



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

# *Notice of Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity*

## **Pocosin Lakes 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 Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Washington and Hyde Counties, North Carolina. The purpose of the cooperative farming program is to provide food for wintering waterfowl and other wildlife. Selected applicants will operate under a Cooperative Agriculture Agreement (CAA) as a “cooperator” with the Service.

### **Background**

Pocosin Lakes NWR (Refuge) was established in 1963 as an inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds and to protect and conserve wetlands for migratory birds and other benefits. 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, contribute 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. Some farm units include waterfowl impoundments that are flooded annually. The farming areas are also used by endangered species including 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 Pocosin Lakes NWR farm fields have long been used by red wolf family groups and individuals. 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**

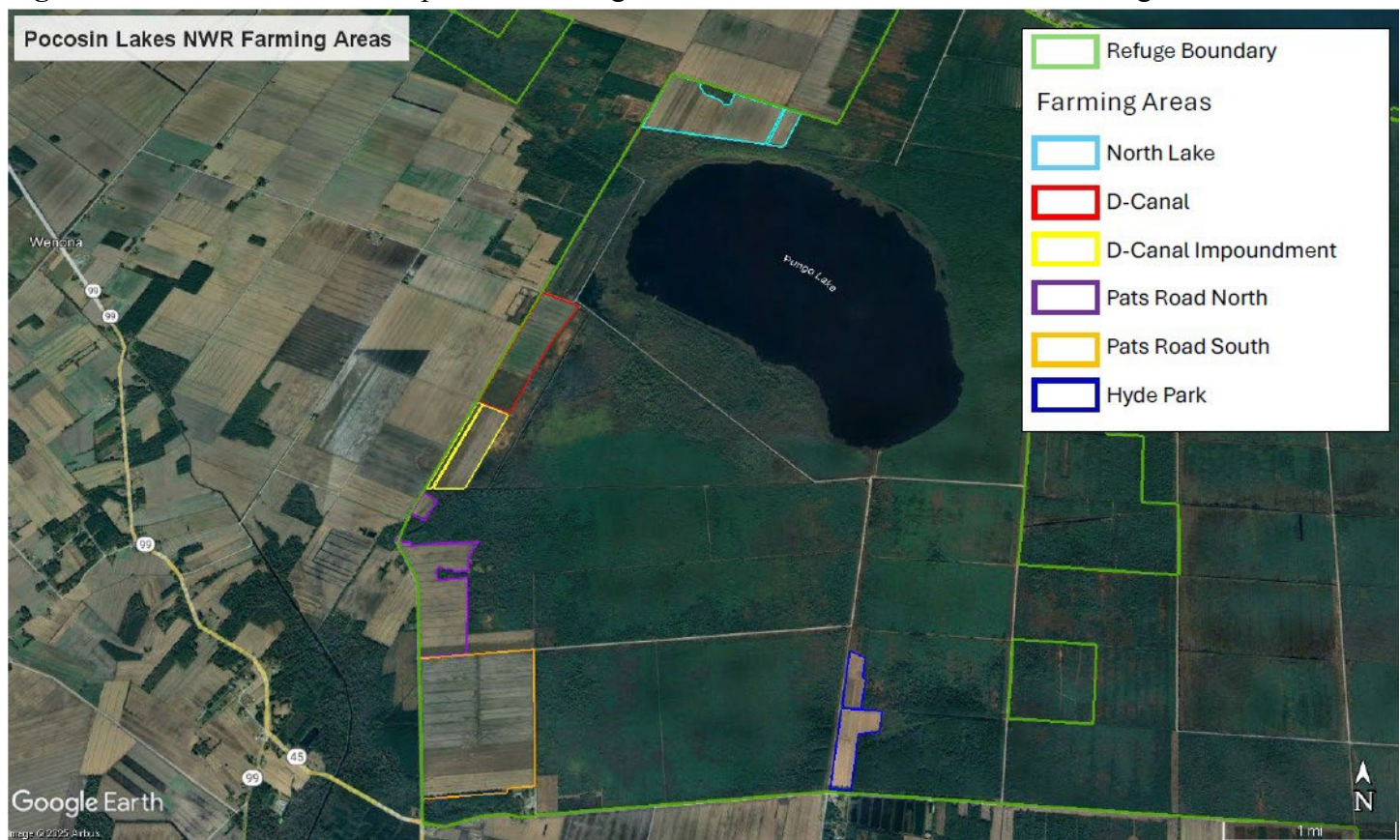
Pocosin Lakes NWR has approximately 1,202 acres of cropland and cropped impoundments. Applicants are applying for use of cropland for five growing seasons, 2026-2030. The Service will award Cooperative Agriculture Agreements (CAA) to include a Plan of Operations and Annual Work Plans. Under a CAA, the 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. An additional percentage of cropped acres will be planted with winter wheat as a cover crop annually. Primary crops allowed for cooperative agriculture include corn, rice, milo/grain sorghum, sunflower, millet, and soybeans.

The Refuge farming unit has been divided into six Farm Areas. Figure 1 shows the six Areas available for bid. More detailed maps are available on the [Refuge website](#). Applicants may apply for multiple Areas, and all Areas will be awarded. No agreement will be for more than 800 acres. The Refuge will be establishing a two-stage ditch in the winter of 2025/2026 which may impact a few acres of the most southern field in the Pats Road North Area and some acres along Pats Road in the Pats Road South Area.

- The North Lake Area (light blue) is in Washington County and is approximately 334.39 acres.
- The D-Canal Area (red) has fields in both Washington and Hyde Counties and is approximately 164.04 acres.
- The D-Canal Impoundment (yellow) is approximately 99.36 acres with the majority of acres cropped and flooded yearly.
- The Pats Road North Area (purple) is approximately 167.4 acres.
- The Pats Road South Area (orange) is approximately 365.94 acres.
- The Hyde Park Area (dark blue) is approximately 17.22 acres and includes an impoundment that is cropped and flooded annually.

Applicants agree to accept the on-the-ground conditions for the Area(s) they are selected for. The condition of v-ditches, field conditions, and external growing factors vary across the Areas. 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 Pocosin Lakes 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 possible to previously approved farming activities.
- Cooperators are expected to maintain v-ditches and sides of collector canals on an annual basis.
- 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 with specific dates 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 of impounded units will begin in February, but fields could remain wet until first of April.
- Fields to plant with winter wheat and planting date will be agreed on in the Annual Work Plan.
- 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 a Bid Sheet 3-1384. 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](#), by contacting Kelley Van Druten at (252) 475-0172 or [kelley\\_vandruten@fws.gov](mailto:kelley_vandruten@fws.gov), or at the Pocosin Lakes Office. Office hours vary so please call ahead, (252) 796-3004. 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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