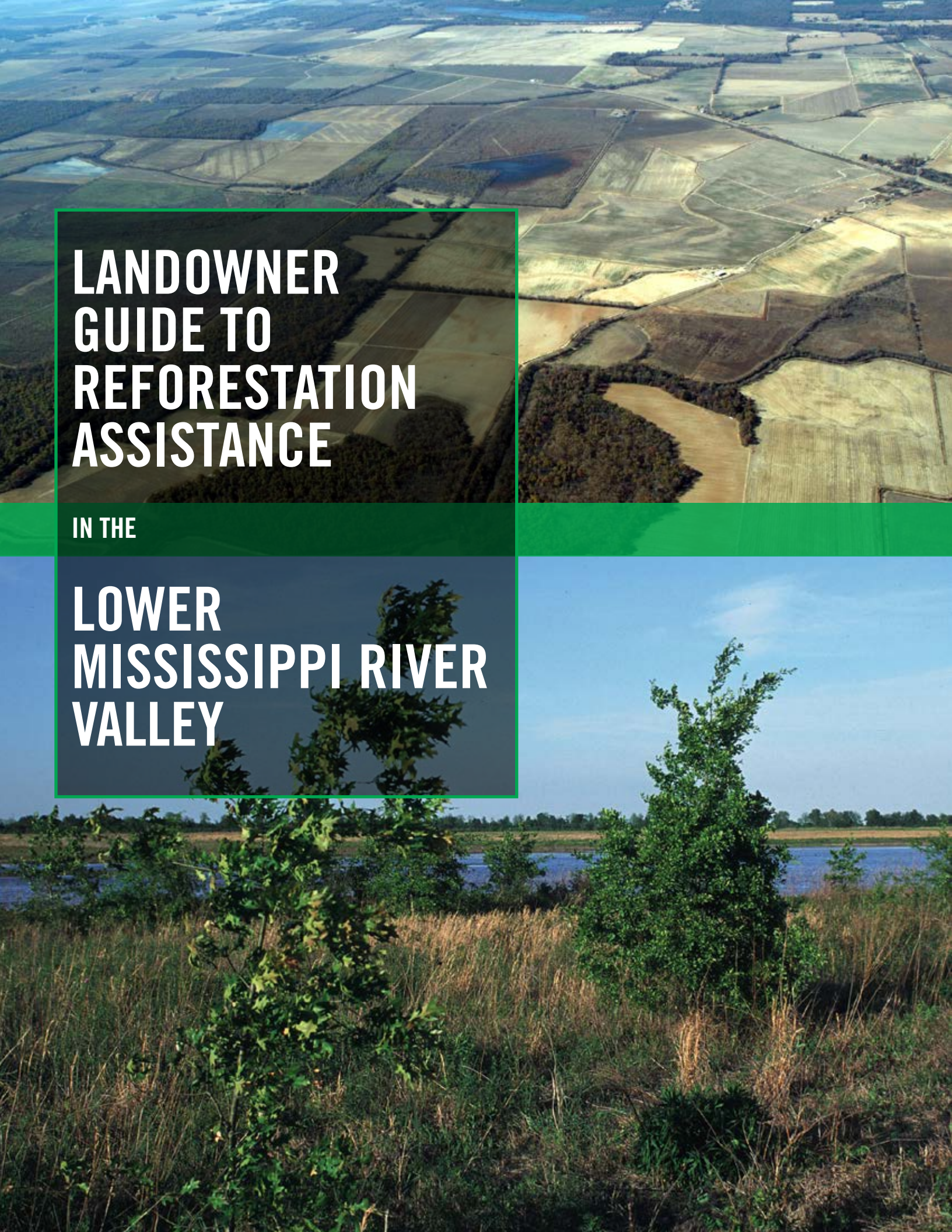

LANDOWNER GUIDE TO REFORESTATION ASSISTANCE

IN THE

LOWER MISSISSIPPI RIVER VALLEY

November 2016

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USDA Farm Services Agency, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Arkansas Game and Fisheries Commission, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries and Parks, Mississippi Forestry Commission, Delta Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, GreenTrees, The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, Wildlife Mississippi and The Trust for Public Land

Cover Photo Credits

FRONT COVER (FROM TOP TO BOTTOM) - Agricultural landscape in Louisiana, *USDA, NRCS*; Recent reforestation on WRE restoration site in Mississippi, *USDA, NRCS*

BACK COVER PHOTOS (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) - Ibises, *USDA, NRCS*; NRCS employee and farmer look at conservation plan, *USDA, NRCS*; NRCS Swamp, *USDA, NRCS*; Riparian Buffer LA, *USDA, NRCS*; Fawn NRCS, *USDA, NRCS*; Sunset LA, *USDA, NRCS*

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For more information about The Trust for Public Land's work in the Mississippi Delta, contact Mississippi.Delta@tpl.org.

CONTENTS

Landowner Guide to Reforestation Assistance in the Lower Mississippi River Valley

4 INTRODUCTION

6 FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

7 USDA Farm Services Agency Conservation Programs

7 Conservation Reserve Program

- Floodplain Wetland Initiative
- Non-Floodplain Wetland Initiative
- Farmable Wetlands Program
- Bottomland Hardwoods Program
- Upland Bird Habitat Initiative
- State Acres for Wildlife (SAFE) Initiative

10 Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

12 USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Programs

12 Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- Agricultural Land Easement
- Wetland Reserve Easement

16 Environmental Quality Incentives Program

17 Conservation Technical Assistance Program

19 USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

20 STATE GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

20 Arkansas Game and Fish Commission - Private Lands Program

20 Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Private Lands Program

21 Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry

- Forestry Productivity Program – Office of Forestry
- Conservation Technical and Financial Assistance - Office of Soil and Water Conservation

22 Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks – Private Lands Habitat Program

