

Working Wet Meadows of Southern Oregon-Northeastern California Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Working ranchlands provide important ecosystem services including clean water, groundwater recharge, and habitat for fish and wildlife. In turn, local communities benefit from the agricultural productivity and recreational opportunities supported by these wet meadows. Flood irrigation on historical floodplains and wetlands in the Southern Oregon-Northeastern California (SONEC) region is critically important for sustaining waterbird populations throughout western North America. More than 6 million wetland-dependent migratory birds rely on working wet meadows in the SONEC region for successful migration and reproduction each year.

Seventy-four percent of these key wetlands in the SONEC region are on privately-owned working ranchlands, making private landowners essential to maintaining these ecological services. Voluntary conservation programs exist to help ranchers continue flood irrigating, restore riparian habitat, and sustain ranching communities. Over the past decade, more than 42,000 acres of flood-irrigated wet meadow habitat has been conserved or enhanced in the SONEC region, demonstrating that livestock producers, soil and water conservation districts, conservation organizations, and state and federal agencies are committed to finding win-win solutions to complex natural resource concerns.

In 2016, the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) assisted with securing an additional \$2.6 million for working wet meadows conservation. The funding was awarded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) for Agricultural Land Easements, Conservation Stewardship Program, and Environmental Quality Incentives Program activities in the SONEC region over the next 4 years. While all three programs received funding, the NRCS dollars will be focused primarily on easements, with matching funds to be provided by state and local sources. Please note that not all programs are available in both states.

What is an Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)?

An ALE is a permanent conservation easement held by an eligible entity, such as a local land trust, that is funded in part by the NRCS. A land trust is responsible for administering the conservation easement. The purpose of ALE is to protect the agricultural viability and related conservation values of eligible land by limiting future uses.

What are the landowner eligibility requirements?

All landowners of the property must have farm records established with their local Farm Services Agency (FSA) and be compliant with the 2014 Farm Bill's Adjusted Gross Income and Highly Erodible Land/Wetland Conservation requirements.

What land is eligible for an ALE under the SONEC RCPP funding?

To be considered, lands must: 1) be within the SONEC Wetland Priority Area; 2) flood irrigation must actively occur on the property for livestock forage production and/or hayed or grazed annually; and 3) the producer must possess and maintain an active surface water right approved by the Department of Water Resources for the property considered.



Can a landowner submit an application directly to NRCS for an ALE?

No, landowners may not submit applications directly to NRCS. To be considered for an ALE, the landowner must submit a completed Statement of Interest form to a land trust that will hold conservation easements under this program. The land trust will prepare the application to NRCS.

How will projects be selected for funding?

Interested landowners must submit a completed Statement of Interest form to a land trust. The appropriate land trust will screen all applications to confirm eligibility and overall suitability for the program. Projects determined to be eligible and suitable will then be ranked for funding, after an in-person visit by the ranking team. Projects will be ranked based on national, state, and local natural resources criteria and prioritized for funding on that basis. Copies of the ranking form will be made available to the landowner by request.

How much funding for each easement can be provided by NRCS?

NRCS may contribute up to 75% of the fair market value for an ALE easement. The balance of the funding must come from other non-federal sources, including state agencies, private donors, and in-kind contributions of easement value from the landowners. Before NRCS can formally commit its funds to a project that has been selected for funding, the non-profit project partners must first secure the other 25% needed.

How much will the landowner get paid for an ALE?

The value of the conservation easement will be determined by an independent appraisal that meets State and Federal appraisal standards and is completed by a qualified licensed appraiser hired by the land trust.

Are there any tax benefits associated with putting an ALE on my property?

Landowners typically only incur Federal or State tax benefits if they donate a portion of the appraised easement value to the non-profit holder of the easement, the land trust. This is a discussion the landowner should have with their personal tax advisor and the land trust.

What are the restrictions placed on a property under an ALE?

Under an ALE, the landowner and land trust work together to protect the agricultural and conservation values of the land. The conservation easement deed language is developed by the land trust in consultation with the landowner and includes specific terms required by NRCS and other funding agencies involved in the transaction.

Does the landowner control access to the land?

Yes. However, under the terms of the easement, the land trust will have the legal responsibility to visit the property at least once a year to confirm that the landowner is complying with the terms of the easement.

What is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)?

Most of the agriculture producers that are approved to participate in CSP have already been implementing conservation practices on their land. CSP steps in and offers enhancements for those practices.

What is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)?

EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to plan and implement conservation practices that improve natural resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. EQIP may also help producers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental regulations.



**For more information, please contact
IWJV's SONEC Conservation Delivery Coordinator,
Ed Contreras at ed.contreras@iwjv.org,
who will assist with connecting landowners to the
appropriate land trusts.**



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