

Improving, Restoring, and Managing Natural Resources on Rural Properties in Florida: Sources of Financial Assistance¹

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Interested in conserving natural resources, such as wildlife habitat, or protecting the agricultural heritage of your land? Federal and state governments have several programs to respond to a broad range of natural resource challenges faced by landowners. These programs provide technical and financial assistance to help landowners achieve desired goals. These programs help landowners to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, protect wetlands and wildlife habitat, promote sustainable systems, and improve forest and farmland productivity and protection. These challenges are addressed through land rentals, technical assistance, cost-shares, and incentive payments and include both time-limited and permanent land use options.

The federal Farm Bill includes a number of provisions and incentives for helping landowners to protect and enhance natural resources. The US Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program assists landowners with improvements or restoration of unique habitats. The purpose of this publication is to inform landowners about government programs available to help conserve natural resources. In each case we describe the program options, benefits, and requirements and provide information on where to apply.

The programs that we detail in this document include:

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
 - Agricultural Land Easements
 - Wetland Reserve Easements
- Rural and Family Lands Protection Program
- Conservation Reserve Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Program
- Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
- Florida Invasive Species Council

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program is managed by the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This program replaces the Grassland and Wetland Reserve Programs of previous Farm Bills and provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve and improve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. There are two components to this program: Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE).

Agricultural Land Easements

The NRCS provides financial assistance to agricultural partners by purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land in perpetuity. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, and shrubland.

Eligible partners include Indian tribes, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs. Individual private farms or landowners are eligible, but they must be sponsored by an eligible partner listed above. Interested farmers or landowners with sponsor support can request an entity sponsor application from the NRCS.

Under the Agricultural Land component, NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement. 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 agricultural land easement.

Wetland Reserve Easements

NRCS also 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. For acreage owned by an Indian tribe, there is an additional enrollment option of a 30-year contract. Through the wetland reserve enrollment options, NRCS may enroll eligible land through:

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 between 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 between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.

Term Easements—Term easements 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 between 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 wetland reserve easements, 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.

How to Apply

For more information and to apply to these Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs, see <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/acep-agricultural-conservation-easement-program>

Rural and Family Lands Protection Program

Administered by the Florida Forest Service, the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program is an agricultural land preservation program designed to protect important agricultural lands through the acquisition of permanent agricultural land conservation easements. The program is designed to meet three needs:

- Protect valuable agricultural lands
- Create easement documents that work together with agricultural production to ensure sustainable agricultural practices and reasonable protection of the environment without interfering with agricultural operations in a way that could put the continued economic viability of these operations at risk
- Protect natural resources, not as the primary purpose, but in conjunction with the economically viable agricultural operations

The program focuses on maintaining the agricultural land base in Florida. The program recognizes that a thriving rural economy with a strong agricultural base and viable rural communities is essential to Florida's future. Easements for this program work together with agricultural production to ensure sustainable agricultural practices and reasonable protection of natural resources.

For more information about this program see the Florida Forest Service's website at <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/For-Landowners/Programs-for-Landowners/Rural-and-Family-Lands-Protection-Program>.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program that contracts with agricultural producers to protect environmentally sensitive land. CRP participants establish long-term, resource-conserving plant species, such as approved grasses or trees (known as "covers"), to control soil erosion, improve water quality, and improve wildlife habitat. In return, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance. Contract duration is between 10 and 15 years. The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers CRP while technical support is provided by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), state forestry agencies, local soil and water conservation districts, and other nonfederal providers of technical assistance.

Payments are provided on a contractual basis to owners. Eligible lands are conserved and improved for soil, water, and wildlife. To be eligible, land must have been planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity 4 of the 6 crop years from 2012 to 2017 and must continue to be physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agriculture commodity. Marginal pastureland is also eligible land when devoted to appropriate vegetation, including trees, for enhancing water or soil quality and wildlife habitat. Haying and grazing are permitted for certain practices when included in an approved Conservation Plan; trees planted on land under CRP contract cannot be harvested or commercially sold unless expressly permitted in the contract. Pine straw harvesting is also prohibited under a CRP contract.

Ranking CRP Offers

Interested landowners must apply to participate in the CRP. Applications for CRP contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), which evaluates CRP contracts and applications based on the following criteria:

- Wildlife habitat benefits resulting from 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

Rental and Practice Payments

Several types of financial incentives are available in CRP contracts:

1. **Rental Payments:** In return for establishing long-term conservation on private lands, FSA provides annual rental payments to participants. FSA bases rental rates on the quality of the soils within your county and the average price paid per acre in your county for the crop you are growing. The maximum FSA rental rate for each offer is calculated in advance of enrollment. Producers may offer land at that rate or offer a lower rental rate to increase the likelihood that their offer will be accepted.
2. **Cost-Share Assistance:** This is provided to participants who establish approved cover, such as trees and native grasses, on eligible cropland. The cost-share assistance can be an amount not more than 50 percent of the applicant's actual costs in establishing approved practices.
3. **Other Incentives:** FSA may offer additional financial incentives of up to \$150 per an acre for certain continuous sign-up practices. This would be a one-time payment for certain practices that are approved at the time the contract begins. Examples of these include, but are not limited to, riparian buffer establishment, wind break establishment, farmable wetland practices, wetland buffers, wildlife habitat buffers, and wetland restoration.

