



RORY DOYLE

ROOTED IN RENEWAL: RESTORING THE VALLEY

In the rich, flat floodplain of the Lower Mississippi River, the soil has always been fertile – but not always forgiving. For decades, farmers cleared forests and drained wetlands to cultivate low-lying lands prone to constant flooding, often planting soybeans. Yet even today, some tracts remain unproductive.

"A certain amount of that farmland is marginal, and it's hard for farmers to make a profit," says Ronald Seiss, Lower Mississippi River program director and coordinator of the Tri-state Conservation Partnership working across Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. "It's an excessive wetness problem."

That wetness, historically a problem, is now at the center of

an effort to restore the valley's natural floodplain functions while improving water quality across the region and beyond. Through the USDA's Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), landowners are voluntarily placing conservation easements on marginal cropland, allowing restoration teams to replant native trees and reestablish wetlands.

Over the past 33 years, more than one million acres have been enrolled across the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley, converting farmland back into vibrant wetlands and hardwood forests.

A key benefit of the program? Farmers are not being asked to sacrifice productive land in the name of conservation.

"Farmers don't have to enroll their entire land ownership – just the unproductive part," says Seiss. "We like to say, 'farm the best and conserve the rest.'"

The impact is profound. By taking unproductive land out of rotation, the initiative reduces the amount of fertilizer used in the region.

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Meanwhile, the restored wetlands hold water during floods, creating habitats for everything from migratory birds to pollinators. They also filter runoff from nearby farmland, capturing sediment and agricultural nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus before they reach rivers.

The benefits ripple far beyond the region. Fertilizer runoff from farms in the Mississippi Valley is one of the largest contributors to the hypoxic "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico – an area the size of a small state where oxygen levels are too low to support marine life. Wetland restoration offers one of the most effective ways to slow that pollution at its source. By taking marginal farmland out of production and letting wetlands filter the existing runoff, the program is reducing the amount of nutrients flowing into the river – cleaning up the water before it gets to the Gulf.

"People think of this as a habitat program," says Seiss. "But it's also nutrient reduction, floodwater reduction, water quality improvement and carbon sequestration. All of that is as important as the habitat it's creating."

According to Seiss, the approach is not just environmentally sound – it's practical. Farmers get paid to stop working land that was costing them time and money. The government saves on commodity programs, crop insurance and disaster assistance payments on unproductive land. The landscape becomes more resilient to flooding and drought, and the public benefits from cleaner water and stronger ecosystems.



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The environmental benefits are only part of the story; the program is also helping address disparities in land access and conservation support. The project includes partnerships with organizations like The KKAC Organization in Arkansas, which supports Black landowners and historically underserved rural communities. According to Executive Director Wilbur Peer, the work keeps families connected with generational land while also supporting projects that restore natural habitats.

"We're making sure people know that you don't have to sell your land to receive nearly the financial value of

the land by enrolling in the wetland easement program," says Peer. "So these farmers can pass this land along through generations – and when my 4-year-old grandson grows up, he'll be able to run around in the woods."

Seiss says the diverse benefits make the initiative extremely effective. The 33-year-old program may no longer be groundbreaking, but it's proven, practical and delivering results. "This is one of the most successful conservation programs ever," says Seiss. "We need to keep doing this. If you want something new and fresh, you can get that somewhere else. But keep us going."