22 Mississippi Forestry Commission - Forest Resource Development Program

22 Mississippi Reforestation Tax Credit

23 PRIVATE ASSISTANCE

23 Delta Wildlife

23 Ducks Unlimited

24 The Nature Conservancy

25 National Audubon Society

25 GreenTrees Carbon Farming Program

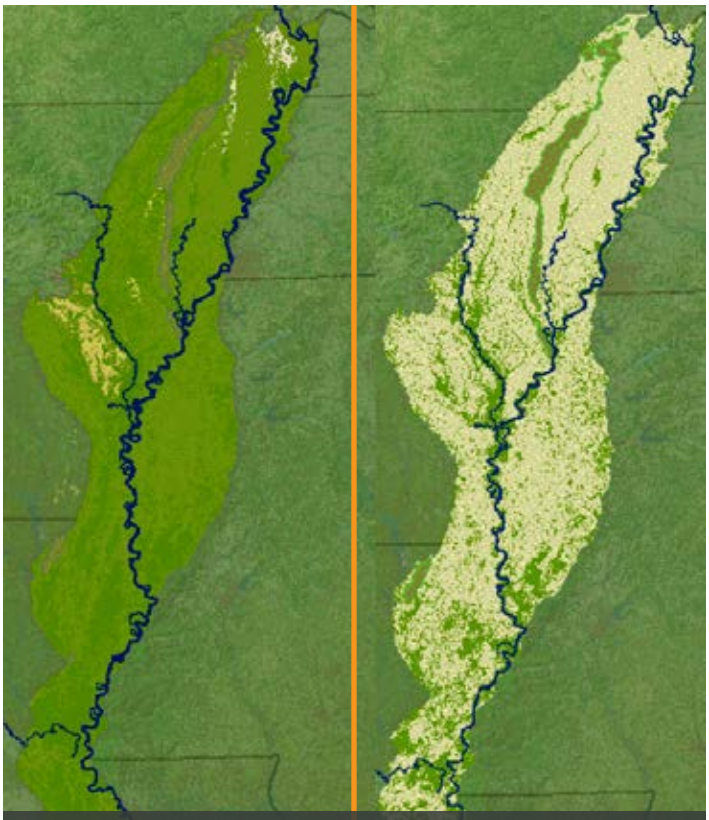
25 Wildlife Mississippi

26 COMPARING FINANCIAL BENEFITS

27 CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

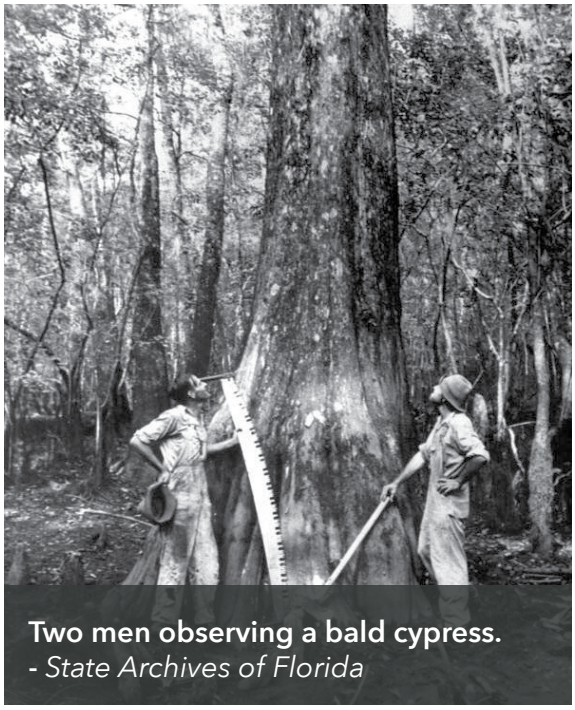
INTRODUCTION

The Lower Mississippi River Valley (LMRV), widely known as the "Delta" represents the historic floodplain of the lower Mississippi River. Since the 1800s, over 80 percent of the original forested wetlands were cleared and converted to other land uses, mostly agricultural production. The LMRV was once a vast wetland complex spanning 24.7 million acres of forested wetlands interspersed with swamps, cypress-tupelo brakes, scrub-shrub and emergent wetlands. A significant part of the forest conversion occurred over a 30 year period starting in the 1950s. The sum of deforestation along with hydrological alterations in the LMRV not only negatively impacted native forests and wildlife that depend on forested habitat, but it contributed to downstream water quality problems such as excess nutrient and sediment loads, most notably in the Gulf of Mexico.



Loss of forest cover in the LMRV from the pre settlement era to 2015.
- Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture

The advanced rate of deforestation slowed in the LMRV, mainly due to restrictions in the 1972 Clean Water Act and the 1985 Food Security Act (Farm Bill). Since the early 1990s, federal (including those authorized under the Farm Bill), state and private incentive programs have been underway to help restore and conserve forested and other wetlands on private lands in the LMRV. During this time, thousands of landowners across the LMRV in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi recognized the value of returning marginal cropland back to wetlands and took advantage of voluntary programs available for reforestation.



Two men observing a bald cypress.
- State Archives of Florida

Reforestation incentive programs can provide a direct payment to landowners for enrollment in habitat restoration programs. In some cases it may result in a permanent source of income from hunting leases and other recreational income generated on properties with quality wildlife habitat. However, the programs' benefits extend far beyond the landowner. Taxpayers benefit from reduced demand for disaster assistance and crop insurance claims on marginal lands that experience repeated losses from flooding and crop damage.

Most of all, the protection of wildlife habitat, improved water quality and availability, natural flood protection and reduction of soil erosion are the long-term conservation gains and ecosystem services resulting from these programs.

Planting hardwood seedlings on former agricultural land in the LMRV.
- LMVJV

The types and sources of assistance to private landowners in the region for reforestation and other wildlife habitat improvements are varied in scope, structure, availability, and impact. Further rules and regulations governing public funding of reforestation change and can be confusing at times. Whether you are a landowner researching options for potential assistance in restoring or managing your forests, or you are a land use professional seeking help for a client, navigating the complex maze of information on assistance programs can be frustrating. **The intent of this document is to assist landowners and others by providing clear and concise information about current reforestation and wildlife habitat improvements programs and related management opportunities within the LMRV in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi.**

This publication identifies and briefly explains financial and technical assistance programs available to landowners at the time of publication. Note that program information, contacts, eligibility rules and fund availability are subject to change over time. It's also important to note that financial assistance from federal agencies is dependent on annual appropriations from Congress, which may vary from year to year.

"Income diversification and conservation practices brought about through outdoor recreational business opportunities such as hunting leases and outfitting, wildlife watching, and other nature-based tourism on reforested private lands in the Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley is a win-win proposition for the landowner. These opportunities strengthen family farm incomes plus improve the environmental integrity of floodplain lands in the AR-LA-MS region. "

- Daryl Jones, Ph.D., Natural Resources Enterprises, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University

Wildflowers near Catahoula lake. - *USDA, NRCS*

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Forested wetland in Louisiana.
- *USDA, NRCS*

USDA Farm Services Agency

Conservation Reserve Program

- Floodplain Wetland Initiative
- Non-Floodplain Wetland Initiative
- Farmable Wetlands Program
- Bottomland Hardwoods Program
- Upland Bird Habitat Initiative
- State Acres for Wildlife (SAFE) Initiative

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- Agricultural Land Easement
- Wetland Reserve Easement

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Conservation Technical Assistance Program

USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

US Department of Agriculture
Farm Service Agency Conservation Programs

Conservation Reserve Program Overview

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), administered by the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA), is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners established by the 1985 Farm Bill. It was originally focused on working with voluntary landowners to retire highly-erodible lands from agricultural production and to establish permanent covers such as forests or grasslands. In recognition of CRP's benefits to wildlife, to air and water quality, and reductions to soil erosion, subsequent Farm Bills modified the program to promote specific fish and wildlife conservation objectives.

