



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Notice of Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity

Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge

Attention Farmers

Refuge Seeks Agricultural Producers for Cooperative Agriculture Program

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is seeking applications from qualified agricultural producers to conduct farming activities under the Cooperative Agriculture Program at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Manns Harbor, Dare County, North Carolina. The purpose of the cooperative farming program is to provide food for wintering waterfowl and other wildlife and to promote early successional grassland vegetation that provides habitat for grassland birds, small mammals, red wolves, black bears, and other wildlife. Selected applicants will operate under a Cooperative Agriculture Agreement (CAA) as a “cooperator” with the Service.

Background

Alligator River NWR (Refuge) was established in 1984 to protect and conserve migratory birds and other wildlife resources through the protection of wetlands on the Albemarle Peninsula in mainland Dare County, North Carolina. The Refuge’s Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) identifies cropland as a habitat to manage intensively for wildlife. The Service has determined that cooperative agriculture is an appropriate, compatible and necessary use of the refuge to meet this objective. Our goal is to provide energy rich agricultural crops for waterfowl, which together with wetland management and sanctuary, contributes towards a healthy, viable waterfowl population. Unharvested agricultural crops provide the greatest energy density food for waterfowl. Efforts on the refuge are in support of Atlantic Flyway management, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, and the Refuge’s CCP.

All farming units are multi-use areas that are open to the public for at least part of the year. Public use, including restrictions on vehicle access, is described in the General Refuge Regulations ([tearsheet](#)) and Hunting Regulations ([hunt regs](#)) documents. Farming units include 18 impoundments that are flooded annually. Four of these impoundments will be managed by the Service as moist soil or freshwater marsh impoundments. All other impoundments will be cropped and flooded annually. Farming units also have filter strips around each v-ditch in non-impounded fields. In combination with cropland, the filter strips provide habitat important to wildlife

including endangered species such as red wolves and northern long-eared bats. Management of endangered and other wildlife species may cause interruption, delays, and changes in planned farming activities to minimize adverse impacts to wildlife. Successful applicants must plan to work with Service staff to coordinate farming activities.

The Alligator River NWR farm fields have long been used by endangered red wolf family groups and individuals, and in many instances make up the entirety of their home ranges. Although the red wolf population in the wild is growing, it remains perilously low at less than 30 individuals and consequently, recovery efforts are ongoing. To protect areas of high importance for red wolf recovery, such as dens and early pup rearing areas, there may be times and locations where farming activity needs to be curtailed or delayed in order to protect them. Additionally, in coordination with farmers, Red Wolf Recovery Program staff may be present at times, when feasible, to monitor red wolf activity before and during farming operations to prevent direct impacts to red wolves. During red wolf capture operations (generally October through March) within farm field areas, coordination will need to occur to reduce potential impacts to farming and trapping activity. Efforts will be made to minimize the area and time of any needed restrictions on farming activity.

