

Restoring Our Wetlands; The Wetlands Reserve Program

For many years, wetlands were considered wastelands and many of these valuable areas were drained or flooded and utilized for other purposes such as development or the formation of man-made lakes. Fortunately, today we understand the importance of these vital ecosystems and realize that they have many beneficial functions. Wetlands serve mankind and wildlife in many ways; they help keep our water clean, recharge water supplies, reduce flood risks and provide fish and wildlife habitat.

Picture a sponge, which absorbs water and eventually releases it. Wetlands perform in a similar manner. They slow the waters down and allow the ground time to absorb it. In this way, the wetlands reduce the chances of erosion and flooding. In addition, the sponge process allows the water to move around vegetation, giving sediments and pollution time to settle to the bottom. This reduces the amount of pollutants that reach our lakes and eventually the ocean.

Wetlands are home to countless species of plant and animal life. Aquatic vegetation flourishes in these areas and provides shelter and food for the wildlife that resides there and in surrounding areas. Wetlands are the favorite plant community of many species for a number of reasons. Smaller animals find shelter from predators in the wetlands. Nesting conditions are ideal for waterfowl and migratory birds enjoy a safe place to stop and rest during their long flight. Wetlands serve as a nursery and spawning habitat for many species of fish and shellfish and perhaps most importantly, they provide an important link in the food chain for both animals and man.

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides incentives to landowners to return agricultural lands to wetlands. The program provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. The Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), with voluntary participation by landowners and cooperation of many partners, has restored and protected more than one million acres of wetlands through this program.

WRP began as a pilot program in 1992. It became a nationwide program in 1995 and was quickly accepted by landowners. There are now restoration projects in 49 states and Puerto Rico. WRP focuses on enrolling marginal lands having a history of crop failure or low yields. These areas are then targeted for the restoration and protection of wetland functions and values, especially for migratory birds and other wildlife.

Highlands County's first WRP project has broken ground and consists of 383.57 acres. This area represents former headwater wetlands of Fish Eating Creek., a tributary of Lake Okeechobee to the south. The site includes freshwater marshes, upland hardwood hammocks, wet prairies, wetland hardwood hammocks and improved pastures. It was developed for cattle ranching prior to 1941. Drainage ditches through most of the freshwater marshes and wet prairie areas have been drained and converted to tame pasture. Three invasive exotic species, Brazilian pepper, torpedo grass and water hyacinth have become established in the former wetland areas.

Plans for the WRP project include filling in the existing drainage ditches and removal of a 48" iron culvert and replacement with a ditch plug. All structures including fences will be removed, while the native vegetation will remain in tact. Erosion control measures will be put in place while the work is being done. These practices should return the flow of the water to its historical pattern and restore the

wetlands that once existed in that area. In addition, the removal of the exotic plant species that now exist in that area is planned, which should further increase the wetland functions and values.

The goal of this project is to restore the natural wetland functions of the site to as near historic conditions as possible. The WRP project is underway at this time and should be completed within five months.

Wetlands serve us in so many ways, not only by the role they play in keeping our water clean, recharging water supplies, reduction of flood risks and providing fish and wildlife habitat, but they provide recreational opportunities, which helps the economy. For example, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, wetland related ecotourism added approximately \$59 billion to the national economy in 1991. Almost \$79 billion per year is generated from wetland-dependent species, or about 71 percent of the nation's entire \$111 billion commercial and recreation fishing industry in 1997.

In addition, an acre of wetland can store 1-1.5 million gallons of floodwater and up to one-half of North American bird species nest or feed in wetlands. And although wetlands cover only about five percent of the land surface in the United States, they are home to 31 percent of our plant species. (United States Environmental Protection Agency)

The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District along with NRCS is very excited about this project and proud to be a part of the restoration and conservation of this important wetland. Several other WRP projects are in place in Highlands County at this time and it is our hope that other projects will be forthcoming in the future. For more information on WRP and other NRCS programs, please visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.