Eligibility

To be eligible for CRP enrollment, a producer must have owned or operated the land for at least 1 year prior to the end of the CRP sign-up period. To be eligible, land must be cropland (including field margins) that is planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity 4 of the previous 6 crop years from 2012 to 2017, and that is currently physically and legally capable of being planted to an agricultural commodity. The land must also meet one of the following criteria:

- Have a weighted average erosion index of 8 or higher
- Be enrolled in a CRP contract that expires September 30
- Be located in a national or state CRP conservation priority area

Special CRP Initiatives

The CRP includes several initiatives to support practices to improve various habitats. These initiatives are designed to help farmers and landowners achieve many farming and conservation goals. In Florida, these initiatives are available:

- **Longleaf Pine Initiative:** provides rental and cost-share payments to convert suitable, environmentally sensitive cropland to longleaf pine forests to provide habitat for native groundcover plants, game birds, and numerous wildlife species of special concern
- **Pollinator Habitat Initiative:** provides rental and cost-share payments to enhance honey bee and native pollinator populations

CRP—Grasslands

The CRP—Grasslands is part of the CRP program and helps landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, and other land, while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. The program emphasizes support for grazing operations, plant and animal biodiversity, and grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under the greatest threat of conversion. Participants voluntarily limit future use of the land while retaining the right to conduct common grazing practices, produce hay, mow, or harvest for seed production (subject to certain restrictions during the nesting season of bird species that are in significant decline or those that are protected under federal or state law), conduct fire rehabilitation, and construct firebreaks and fences.

How to Apply for CRP

There are four types of signups available:

1. **CRP General Signup:** producers may submit offers during designated sign-up periods. These are competitive and ranked according to EBI (incentive payments are not applicable).
2. **CRP Continuous Signup:** if environmentally sensitive land CRP practices are determined needed and feasible, producers may submit these offers at any time.
3. **CRP Continuous Grasslands Signup:** producers may submit offers at any time, but it is competitive and ranked during announced ranking periods.
4. **Transition Incentives Program:** helps transfer expiring CRP land from an owner or operator to a beginning or veteran farmer or rancher to return land to production for sustainable grazing or crop production.

For more information, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under US Department of Agriculture, or on the internet at <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/service-center-locator>.

For more information on CRP, contact your local FSA office or visit FSA's website at <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/resources/conservation/conservation-reserve-program>.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a voluntary conservation program that encourages producers to address resource concerns by undertaking additional conservation activities and improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

Through CSP, NRCS will provide financial and technical assistance to eligible producers to conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land.

Practice Payments

CSP provides participants with two possible types of payments:

- An annual payment is available for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing activities.
- A supplemental payment may be earned by participants receiving an annual payment who also adopt a resource-conserving crop rotation.

Through 5-year contracts, payments will be made as soon as practical after October of each year for contract activities installed and maintained in the previous year. The Farm Bill sets payment guidelines for the CSP. See the Florida NRCS site for current information: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/csp-conservation-stewardship-program>.

Eligibility

Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forest lands, agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe, and other private agricultural land (including cropped woodland, marshes, and agricultural land used for the production of livestock) on which resource concerns related to agricultural production could be addressed.

How to Apply

Producers interested in CSP are encouraged to begin the application process by completing a producer self-screening checklist. The self-screening checklist helps potential applicants decide for themselves whether CSP is the right program for them. The level of environmental benefit to be achieved will be estimated to determine eligibility, rank applications, and establish payments. For a preapproved applicant, NRCS will request the applicant's conservation activity records and conduct on-site field verification to ensure that information provided by the applicant was accurate prior to contract approval. Once

information is verified, NRCS and the applicant proceed to develop the contract.

For more information on CSP, visit <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/csp-conservation-stewardship-program>.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers that address natural resource concerns and improve water and air quality, conserve ground and surface water, reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, or improve or create wildlife habitat. Through EQIP, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) develops contracts with agricultural producers to implement conservation practices to address environmental natural resource problems and improvements. Payments are made to producers once conservation practices are completed according to NRCS requirements. Note that the former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) has been rolled into the EQIP as special habitat initiatives.