Success of CRP in the U.S.

Since it was established on Dec. 23, 1985, CRP has:

- Prevented more than 9 billion tons of soil from eroding, enough soil to fill 600 million dump trucks
- Reduced nitrogen and phosphorous runoff relative to annually tilled cropland by 95 and 85 percent respectively
- Sequestered an annual average of 49 million tons of greenhouse gases, equal to taking 9 million cars off the road

Since 1996, CRP has created nearly 2.7 million acres of restored wetlands.

As of 2015, CRP is protecting more than 170,000 stream miles with riparian forest and grass buffers, enough to go around the world 7 times.

– Source USDA CRP Fact Sheet, December 2015

Under the current Farm Bill (2014), the CRP program provides assistance for a variety of conservation practices and initiatives such as:

- wetland restoration
- wildlife habitat
- wildlife food plots
- wildlife corridors
- riparian (stream) buffers
- windbreaks
- windbreaks
- shelterbelts
- native grasses
- tree planting
- high-priority species
- farmable wetlands

CRP also offers different types of payments and incentives. In return for establishing resource-conserving covers, the FSA provides annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to participants. With the concurrence of the county/parish government, CRP contracts are for 10 to 15 years.

CRP Sign-up Process: There are typically two types of sign-ups for the CRP: General Sign-up and Continuous Sign-up. The FSA bases rental rates for both general sign-up and continuous enrollment CRP programs on the relative productivity of the soils within each county and the average dry land cash-rent or cash-rent equivalent.

GENERAL SIGN-UP - Participants can offer land for the CRP enrollment only during designated sign-up periods. Historically this has occurred on an annual basis and applications are competitive based on competitive bidding and the property's Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) score, described below. The general sign-up is focused on whole fields and, depending upon ecological site conditions, may consist of grass and forbs or trees.

CONTINUOUS SIGN-UP - Environmentally-desirable land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time under the CRP. Certain eligibility requirements still apply, but offers are not subject to competitive bidding. A variety of programs and conservation practices offered under continuous sign-up and payments in the form of annual rental payments, restoration or enhancement and maintenance are available.

CRP Basics: For general CRP, the maximum CRP rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment through consultation with county FSA staff. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted. The CRP annual rental payments may include an additional incentive amount of up to $4 per acre per year to perform certain maintenance obligations. This is particularly important for wildlife since the vegetative cover can become unfavorable to wildlife over time and a disturbance activity, such as disking or burning, can set back plant succession and enhance wildlife benefits.

For general CRP, cost-share assistance is typically offered for not more than 50 percent of the participant's costs in establishing approved cover on eligible cropland. Several of the continuous CRP programs may cover an additional 40 percent of establishment costs under a Practice Incentive Payment, bringing total establishment assistance to 90 percent of cost. On certain continuous enrollment CRP programs, FSA offers further financial incentives of up to an additional 20 percent of the annual payment for certain continuous sign-up practices and also an initial sign-up incentive payment of $150 per acre.

Offers for CRP general sign-up contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). To calculate an offered site's EBI, the FSA collects data for each of the EBI factors based on the relative environmental benefits for the land offered. Each eligible offer is ranked in comparison to all other offers and selections made from that ranking.

The following are ranked EBI factors:

- wildlife habitat benefits resulting from covers on 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
- cost

No more than 25 percent of a county's cropland acreage can be enrolled in CRP and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) under the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (formerly known as the Wetland Reserve Program). Certain flood-prone soils may be exempt from this limitation.

CRP Initiatives: The following are several special CRP initiatives available to landowners in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. **It is important to note that not all of the following programs are available in each county, or the programs may not have available funding at the time of a landowner's inquiry.**

Riparian Buffers (Conservation Practice 22)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/Practice_CP22_Riparian_Buffer.pdf

For landowners interested in improving water quality and creating habitat for fish and wildlife, a riparian buffer—a strip of trees bordering perennial or seasonal streams, waterbodies and wetlands areas—is a beneficial solution. Offered in continuous sign-up, this practice is for areas located adjacent to or parallel to a permanent water body, stream, wetlands or semi-permanent or seasonally flooded area.

Floodplain Wetland Initiative (Conservation Practice 23)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/Floodplain_Wetlands_Initiative.pdf

This practice is designed to restore wetlands on lands that have been in agricultural use within the 100-year floodplain. The objective is to prevent degradation of the wetland area, increase sediment trapping efficiencies, improve water quality, prevent erosion and provide vital habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife.

Non-Floodplain Wetland Initiative (Conservation Practice 23A)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/NonFloodplain_Wetlands_Initiative.pdf

This practice is designed to restore wetlands outside the 100-year floodplain that provide vital habitat for many species of wildlife, filter runoff, recharge groundwater supplies and sequester carbon (long-term storage of atmospheric carbon dioxide to help offset climate change).

Farmable Wetlands Program (Conservation Practices 27/28)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/farmable-wetlands/index

The nationwide aim of the Farmable Wetlands Program (FWP) is to restore up to 1,000,000 acres of previously farmed wetlands and associated wetland buffer to improve both vegetation and water flow. Participants must agree to restore the wetlands, establish plant cover, and to not use enrolled land for commercial purposes. Plant cover may include plants that are partially submerged or specific types of trees. FWP consists of both Farmable Wetlands (CP27) and required associated Buffers (CP28). Restoring wetlands and the adjacent upland buffers provides soil erosion protection and water quality enhancement, as well as habitat for wildlife, especially waterfowl, upland game birds and songbirds.

Bottomland Hardwood Initiative (Conservation Practice 31)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/Bottomland_Hardwood_Trees_Initiative.pdf

This is a popular practice used to restore floodplains primarily through the restoration of bottomland hardwoods, and is often used to reforest whole fields that are within a 100-year floodplain. This initiative is intended to provide wildlife habitat, improve air and water quality and also provides carbon sequestration benefits.

Upland Bird Habitat Initiative (Conservation Practice 33)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/Upland_Bird_Habitat_Initiative.pdf

This practice is aimed at increasing numbers of Northern Bobwhite Quail and other species such as Field Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlark that depend on similar habitat by supporting the establishment of cover around field edges and eligible crops. Species of buffer plants may include native warm-season grass, legumes, wildflowers, forbs and limited shrub and tree plantings as specified in the participant's approved conservation plan.