The Proposed Cooperative Agriculture Agreement

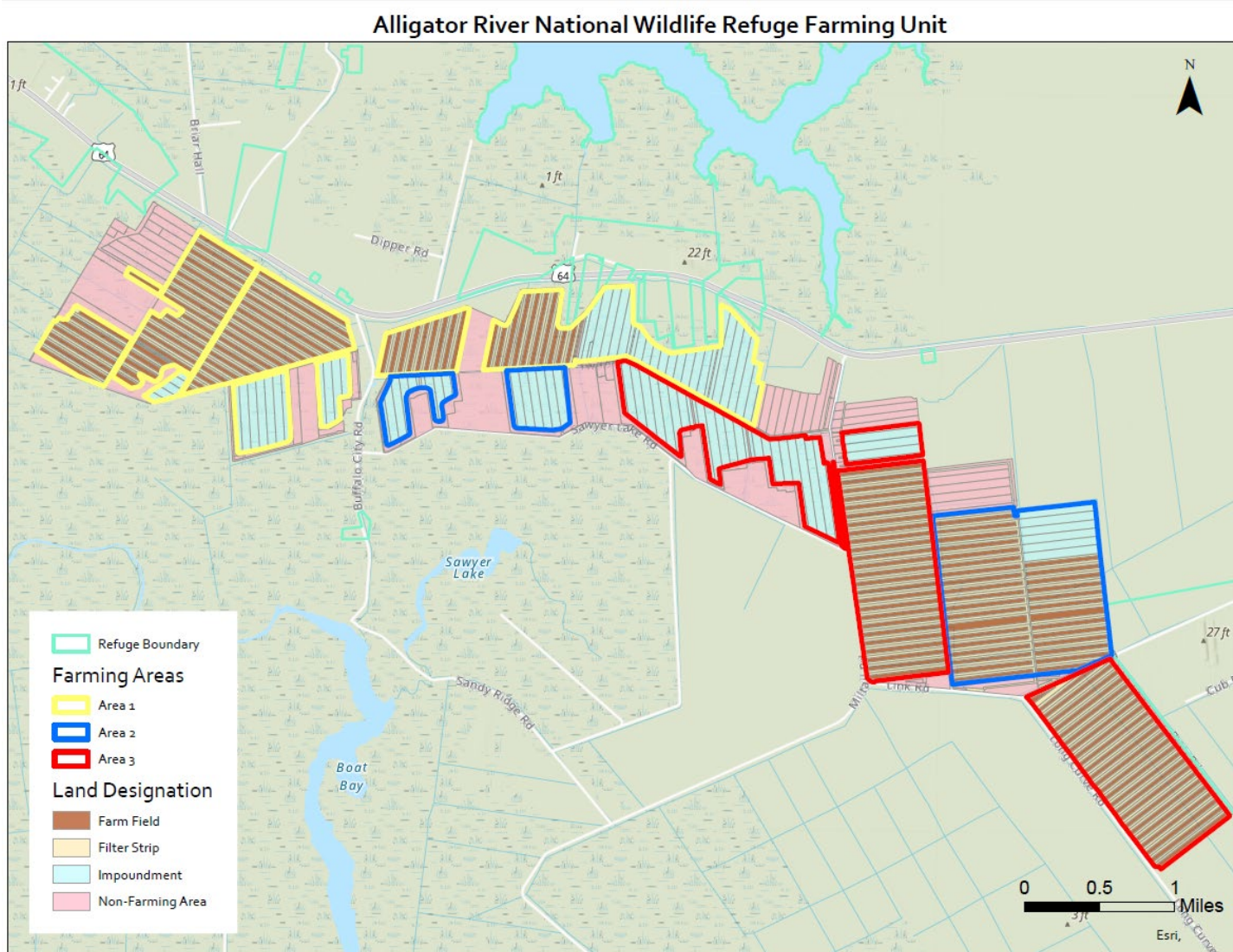
Alligator River NWR has approximately 2,744 acres of cropland covering three farming units that have a mixture of cropland, cropped impoundments, and filter strips. Applicants are applying for use of cropland for five growing seasons, 2026-2030. The Service will award up to three Cooperative Agriculture Agreements (CAA) to include a Plan of Operations and Annual Work Plans. Under a CAA, the Service is proposing a percentage crop share-split agreement where the Refuge share of the crops will be left in the field with locations to be determined by the Service. Primary crops allowed for cooperative agriculture include corn, rice, milo/grain sorghum, sunflower, millet, and soybeans.

The Refuge farming unit has three management units that have been divided into three Farm Areas to more evenly distribute the acreage of filter strips and impoundments between cooperators than under past agreements. Figure 1 shows the three Areas available for bid. The Service will manage four impoundments as moist soil/freshwater marsh that are included with other non-farming areas that will not be included in any CAAs. Applicants may apply for multiple Areas. More detailed maps are available on the [Refuge website](#).

- Farm Area 1 (yellow) includes the Laurel Bay Unit and parts of the Twiford Unit. This Area is approximately 1,435 acres with 929 acres of cropland and 506 acres of filter strips. It includes six impoundments to be cropped and then flooded every winter.
- Area 2 (blue) includes part of the Twiford Unit and part of the Creef Unit. This Area is approximately 929 acres with 593 acres of cropland and 336 acres of filter strips with four impoundments to be cropped and flooded yearly.
- Area 3 (red) includes part of the Twiford Unit and part of the Creef Unit. This area is approximately 1,424 acres with 865 acres of cropland and 559 acres of filter strips with four impoundments.

