

***Wetlands Reserve Program: Restoring America's Wetlands. Washington: US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2000.*** (Reviewed by Kyle Walker)

This document, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, gives a synopsis of the Wetlands Reserve Program, which the USDA describes as the “nation's premier wetlands restoration program.” This program, which is completely voluntary, allows for up to 100 percent compensation for wetlands restoration costs on private lands. Furthermore, no public access is required. Essentially, this program encourages private landowners, especially farmers, to restore wetlands by offering financial incentives.

Eligible land for the program includes wetlands previously cleared for agricultural purposes, lands adjacent to restorable wetlands, and existing riparian habitat that connects wetland areas. The program gives landowners three options for compensation if they comply with the program's demands. The first option, Permanent Easements, consists of an easement attached to the property deed that states that future owners of the property will preserve its wetlands. The USDA then pays 100 percent of the restoration costs and legal fees, and either the geographical area rate cap, the appraised agricultural value of the land, or a sum offered by the owner. The second option, 30-year easements, expire after 30 years and pay 75% of what would be paid for a permanent easement. Finally, the third option, Restoration Cost-Share, is a 10-year agreement to restore wetlands and habitat. USDA pays up to 75% of restoration costs in this case.

Landowners sign up with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to make a visitation appointment. The NRCS then sends a representative to the land to evaluate its potential for restoration.

The USDA concludes the document by detailing some benefits of wetland restoration, such as water quality improvement, habitat for wildlife, financial benefits, flood reduction, water supply, and recreation and aesthetics.

## **Critique**

Overall, this document was clear and to the point. The USDA did not intend it to be a critical or scholarly document, as it does not analyze the Wetlands Reserve Program. Rather, the document serves as an informational tool for farmers and other private landowners to learn about the benefits of wetland restoration and how to be compensated for restoration efforts.

Although this document does not reference the Willamette Valley, it does have important implications for our ecosystem. Most wetland loss in the Willamette Valley is caused by conversion of wetlands to agricultural uses. So far, Oregon regulations designed to prevent wetland loss have failed to achieve their goals, largely because wetland loss on agricultural lands is extremely difficult to regulate. The Wetlands Reserve Program complements regulatory programs by addressing private lands. Compensatory programs such as this one can assist our farmers while encouraging wetland protection.

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