State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) (Conservation Practice 38)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2015/CRPProgramsandInitiatives/State_Acres_for_Wildlife_Enhancement_SAFE_Initiative.pdf

SAFE proposals must originate from within FSA geographically defined areas targeting specific species of wildlife. Proposals must include monitoring and evaluation plans and are usually developed by partnerships of wildlife experts in state and federal agencies, the public, non-profit organizations and others. After review by the USDA State Technical Committee, proposals are submitted to the FSA national office for final review and approval. This conservation practice allows the wildlife community to design a program around targeted priority species in their region.

Examples of approved SAFE Projects in the LMRV

- Arkansas Grass SAFE to restore early successional habitat to benefit Northern Bobwhite Quail and other grassland birds
- Louisiana Bayou Bartholomew SAFE to benefit freshwater mussels and Bald Eagle habitat
- Mississippi Bobwhite Quail SAFE to increase native grassland habitats in Mississippi for Northern Bobwhite Quail

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-enhancement/index

An offshoot of the CRP, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) focuses on helping agricultural producers retire farmland to protect environmentally-sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat and safeguard ground and surface water.

This program targets high priority conservation issues (such as loss of critical habitat for threatened and endangered species) identified by local, state, or tribal governments and non-government organizations (partners). In addition to providing wildlife habitat, CREP projects are usually focused on conservation practices such as filter strips and forested buffers that help protect streams, lakes and rivers from sedimentation and agricultural runoff.

A CREP project begins with eligible partners identifying an agricultural issue of regional or national significance. In cooperation with the FSA, they develop a project proposal to address the issue. These projects must originate from approved geographic priority areas established by the FSA.

The FSA provides CRP funding to pay for a percentage of the cost with the remaining amounts coming from partners.

How Is CREP Different From Continuous CRP? While both programs focus on environmentally sensitive land, CREP is a partnership between state and/or tribal governments and the federal government. This partnership is in place to address a high priority environmental problem. Land cannot be enrolled in CREP if your state does not have a CREP agreement.

How do I enroll in CREP? If there is an agreement in your state, land can be enrolled in CREP on a continuous basis provided it meets the eligibility requirements for the program. Any land that meets basic CRP eligibility requirements, plus the additional requirements for a specific CREP project, is automatically eligible for enrollment. Most additional CREP land eligibility requirements apply to the location and characteristics of the land to be enrolled. All enrollment offers are processed through your local FSA office.

For state by state information CREP, and eligibility in your area, see
http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-enhancement/index.

CREP in Mississippi

The Mississippi CREP is offered through FSA with private support from the Walton Family Foundation and The Nature Conservancy's Plant a Billion Trees Program. Three types of conservation practices are included within the CREP program: CP-22 (riparian forest buffers), CP-23 (wetland restoration), and CP-31 (bottomland hardwood timber establishment on wetlands). Landowners and agricultural producers who implement these practices will receive incentives in the form of a financial supplement that offsets the cost of removing the land from agricultural production. The CREP program encompasses 11 eligible counties within the Mississippi Delta: Washington, Sharkey, Issaquena, Bolivar, Humphreys, Holmes, Yazoo, Coahoma, Sunflower, Leflore, and Tallahatchie.

For Help with CRP and CREP, contact your USDA FSA service center

Arkansas http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=ar&agency=fsa
Louisiana http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=la&agency=fsa
Mississippi http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=ms&agency=fsa

US Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Programs

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/acep/

ACEP is a new conservation easement program created by the 2014 Farm Bill that is administered through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It combines three easement programs of previous Farm Bills into a single program with two components: Agricultural Land Easements and Wetlands Reserve Easements.

Former	New
• Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)	• Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)
• Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)	• Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)
• Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	

Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners (Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs) for purchasing ALEs that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. It also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, pastureland and shrubland. It is an excellent program for protecting farm and ranchlands threatened by development in urbanizing areas.

NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the ALE. Where NRCS determines that grasslands of special environmental significance will be protected, NRCS may contribute up to 75 percent of the fair market value of the ALE. The remaining easement value (50 or 25 percent) is derived from landowner contributions (capped at 25 percent), conservation organizations and/or other entities that recognize value in the project.

Examples of Cost Share Assistance and Match Requirements (under ALE)

EXAMPLE 1 (ELIGIBLE PARTNER CONTRIBUTES 50 PERCENT OF MATCH)
Easement Fair Market Value = $100,000
NRCS Contribution = $50,000 (50% of FMV)
Non-federal Cash Contribution = $50,000 (50% of FMV & equivalent to the NRCS Contribution)

EXAMPLE 2 (BOTH LANDOWNER AND ELIGIBLE PARTNER CONTRIBUTE 25 PERCENT OF MATCH EACH)
Easement Fair Market Value = $100,000
NRCS Contribution = $50,000 (50% of FMV)
Non-federal Cash Contribution = $25,000 (25% of FMV & 50% of NRCS Contribution)
Landowner Donation = $25,000 (25% of FMV)

Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)

Through WRE, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands or flood-prone agricultural lands. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance directly to private landowners and Indian tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the purchase of a wetland reserve easement. Formerly known as the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), this program has proven highly popular among landowners wishing to restore marginal agricultural lands with over 700,000 acres having been enrolled to date in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

Through WRE, NRCS may enroll eligible land under:

PERMANENT EASEMENTS – Permanent easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays 75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs.

30-YEAR EASEMENTS – 30-year easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. Additionally, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

TERM EASEMENTS – Term easements are easements that are for the maximum duration allowed under applicable state laws. NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement. Additionally, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

30-YEAR CONTRACTS – 30-year contracts are only available to enroll acreage owned by Indian tribes, and program payment rates are commensurate with 30-year easements.

For WRE, 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.

ACEP Eligibility:

Land eligible for **ALE** includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and non-industrial private forest land. NRCS will prioritize applications that protect agricultural uses and related conservation values of the land and those that maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to agricultural use. Land eligible for **WRE** includes farmed or converted wetlands that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored. Property must be under ownership for at least 24 months (unless eligible to request a waiver of the length of ownership). NRCS will prioritize applications based on the easement's potential for protecting and enhancing habitat for wetland wildlife species including migratory birds and threatened and endangered species, extent to which hydrology can be restored and location values. Examples of location values include proximity to other permanently protected areas (federal lands, parks, natural areas).

Potential WRE site on marginal cropland
- Marlin Jordan, TPL

ACEP Enrollment: To enroll land through **ALE**, NRCS enters into cooperative agreements with eligible partners. Each easement is required to have an agricultural land easement plan that promotes the long-term viability of the land. To enroll land through **WRE**, NRCS enters into purchase agreements with eligible private landowners or Indian tribes that include the right for NRCS to develop and implement a wetland reserve restoration easement plan. This plan restores, protects, and enhances the wetland's functions and values (such as fish and wildlife habitat, flood storage, natural filtration for water quality, shoreline erosion protection).

