> under “Easement Programs, Wetlands Reserve Program.” Find USDA Service Centers at: http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/directory/field_offices.html