How EQIP Works

An NRCS planner will visit the property to listen to the landowner's or producer's goals, evaluate resource concerns, work with them to explore solutions and develop an effective conservation plan. The NRCS contracts with producers to address local and national priority concerns that include soil, water, air, wildlife, human, and related natural resource concerns:

- Reduction of non-point source pollution, such as nutrients, sediment, pesticides, or excess salinity in impaired watersheds, consistent with total maximum daily loads where available; the reduction of surface and groundwater contamination; and the reduction of contamination from agricultural sources, such as animal feeding operations
- Conservation of ground and surface water resources
- Reduction of emissions, such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters that contribute to air quality impairment violations of National Ambient Air Quality Standards
- Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation from unacceptable levels on agricultural land
- Promotion of at-risk species habitat conservation including development and improvement of wildlife habitat
- Energy conservation to help save fuel, improve efficiency of water use, maintain production, and protect soil and water resources by more efficiently using fertilizers and pesticides
- Biological carbon storage and sequestration

Florida Priorities

In Florida, the following priorities guide EQIP application selection:

- Water quality degradation
- Insufficient water (surface and groundwater quantities)
- Soil health (erosion and quality)
- Plant and animal health (degraded plant condition and livestock production limitation)
- Inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife

There are several EQIP-funded initiatives that address specific resource or wildlife habitat improvements. These include the [Organic Initiative](#), [High Tunnel Initiative](#), [Air Quality Initiative](#), [Longleaf Pine Initiative](#), [National Water Quality Initiative](#), [On-farm Energy Initiative](#), and [Working Lands for Wildlife](#).

Applications for EQIP are ranked based on the environmental benefits and costs. More information regarding state and local EQIP implementation can be found at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives>.

Practice Payments

The Farm Bill sets the total amount of cost-share and incentive payments paid to an individual or entity. Current information on payment guidelines is available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives>.

Eligibility

Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pastureland, private non-industrial forestland, and other farm or ranch lands. Those interested in entering into a cost-share agreement with the USDA for EQIP assistance may file an application at any time. Applicants must

- Be agricultural producers;
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions of the Farm Bill; and
- Develop an EQIP plan of operations, including
 - the participant's conservation and environmental objectives to be achieved; one or more conservation practices in the conservation management system to be implemented to achieve the conservation and environmental objectives; and
 - the schedule for implementing the conservation practices.

If an EQIP contract includes an animal waste storage or treatment facility, the participant must implement a comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP). If an EQIP plan addresses non-industrial private forestland, the participant must implement a forest management plan.

How to Apply

Applications may be obtained and filed at any time with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office. Applications also may be obtained through USDA's e-gov website: <https://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>.

For more information about EQIP, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under US Department of Agriculture, or on the internet at <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/service-center-locator>. Information also is available on the web at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives>.

Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Program

The Southern Pine Beetle Assistance and Prevention Program is offered to eligible non-industrial private forest landowners by the Florida Forest Service (FFS) through temporary grants from the USDA Forest Service. Periodic southern pine beetle (SPB) outbreaks in Florida have resulted in millions of cubic feet of pine timber killed on thousands of acres. The goal of this program is to minimize SPB damage in Florida by helping forest landowners conduct management practices that can make their pine stands less susceptible to this destructive insect pest. Forest management practices, such as thinning, prescribed burning, other competition control, and use of less-susceptible pine species can improve the health of pine stands and decrease their likelihood of developing SPB infestations.

The program offers partial cost reimbursement or incentive payments for

- First pulpwood thinning
- Prescribed burning
- Planting longleaf and/or slash pine
- Mechanical underbrush treatments

All payments are made at specified per-acre or per-seedling rates. Please see the Technical Guidelines Booklet for available practices, practice requirements, and payment rates.

The program is limited to 44 northern Florida counties located within the range of the southern pine beetle. Qualified landowners may apply for up to two approved practices per year. The minimum tract size requirement is 10 acres (5 acres for first pulpwood thinning) and funding requests may not exceed \$10,000. Only one application per landowner is permitted per year.

For more information about this program and the next sign-up period, see <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/For-Landowners/Programs-for-Landowners/Southern-Pine-Beetle-Prevention>.

The Florida Forest Service has other programs that provide financial and technical assistance to landowners. These can be found at <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/For-Landowners>.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is a voluntary private lands initiative developed to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners and other partners who conduct habitat restoration and improvement activities on their land. The focus of the Partners Program in Florida is on restoration of native habitats (e.g., longleaf pine sandhill, scrub), restoration of degraded streams and wetlands, and eradication of invasive species. The Partners Program also provides technical assistance to the USDA and landowners participating in USDA Farm Bill conservation programs.

For more information about and state contacts for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, see the website at <https://www.fws.gov/program/partners-fish-and-wildlife>.

Florida Invasive Species Council

The Florida Invasive Species Council (FISC) is dedicated to mitigating the impact of invasive species through science-driven management, information exchange, and statewide collaboration. This group connects experts, land managers, and stakeholders to share knowledge, promote best practices, and enhance efforts to protect Florida's natural ecosystems. Visit <https://www.floridainvasives.org> to access information about regional partnerships, programs, and resources for controlling invasive species.

Additional information regarding conservation and assistance for management of natural resources in Florida is available on the Ask IFAS website:

- *Improving, Restoring, and Managing Natural Resources in Florida: Sources of Technical Assistance for Urban Homeowners* (<https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/UW212>)
- *Conservation Easements: Options for Preserving Current Land Uses* (<https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FR149>)
- *Evaluating Private Lands for Conservation of Wildlife* (<https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/UW195>)
- *Got Invasives? Get Help!* (<https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FR285>)

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