10 year old hardwoods on WRE site
- Marlin Jordan, TPL

WRE Consideration Process:

Each state uses similar processes and evaluation criteria, most of which are national policy requirements. NRCS's Conservation Program Applications (NRCS-CPA-1200) are taken and processed at the local county/parish NRCS office in the USDA Service Center. The local office is also the source of basic information about the program and status of the application. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis, even though there may be specific cut off dates each year for that year's available funding.

Upon the landowner's completion of the application, NRCS provides the landowner with program information to help him/her decide whether to continue with the application process, including a list of the documentation that must be provided prior to NRCS taking any action on the application. All landowners must meet landowner and payment eligibility requirements under the highly erodible land and wetland conservation (HEL/WC) provisions of the 1985 Farm Bill and the adjusted gross income (AGI) provisions. They must also be informed that land enrolled in ACEP-WRE is ineligible for any other USDA program payment for the life of the enrollment. Additionally, landowners operating under an employee identification number (EIN) must also be informed about the requirements to obtain a valid Dun and Bradstreet Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number and meet the Central Contractor Registration (CCR) requirements through registration or renewal in the System for Award Management (SAM) or successor registry.

Once an applicant has been determined to be eligible and the land is considered potentially eligible, the application packet is referred for further review and evaluation. Ranking teams are utilized to ensure consistent and collaborative evaluations of the land. The applicant will be given an opportunity to participate in the evaluation and preliminary planning process and will be given an explanation of the evaluation criteria results and potential restoration elements, as well as the opportunity to offer offsets to the easement costs.

Applications that provide the highest amount of environmental benefit compared to cost will be tentatively selected for enrollment. These applicants are offered an opportunity to continue for final selection by signing an Agreement for the Purchase of a Conservation Easement (NRCS-LTP-31). Enrolled applications proceed to the legal closing and final restoration planning processes. Typically, closing may take up to six to twelve months from the time the agreement is signed.

Final acceptance by the applicant and the government occurs at the easement closing, at which point the Warranty Easement Deed is sent for recording at the county/parish courthouse, and the participant typically receives compensation within 60 days. For both permanent and 30-year easements, the 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.

A farmer looks at a conservation plan. - *USDA, NRCS*

The restoration process starts with the preliminary planning where the landowner provides input on species to be planted and the configuration of habitats to be restored. After a final restoration plan is completed, the plan is implemented either by the landowner through an approved contractor or by the NRCS through a federal contract, usually with a non-profit conservation organization, that implements the restoration. The land will be restored to native vegetation and hydrology. This usually includes bottomland hardwoods and shallow water features. Typically shallow water areas are designed so water levels can be manipulated for management of waterfowl and other wildlife. Normally, implementation of the plan begins during the next construction or tree planting cycle and is completed within three years.

Landowners enrolled in WRE restrict many of their use rights in the easement deed except for private or lease hunting, fishing, quiet recreational use and subdivision into smaller tracts. In addition, they cannot place permanent structures on the easement or otherwise impact wetland functions and values. Certain compatible uses (such as timber harvesting with an approved harvest plan, shallow water management, wildlife food plots, and access roads) of the land under easement requested by the landowner may be permitted by NRCS if it is deemed compatible with the easement's purpose to protect a functioning wetland.

In recent years in the LMRV, the average easement payment has been approximately $1,800 per acre and the average cost of restoration has been approximately $250 per acre.

2016 WRE PERMANENT EASEMENT PURCHASE RATES ($) IN THE LMRV *

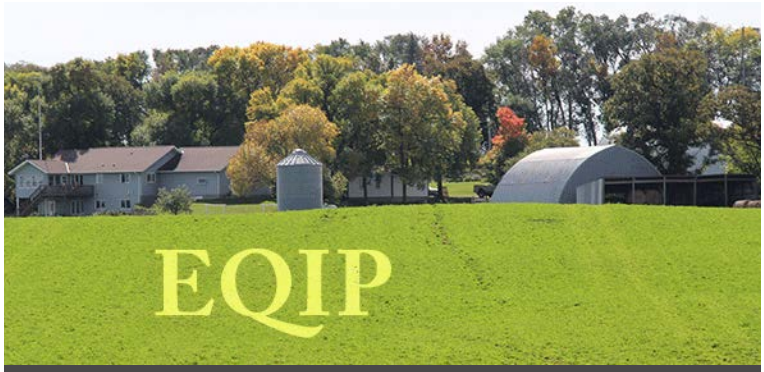
STATE	Irrigated Cropland	Non-Irrigated Cropland	Aquaculture	Pastureland	Woodland	Water
Arkansas	2900	2100	750	750	750	750
Louisiana (Northeast)	1700	1700	1700	1700	1200	1200
Mississippi	2400	2400	2000	1700	1450	

***For example only. Interested persons should verify the above rates with the NRCS. The rates may change annually. The 30-year easement rate is up to 75 percent of these rates.**

WRE provides a lump-sum easement payment that may be used to pay off current debts or to meet current operating fund needs.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip/



EQIP - *USDA, NRCS*

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), also administered by NRCS, provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air and related natural resources such as pollinators, threats from invasive species and at risk species. At risk species are any listed plants or animal species (such as federal or state threatened or endangered species) which need direct intervention to halt its population decline. The program is very broad in scope and diverse in the types of practices that can be implemented under it, based upon what natural resource concerns are in the landowner's area/state and the EQIP practices available to them.

Examples of a few eligible EQIP practices relative for forest restoration and wildlife habitat are:

- Animal Waste (e.g. riparian forest buffer)
- Forestry (e.g. riparian forest buffer, firebreak, tree and shrub establishment, forest stand improvement)
- Grazing Land (e,g. prescribed grazing)
- Sedimentation (e.g. tree establishment/cropland conversion, wetland wildlife management, hedgerow planning)
- Wildlife (e.g. prescribed burning, structure for water control, forest stand improvement, field border)

EQIP provides financial assistance to producers in a manner that promotes agricultural production, including forestry, and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimizes environmental benefits and helps farmers and ranchers meet state, tribal and local environmental regulations. In addition, it can replace forgone income to further a conservation objective such as delayed grazing to promote establishment of nesting cover. It also includes forest management, energy conservation and practices related to organic production.

This program provides payments to offset the costs associated with planning, design, materials, equipment, installation, labor, management and maintenance of available conservation practices. An increased payment rate is available to historically-underserved producers, including beginning, limited resource and socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. These groups can also receive an advance of 50 percent of the estimated payment amount which can be utilized for purchasing materials or services to implement a conservation practice.

