



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Notice of Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity

Laguna Atascosa 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 Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Cameron County, Texas. The purpose of the cooperative farming program is crop production to prevent the establishment of invasive grass in future restoration sites. 1,671 acres will be available for crop production in Subunit 9 of the Refuge's Laguna Atascosa Unit. The selected applicant will operate under a Cooperative Agriculture Agreement (CAA) as a "cooperator" with the Service.

Background

Laguna Atascosa NWR (Refuge) was established in 1946 to provide habitat for wintering waterfowl and other migratory birds, principally redhead ducks. Today, there is an expanded emphasis that includes endangered species conservation and management for shorebirds. The Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) identifies the Cooperative Agriculture Program as an authorized economic use and an important habitat management tool. The Service has determined that cooperative agriculture is an appropriate, compatible and necessary use of the Refuge. The Refuge's goal is to keep current crop land free of invasive grass until thornscrub or coastal prairie restoration efforts can be implemented, provide an important economic use for the local farming community, and bring in supplemental funding to support future restoration efforts. Ultimately these restoration efforts on the Refuge are in support of the Refuge's Resources of Concern Plan and CCP, multiple endangered species recovery plans, habitat objectives of the Laguna Madre Initiative Team of the Gulf Coast Joint Venture, and many other bird conservation planning efforts.

The available farming unit (Subunit 9) is a multi-use area that is open to the public for at least part of the year. Public use restrictions are described in the [General Refuge Regulations](#) and [Hunting Regulations](#) sections of the Refuge website. Additional conditions of access will be provided to the selected applicant through a Special Use Permit. The non-cropland areas of Subunit 9 (Figure 1) are actively managed to meet the Refuge's habitat objectives. Examples of these management actions include flooding resaca impoundments, mechanical and chemical brush control, and invasive grass control in thornscrub planting sites. These management actions may cause interruption, delays, and changes in planned farming activities. Additionally, a small portion of the

cropland is pulled out of production annually for thornscrub and prairie restoration efforts. These areas typically total less than 100 acres annually and are declared well in advance of crop planting. Farm rental agreements will be completed annually to reflect the updated crop production acreage and rent bill. Successful applicants must plan to work with Service staff to coordinate farming activities and ensure they do not interfere with the Refuge's habitat restoration and management efforts. The selected applicant will be given the opportunity to provide in-kind restoration site prep and management services (discing, rowing, herbicide application, etc.), which can be used to lower the producer's rent bill. Restoration sites where these services may be requested can be found in Figure 1.

The Proposed Cooperative Agriculture Agreement

Laguna Atascosa NWR is proposing crop production on 1,671 acres in Subunit 9 of the Laguna Atascosa Unit (Figure 1) through a Cooperative Agriculture Agreements (CAA). Applicants are applying for use of this cropland for five growing seasons, 2027-2031. The awarded CAA will include a Plan of Operations and Annual Work Plans. Under the CAA, the Service is proposing that all crops and associated revenue will belong to the selected applicant in exchange for the agreed upon rental rate. The primary crop for this proposed CAA is dry-land sorghum as no irrigation services are available. It is the intention of the Refuge to award one CAA for all 1,671 acres. Soil types within the cropland of Subunit 9 include Laredo Silty Clay Loam, Olmito Silty Clay, Harlingen Clay, and Benito Clay. Applicants agree to accept the on-the-ground conditions in the Unit. 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.

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.

- Farm equipment access to the Unit will only be allowed at four pre-determined gates (Figure 1). There are other gated entrances to the Unit, but they are not wide enough for farm equipment.
- Wildlife is unpredictable and unplanned management actions may arise during the year. The Service will work with the cooperator to minimize impacts to approved farming activities as much as possible.
- The Service is not responsible for any crop damage that occurs because of wildlife depredation.
- No farming activities or land conversion (e.g., disking, brush removal, etc.) is authorized in non-crop production areas.
- Annual Work Plans will be renewed no later than December 1 each year.
- Use of genetically modified crops (GMOs) is not currently allowed.
- **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 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 pesticide use report detailing pesticide use will be submitted by November 15 each year.
- Fields that will be pulled from crop production for habitat restoration will be declared 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 crop 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. Application packets are available on the Refuge website, at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center, or by contacting Sergio Vasquez at (956) 556-1552 or sergio_vasquez@fws.gov.

Website: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/laguna-atascosa>

e-mail Address: sergio_vasquez@fws.gov

Visitor Center Address: 22688 Buena Vista Blvd, Los Fresnos, TX 78566

Mailing Address: 22817 Ocelot Road, Los Fresnos, TX 78566

For more information, please contact Sergio Vasquez at (956) 556-1552 or sergio_vasquez@fws.gov.

Figure 1.

