



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For Release: March 29, 1994

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND FARMERS HOME ADMINISTRATION
TEAM UP FOR WETLANDS CONSERVATION

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) recently announced they are boosting their cooperative efforts under a wetlands conservation program which benefits farmers as well as wildlife.

Midwest farmers in particular may benefit from the program, which involves establishing conservation easements on unproductive agricultural lands, as a way to help them recover from damages resulting from the Flood of '93.

The Conservation Easement Debt Cancellation Program allows farmers with FmHA loans secured by real estate to cancel a portion of their debt in exchange for establishing a conservation easement on their property, known as a "debt-for-nature" easement.

Prior to the flood, many wetland areas in the Mississippi floodplain had been cleared and converted to agricultural use. When these areas were flooded, many returned to their wetland state and became unproductive agriculturally but ideal habitat for many species of wildlife, especially waterfowl.

"The Service looks forward to increasing its efforts with FmHA to help farmers and conserve important wildlife habitat," said Service Director Mollie Beattie. "Through this partnership we are accomplishing good things for both people and wildlife."

Representatives from the Fish and Wildlife Service assist FmHA with field evaluations of possible easement sites. Ultimately, the easement can be managed by a federal, state, or

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local conservation agency. Farmers interested in participating in the program should contact their local FmHA County Office.

"This program represents the kind of innovative cooperation that this Administration has been encouraging," said FmHA Administrator Michael Dunn.

FmHA can also transfer lands it receives as collateral on defaulted loans to conservation agencies. Lands that have marginal agricultural value and are considered more suitable as wildlife habitat may be transferred. However, FmHA provides former owners an opportunity to lease or reacquire their properties prior to transfer. To date more than 100,000 acres of wetlands and other environmentally-sensitive lands have been approved for transfer to agencies in 36 states as conservation lands. More than half of these will become state-owned natural areas, and approximately 40,000 acres have been added to the National Wildlife Refuge System managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Director Beattie and Administrator Dunn praised Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy's continuing support of wetlands and wildlife conservation programs as chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Senator Leahy has worked closely with FmHA and the Service in the planning and implementation of these programs.

The Service is involved with many wetlands conservation efforts owing to its responsibilities to protect migratory birds, inland fisheries, and endangered species, all which depend to a large degree on wetland habitats. Wetlands also help to purify water, recharge groundwater reservoirs, and control erosion.