

USDA Seeks Comments On Wetland Reserve Program

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service of the United States Agriculture Department is seeking public comment on changes to a voluntary program that helps landowners restore their land to its natural wetland condition.

The Wetlands Reserve Program was reauthorized with slight revisions in the 2008 Farm Bill, said Dr. Robert Coats, extension economist and professor for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

"This is an important program to Arkansas, which ranks No. 2 in the nation in the amount of acreage enrolled in the program," he said.

More than 2 million acres are enrolled in the program nationwide, with about 150,000 acres in Arkansas. Of that amount, 39,000 acres of shallow water habitat created and 80,000 acres of reforested land in the Natural State, according to NRCS.

The USDA is also seeking public comment on its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), another NCRS voluntary conservation program.

EQIP supports production agriculture and environmental quality as compatible goals. Through EQIP, farmers may receive financial and technical help with structural and management conservation practices on agricultural land. It provides financial assistance to help offset the costs of eligible conservation practices.

USDA invites those interested in wetlands conservation to review this interim final rule. Written comments on the interim final rule from individuals, governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations are encouraged

during the 60-day public comment period, which ends March 16. The interim final rule can be viewed at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/>.

The public may submit comments:

- Online at www.regulations.gov
- By mail to: Easements Programs Division, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Wetlands Reserve Program Comments, P.O. 2890, Room 6819-S, Washington, DC 20013.
- By fax: 1-202-720-9689
- By hand delivery: Room 6819-S of the USDA South Office Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20250, between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, except federal Holidays. Please ask the guard at the entrance to the South Office Building to call 202-720-4527 in order to be escorted into the building.

Wetland ecosystems supply life-sustaining habitat for hundreds of species, including many of the nation's endangered and threatened species. Wetlands also help protect water quality by filtering out pollutants and offer aesthetic and recreational opportunities.

The Wetland Reserve Program is administered by NRCS and provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private agricultural land.

For more information about the Wetlands Reserve Program, visit www.uaex.edu or www.nrcs.usda.gov or <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/>.

For additional information about EQIP, please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP>.

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