Applicants agree to accept the on-the-ground conditions for the Area he/she is selected for. The condition of v-ditches, filter strips, field conditions and external growing factors vary across the Areas. The Refuge floods impoundments using a combination of rainwater and flowing/pumping water in from the US Highway 64 canal. Water from this canal has become more saline and has impacted some farm fields. The Service is monitoring salinities and is striving to use the freshest water available when flooding impoundments. The Refuge is open to allowing improvements a cooperator would like to make, but improvements must meet Service and Refuge policies and follow Service requirements for approval before they can be made. The Service's ability to help with any proposed improvements will be dependent on funding and available resources.

Figure 1: Areas available for cooperative farming at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge.



General Operating Requirements

A Plan of Operations along with a yearly Annual Work Plan will guide farming activities on the Refuge under a CAA. Below are several general operating requirements that will be covered in these plans. An example Plan of Operations is available on the [Refuge website](#).

- Wildlife is unpredictable and unplanned management actions may arise during the year. The Service will work with the cooperator to minimize impacts as much as possible to previously approved farming activities.
- Cooperator agrees to pay year-round fuel costs associated with running the Refuge pumping stations as identified in the Annual Work Plan. Diesel fuel costs are based on a percentage of the number of acres to be pumped by the corresponding pump station and divided among interests.
- Cooperators are expected to maintain v-ditches and sides of collector canals on an annual basis.
- Cooperators are expected to maintain filter strips in their Area on a 2-year cycle as described in the Annual Work Plan.
- Annual Work Plans will be renewed no later than December 1 each year.
- Use of genetically engineered crops (GECs) is currently allowed. Their use will follow Service guidelines and recommendations from the Agricultural Extension Service.
- **ALL** pesticide use must be pre-approved under a Pesticide Use Proposal (PUP) before use. Cooperators will submit a list of pesticides for approval each Fall. A list of approved pesticides will be supplied to the cooperator as well as any Best Management Practices (BMPs) that are conditions to an approved PUP and must be followed. Neonicotinoid pesticides are not permitted. The approved list of pesticides and their BMPs for 2025 is available upon request to see what type of pesticide restrictions were required previously.
- Cooperators must give a notice prior to every pesticide application, including aerial. A chemical use report detailing pesticide use will be submitted by November 15 each year.
- To facilitate flooding impoundments for waterfowl, harvest must be completed by November 1. Refuge staff will be doing manipulations in impoundments prior to flooding. Applicants should consider seed varieties and planting dates that will facilitate this deadline. De-watering will begin in February, but fields could remain wet until first of April.
- The cooperator must have or acquire liability insurance that covers equipment used on Service lands. All liability relating to farming and crop management, to include all persons working for the cooperator, whether related, hired, or as a partner, is strictly that of the cooperator.
- Farming privileges may not be sold, transferred, or sublet.
- Non-use of lands, in whole or in part, must be agreed to by the Service in the Annual Work Plan or at time of planting.
- Failure to fulfill the conditions and requirements included in the Special Use Permit, Plan of Operations or Annual Work Plan could be cause for cancellation of the CAA.

Cooperator Selection

Selections will be made through an open, transparent and competitive process where applications will be scored and ranked using objective criteria in the application/bid form.

To be considered, applicants must complete and submit a FWS Special Use Permit Form 3-1383-C and Bid Sheet 3-1384 available on the [Refuge website](#). Both the Plan of Operations (Section 18) and Logistics and Transportations (Sections 24a through 30) of Form 3-1383-C only need to be completed if you are selected as the cooperator. Application packets are available on the [Refuge website](#), at the Coastal NC NWRs Visitor Center, or by contacting Kelley Van Druten at (252) 475-0172 or kelly_vandruten@fws.gov. Bid packets must be returned to Kelley via email, mail, or in person **by December 22, 2025 at 4:00 pm**. Selections will be made by December 30, 2025.

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