Eligible lands: cropland, grassland, rangeland, pastureland, wetlands, non-industrial private forest land and other agricultural land on which agricultural or forest-related products or livestock are produced.

Eligible applicants must:

- Be an agricultural producer (person, legal entity, or joint operation who has an interest in the agricultural operation, or who is engaged in agricultural production or forestry management)
- Control or own eligible land
- Have an adjusted gross income (AGI) of less than $900,000
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation requirements
- Develop a NRCS EQIP conservation plan and plan of operations.

Additional restrictions and program requirements may apply.

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/cta/

Through the CTA Program NRCS provides land users with proven conservation technology and the delivery system needed to achieve the benefits of a healthy and productive landscape. This assistance comes in many forms, sometimes with the aid of the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other local, state or national partners depending on the client's desires and needs. CTA is based on voluntary cooperation and recognizes the landowner's needs and assists each in achieving a sustainable natural resource system that contributes to healthy land.

Though the CTA program does not include financial or cost-share assistance, landowners may develop conservation plans, which can serve as a springboard for those interested in participating in USDA financial assistance programs. CTA planning may also serve as a door to financial assistance and easement conservation programs provided by other Federal, State, and local programs. There are no fees or charges to the land user for this service.

A conservation plan is the logical first step in managing natural resources in the landscape. With advice from the NRCS and others, a landowner or land manager selects the best combination of conservation practices to meet both natural resource needs and his or her individual land management goals. The plan combines the landowner's or producer's land management skills with NRCS science-based technology.

The conservation planning process often identifies financial assistance opportunities.

Your Conservation Plan

The landowner's or producer's decisions are recorded in the conservation plan, which becomes his or her roadmap for better management of natural resources. A conservation plan includes:

- Landowner-determined goals
- Aerial photograph or diagram of the land
- Soils map and soils descriptions
- Resource inventory data, such as forage, crop production, forestry or wildlife potential
- List of landowner's conservation decisions
- Location and schedule for applying conservation practices and systems
- Maintenance information for installed conservation measures

For help with ACEP, ALE, WRE, EQIP or CTA contact your USDA NRCS service center

Arkansas http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ar/contact/local/
Louisiana http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/la/contact/
Mississippi http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ms/contact/local/

US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program

http://www.fws.gov/partners/

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program is the US Fish and Wildlife Service's primary mechanism for delivering voluntary, on-the-ground, habitat improvement projects on private lands for the benefit of Federal trust species. Federal trust species are defined as migratory birds, anadromous fish (fish that migrate between salt and fresh water), threatened and endangered species, and certain marine mammals. PFW Program personnel provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners seeking to improve habitat conditions on their land.

Eligible program cooperators may include farmers, ranchers, corporations, educational institutions, private organizations, local governments/agencies, Native American tribes, and virtually any other interested private landowners.

Eligible property may include all habitat types which conserve or restore native vegetation, hydrology, and soils associated with imperiled ecosystems such as longleaf pine, bottomland hardwoods, native prairies, marshes, rivers and streams, or otherwise provide an important habitat requisite for Federal trust species. Habitat improvements can include bottomland hardwood reforestation, longleaf pine reforestation, prairie planting, riparian restoration/fencing, shallow water area development, stream restoration, nest structure installation and invasive species control (in conjunction with other restoration measures), outdoor classroom development, and almost any other practice of benefit to Federal trust species.

Bear Crossing Warning on I-20.
- Marlin Jordan, TPL

Restoration of degraded habitats is emphasized in conjunction with landowner objectives. In **Mississippi**, the PFW program has partnered with 23 other state and federal government agencies as well as non-governmental conservation organizations to deliver conservation on private lands. A 50 percent cost share is the goal for the overall project; however, up to 100 percent of project costs could be provided under certain limited conditions. In **Louisiana**, the PFW program can reimburse cooperators for up to 100 percent of agreed-upon restoration costs. Landowners sign an agreement to restore the habitat for the life of the agreement (at least 10 years), but otherwise retain full control of the land. In **Arkansas**, a 50 percent cost share is the goal for the overall project; however, up to 100 percent of project costs could be provided under certain limited conditions. Cost shares may include in-kind work, materials, and other conservation programs.

USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife State Contacts

Arkansas - www.fws.gov/arkansas-es/proj_pfw.html
Louisiana - www.fws.gov/lafayette/pfw_program.html
Mississippi - http://www.fws.gov/southeast/pubs/facts/mspcon.pdf

STATE GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

ARKANSAS GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) Private Lands Program

http://www.agfc.com/habitat

The AGFC Private Lands Program offers private landowners technical assistance and advice managing wildlife through a statewide staff of private lands biologists. Private lands biologists offer recommendations to improve habitat based on the wildlife objectives of the landowner. They can provide a written wildlife management plan along with current aerial photos identifying where wildlife practices are recommended for installation. Private lands biologists are also well versed in other state, federal and non-profit incentive programs and can direct landowners to appropriate agency contacts for assistance.

AGFC Private Lands Program Contacts

Northeast Arkansas (Jonesboro) at 870-972-5438
East Central Arkansas (Brinkley) at 870-734-4581
Southeast Arkansas (Monticello) at 870-367-3553

LOUISIANA GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Private Lands Program

http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/assistance-private-landowners-and-m

The LDWF Private Lands Program provides technical assistance to private landowners to help them meet their wildlife and habitat objectives. LDWF employees have a vast amount of knowledge and experience in bottomland forest restoration and wildlife habitat improvement. Private lands biologists (PLB) can perform a variety of duties on private properties around the state. One of the most common activities is assisting landowners and hunting clubs with management of their deer herd. This may involve established programs such as the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) which provides landowners with tags and guidance regarding their deer harvest. Other landowners simply want advice and suggestions to help them manage their harvest. Even though white-tailed deer receive a lot of attention, assistance from PLBs is not limited to deer. PLBs can also help landowners with dove field establishment, waterfowl impoundments, forest and general habitat management for a wide variety of wildlife.

LDWF Private Lands Program Contacts

Monroe at 318-343-4044
Pineville at 318-487-5885

Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF)

Forestry Productivity Program
http://www.ldaf.state.la.us/forestry/management/forest-productivity-program/

LDAF's Forestry Productivity Program (FPP) provides financial/cost share assistance to eligible landowners for establishing and improving their forest. Cost share payments cover 50 percent of the total cost of implementing one or more forestry practices, not to exceed a maximum limit set for each individual practice. Eligible landowners can receive up to $10,000 of FPP assistance each fiscal year.

