

# OKLAHOMA WETLAND PROGRAMS

*By Alan Stacey, Wetlands Program Coordinator*

After church service a few Sunday's ago, I greeted a visitor who told me he farmed for a living out in the northwest part of the state. Being very polite and friendly, he then proceeded to ask me what I did for a living.

When stating to him that I worked for the Wildlife Department, his face lit up asking "Are you a game warden?" "No, I work with the wetland programs," I replied.

Immediately his facial expression soured, and in a somewhat disappointed voice stated "You know, I like wildlife but I'm not very high on wetlands."

I can't blame him, but always one to enjoy a challenge and seeing a potential convert, I jumped in head first. Throughout the course of the next five or six minutes, both of us exchanged various views concerning wetland issues before parting ways on friendly terms. Whether I succeeded in slightly changing his attitude regarding the benefits and values of wetlands during this brief encounter remains to be seen.

Over the past several years, a lot of confusion and negative feelings have occurred because of legislation and regulatory laws that provided needed protection for wetlands but offered little or no economic incentives to the landowner. Fortunately, programs offering financial incentives and/or cost share assistance combined with a greater awareness of wetland values, have helped to change attitudes and boost the conservation of our state's wetland resources.

More and more, Oklahoma landowners are becoming increasingly aware of those program opportunities that provide a number of options to restore wetland resources on their property. Without a doubt, one of the most popular programs with landowners has been the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP).

Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, this farm bill program was first offered in the state five years ago. It has rapidly grown in popularity with nearly 40,000 acres of wetlands either currently enrolled or restored during this relatively short time period. Two of the three options available to the landowner are a perpetual easement or a 30-year



*Landowners may receive technical assistance for wetland restoration projects, including water control structures for wetland management such as the one seen above. These projects will attract a variety of wildlife for a landowners enjoyment.*

easement. Adjacent buffer areas deemed necessary to protect the restored wetland are also included in the total acreage enrolled within the program.

The landowner retains ownership of the land but voluntarily agrees to preserve wildlife values as well as other wetland functions. In return, the landowner receives a payment usually based upon the appraised ag value of the land for perpetual easements and 75 percent of what would be paid for perpetual easements for a 30-year easement. With the perpetual easement option, the program pays 100 percent of the restoration work and 75 percent with the 30-year easement.

A third option includes matching cost share assistance to restore wetlands, but without an easement restriction and easement payment from the government. The cost share match for assisting the landowner with restoration work on this option is 75 percent, based upon average cost rates with the landowner responsible

for the remaining 25 percent.

State wetland areas which have been used extensively for crop or forage production have previously qualified for restoration under WRP. Eligible lands are often existing or previously cropped wetlands, where hydrology has been altered through draining, diverting, filling or other alterations. Consideration in some instances is also given to areas where original vegetation such as bottomland hardwood timber has been altered or destroyed.

In addition to WRP, other popular wetland assistance options are available to the landowner including the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP), administered by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Both of these programs also offer cost share assistance for restoration or habitat improvement of

other habitat types as well.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can offer up to 100 percent cost share assistance for approved wetland restoration projects up to a maximum funding level of \$10,000 per project. Dependent upon available funding, financial assistance is based upon a specified dollar amount per surface acre restored plus a lesser rate for an approved number of adjacent buffer acres. Requirements for developing these areas include the restoration or creation of a shallow water zone and a provision for draw-down capability through the installation of a water control structure. The program also emphasizes restoration of riparian corridors and adjacent wetlands.

The State WHIP Program provides a matching cost-share assistance rate of up to 50 percent, either to restore, enhance or even create wetlands provided projects qualify and funding is available. Restrictions include a maximum state match of \$2,500 per landowner per project per year. As a rule of thumb, projects

which will provide an average water depth of 18" or less over 75 percent or greater of the total water area created are eligible. Other eligible practices include cost share for development of permanent structures used to enhance existing wetland resources such as the construction of an upstream reservoir for reliable wetland flooding downstream, installation of water control structures, or perimeter fencing of existing wetlands.

Other farm bill programs that offer options to protect or restore wetlands include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Although primary emphasis of these programs focuses on other environmental measures and conservation practices, wetland resource options exist, pending program approval and funding availability.

At times, landowners may have a primary need for wetland technical assistance without cost share assistance.

Many of these needs include questions concerning wetland management issues such as moist soil management, control of undesirable vegetation, or water level manipulations. Other common questions focus on wetland enhancement practices, wetland delineation, and regulatory policies.

Currently these programs are available for landowners. However, budgets may or may not allow agencies to conduct a sign-up period for specific programs. Landowners who are interested in these programs should contact the proper agency for program sign-up dates and funding opportunities. The following agencies/organizations are available to provide technical assistance in dealing with these and other questions regarding wetlands:



## Wetland Program Contacts

### Agency

Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. Army Corp of Engineers

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

OK Dept. of Wildlife Conservation

Ducks Unlimited

### Issue(s)

Wetland restoration  
Wetland management  
Wetland delineation

Wetland delineation  
Regulatory Policies

Wetland restoration

Wetland restoration  
Wetland management  
Wetland enhancement

Wetland restoration  
Wetland management  
Wetland enhancement

### Contact

Local Field Offices

Tulsa District Office  
(918/669-7400)

Tulsa Ecological Services  
Wetland management Office  
(918/581-7458)

OKC Central Office  
(405/521-2739)

Shawnee Office  
(405/275-9152)