Eligible practices under FPP:

- Planting or seeding
- Site preparation for natural regeneration
- Control of competing vegetation

FPP assistance is available to landowners in all Louisiana parishes who own a minimum of five contiguous acres suitable for growing a commercially valuable timber species. There is no maximum size of ownership limiting a landowner's participation in the program. Applications for FPP assistance are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

Each landowner who participates in a FPP cooperative agreement with the LDAF is required to maintain the forestry usage for 10 years. If land is sold or conveyed before the end of the agreement, the original recipient of funds is bound, unless the new owner assumes responsibility in writing.

Applications are available from LDAF foresters, industry foresters, forestry consultants or foresters from other governmental agencies. A non-refundable application fee is required.

Forestry Productivity Program Contact

318-345-7595

Conservation Technical and Financial Assistance Office of Soil and Water Conservation

http://www.ldaf.state.la.us/conservation/soil-water-conservation-districts/

The LDAF Office of Soil and Water Conservation (OSWC) provides support to landowners who make long term reforestation commitments on their lands in selected watersheds. The OSWC also employs technical specialists who work directly with landowners in Louisiana's coastal zone and in priority watersheds to remedy identified water quality, air quality, soil loss, agricultural solid waste, and wetland loss concerns in those areas.

OSWC also works closely with other state and federal resource management agencies to help implement programs such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and Farm Bill Program Assistance. The OSWC also assists the Soil & Water Conservation Districts in watershed management implementation and other special projects.

OSWC Contact

Main number 1-866-927-2476

MISSISSIPPI GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) Private Lands Program

http://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/private-land-habitat.aspx

Wildlife biologists within MDWFP's Private Lands Program (PLP) provide habitat management advice to private landowners to help them achieve their wildlife management objectives. When possible, biologists can help landowners obtain cost-share assistance to conduct management practices. Detailed management plans may also be developed to help landowners accomplish their objectives. Biologist assistance is free of charge.

MDWF private lands biologists offer technical assistance on federal cost share programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

MDWFP Private Lands Program Contact

Alec Conrad at 662-588-6648 or alecc@mdwf.state.ms.us ; Main number 601-432-2199

Mississippi Forestry Commission (MFC) Forest Resource Development Program

http://www.mfc.ms.gov/forest-resource-development-program

The MFC's Forest Resource Development Program (FRDP) provides technical and cost sharing assistance for tree planting and forest improvement. This program helps offset a landowner's expenses by sharing the cost of implementing specific forestry practices designed to produce timber and enhance wildlife development. Cost share payments range from 50 to 75 percent of the cost based on flat rate for each practice. Payments are limited to $7,000 per landowner per year. In turn, a landowner agrees to protect the area receiving FRDP assistance from fire and grazing and to properly manage the area for a minimum of ten years.

MFC FRDP Contact

662-842-5312

Mississippi Reforestation Tax Credit

The Mississippi Reforestation Tax Credit provides a Mississippi income tax credit of up to 50 percent of the cost of approved hardwood and pine reforestation practices. The tax credit promotes reforestation on private, non-industrial lands. The credit applies only to individuals or groups of private non-industrial landowners, and there is a lifetime limit of $75,000. In addition, a landowner may claim a tax credit of up to $10,000 in any single year with an unlimited carry-forward provision. Landowners must have a reforestation plan prepared by a graduate or registered forester. The cost of planting orchards, Christmas trees or ornamental trees does not qualify.

Acreage enrolled in a state or federal incentive program is not eligible for the tax credit. However, certain landowners may be eligible for the tax credit in addition to incentive payments. Those landowners whose adjusted gross income is less than the federal Earned Income Credit level may be eligible for this provision. See a tax advisor for further information.

The work must be verified by the forester on Mississippi Tax Form 80-315 as completed according to the prepared plan and submitted to the Mississippi Department of Revenue (MDR) by the landowner in order to qualify. Contact the MDR for a copy of tax form 80-315 and for additional tax-related information at www.dor.ms.gov.

Additional tax information for your forestland can be found at the National Timber Tax website. www.timbertax.org.

PRIVATE ASSISTANCE

Several non-profit conservation organizations and for-profit corporations also work in concert with state and federal resource agencies in providing some form of technical or financial assistance to landowners seeking support for reforestation or forest management. The following is a list of organizations and corporations, a short description of their activities, and contact information for more details. This is not an exhaustive list. Other private organizations or corporations may operate in your particular area. Inquiring among contacts listed throughout this document may help you locate other private entities working in your area.

Delta Wildlife

www.deltawildlife.org

Delta Wildlife (DW) strives to conserve, enhance, and restore native wildlife habitats, wildlife populations, and the natural resources of the Delta and part-Delta counties of Northwest Mississippi. The organization accomplishes this mission through two primary means:

- By developing, implementing, and monitoring science based projects and programs that address wildlife, wildlife habitat, and natural resource concerns in the region.
- By arming children, sportsmen, land managers, landowners, and the general public with information that will helps them make better decisions as conservationists, hunters, fishermen, or wildlife managers.

DW assists private landowners and land managers with projects that improve wildlife habitat through management, and helps with efforts not included as a part of other programs or projects, so long as the project is true to the organization's mission. They typically reforest over 3,000 acres annually as a technical service provider for NRCS and aid landowners with CRP and private reforestation projects, either through technical assistance or as a contractor. DW is also certified to receive and monitor conservation easements.

Delta Wildlife Contact

662-686-3370

Ducks Unlimited

www.ducks.org

Ducks Unlimited Inc. (DU) is the world's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving North America's continually disappearing waterfowl habitats. Established in 1937, DU has conserved more than 13.6 million acres thanks to contributions from more than a million supporters across the continent. Guided by science and dedicated to program efficiency, DU works toward the vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever.

DU conservation focus in the LMRV includes working through conservation easements to permanently protect private lands, assisting landowners to restore and enhance wetlands through partners' programs, and enoucraging management of habitat for waterfowl on private lands. DU typically reforests and restores wetlands on over 3,000 acres of private lands annually as a technical service provider for NRCS.

DU's Southern Regional Office Contact

601-956-1936

The Nature Conservancy

Arkansas

http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/arkansas/

Since 1982, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and its partners have reforested over 50,000 acres and safeguarded more than 120,000 acres in the Big Woods. TNC and its partners – public agencies, private organizations, businesses, landowners – are working together to conserve the Big Woods of Arkansas as a healthy, functioning floodplain ecosystem within the context of sustainable human use. To accomplish this, the TNC has outlined four goals: conserve the remaining forests and wetlands; reforest degraded sites to reconnect forest fragments; restore sustainable form and function to major rivers; and reduce river sedimentation and pollution to preserve water quality.

On a larger scale, TNC has a team of hydrology, geomorphology and restoration specialists working on reducing sediment and stabilizing rivers throughout the LMRV.

TNC Arkansas Contact

501-663-6699

Louisiana

http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/louisiana/index.htm

In Louisiana, TNC provides technical, outreach and financial assistance to private landowners to reforest marginal croplands. Their featured program is the Lower Mississippi Valley Grouped Afforestation Program (LMVGAP). TNC can offer restoration cost share support and other financial incentives to landowners who are eligible for both the LMVGAP and USDA's WRE (30 year) or CRP programs. TNC will purchase a permanent conservation servitude from the landowner in exchange for carbon rights derived from reforestation.

TNC Louisiana Contact

225-338-1041

Mississippi

http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/mississippi/

In Mississippi, TNC provides educational, technical and sometimes financial assistance to private landowners to restore bottomland forest. One example is the Mississippi Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) offered through the USDA FSA. Three types of conservation practices are included within the CREP program, CP-22 (riparian forest buffers), CP-23 (wetland restoration), and CP-31 (bottomland hardwood timber establishment on wetlands). Landowners and agricultural producers who implement these practices will receive incentives in the form of a financial supplement that offset the cost of removing the land from agricultural production. Eleven counties are eligible in the Mississippi Delta: Washington, Sharkey, Issaquena, Bolivar, Humphreys, Holmes, Yazoo, Coahoma, Sunflower, Leflore, and Tallahatchie.

Mississippi TNC Contact

662-803-1691

National Audubon Society - Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana

www.audubon.org

Audubon works with private landowners and their foresters to develop management plans that balance the potential economic opportunities (timber harvesting) with the potential recreational and wildlife benefits of a high quality bottomland hardwood habitat.

Audubon Contacts

Arkansas: 501-244-2229
Mississippi: 225-768-0820
Louisiana: 225-768-0820

GreenTrees Carbon Farming Program

www.green-trees.com

GreenTrees is a privately managed forest restoration and carbon sequestration organization. Opportunities for landowners include agreements to market carbon on lands that have been planted to a bottomland forest since 1998, and technical assistance to plant cottonwoods with other tree species in conjunction with other financial programs such as CRP and WRP/WRE.

GreenTrees Contacts

In Arkansas and Louisiana, contact Andy Johnson at andy@green-trees.com or 870-403-3885
In Mississippi, contact Steve Burgess at steve@green-trees.com or 662-458-5256.

Wildlife Mississippi

www.wildlifemiss.org

Wildlife Mississippi provides reforestation and wildlife management assistance (technical and sometimes financial) to private landowners. They also specialize in providing comprehensive information relative to other opportunities for landowners. Wildlife Mississippi is also a technical service provider for WRE restoration. Their work is based on four primary focus areas: habitat conservation, conservation education, conservation policy and outdoor recreation.

Contact Wildlife Mississippi

662-686-3375

Mallards in a restored wetland area. - *Ducks Unlimited*

COMPARING FINANCIAL BENEFITS

All landowners must face the decision of what to do with their land. Most people are interested in creating revenue from their land from agriculture, forestry or perhaps leasing for hunting and fishing or other recreational uses. Others are content with just owning their property for personal enjoyment, or keeping it as a legacy to hand down to future generations. Still, a decision for the land's use must be made, and it would greatly benefit the landowner to have all their options and information available in one place so that they can make an informed decision on what is best for them, their family and future generations. This idea has lead Wildlife Mississippi towards developing the Conservation Finance Center (www.conservationfinancecenter.org) to assist landowners with difficult land-use decisions and convey to them information on current conservation programs.

A landowner looks at a conservation plan.
- USDA, NRCS

Wildlife Mississippi, the Mississippi Land Trust and the Mississippi River Trust have partnered with Yale University and the Walton Family Foundation to develop a website to assist private landowners in making conservation decisions based on sound economics. The website contains background information for many of the programs that Wildlife Mississippi uses to assist private landowners with conservation projects. Currently these conservation tools include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE).

One of the most useful elements of the website is a Decision Support Tool (DST) where landowners can provide information on their property that will help them make a comparative financial analysis of various land uses. This can assist landowners in visualizing the economic results of undergoing certain land-use practices, while providing all of the background information, costs and revenues all in one easily accessible location.

Currently, the DST is designed for bottomland hardwood restoration using the CRP and the WRE in the states of Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee. Future plans are to modify the decision tool to accommodate upland projects as well, such as native prairie and longleaf pine restoration.

The website provides plenty of useful information, summaries and links for different aspects of land conservation and the numerous programs that are available to provide incentives for private landowners interested in restoring, enhancing or preserving fish and wildlife habitat and other natural resources.

Contact Conservation Finance Center

www.conservationfinancecenter.org

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

An introduction to conservation easements

A conservation easement is a voluntary restriction you place on the use of your real property by means of a recorded document (the easement). The easement is granted to a qualified entity, often a tax-exempt charitable organization (such as a land trust) granting them the authority to monitor and enforce the restrictions on your land.

Mature Lower Mississippi River Valley Forest - *USDA, NRCS*

As a landowner, you have the right to do a lot of different things with your property, such as plant trees or cut them down, construct buildings or demolish them, subdivide your property, dig holes or build fences. The sale or donation of a conservation easement will restrict your right to do some of these things and other rights depending on the purpose of the easement. Every landowner and property are unique. Thus, a conservation easement is drafted specifically for your property and will vary depending on your current use of the property and your conservation vision for the future. Generally, conservation easements prohibit future uses such as surface mining, future real estate development, industrial use, and many potential commercial uses. However, you may choose to continue current uses, including, for example, residential and recreational use, agriculture, forestry, or ranching. Remember, if you sell or donate an easement you are only limiting some of your rights with respect to your property. You continue to own your land, and you can do anything with your land that is not prohibited or restricted by the easement.

When donating a conservation easement on your land, you may be eligible for certain income and estate tax benefits. To receive federal tax benefits (i.e. tax deduction) for your donation the easement must run with the land **in perpetuity**. The easement must also be for conservation purposes, such as to preserve land for outdoor recreation or education of the general public, protect natural habitats for wildlife, preserve open space, or to preserve historic land and structures. IRS regulations regarding conservation easements can be complicated and must be strictly followed. Landowners should involve professionals (e.g. CPAs, attorneys, qualified appraisers, qualified land trust) experienced in working with conservation easements to assist them before an easement is filed. For more information on income tax incentives and IRS regulations regarding conservation easements, visit the Land Trust Alliance at http://www.landtrustalliance.org/what-you-can-do.

For more information on the tax implications of conservation easements, consult your CPA.

NRCS