

Ag Departments sets third sign-up under Wetlands Reserve Program

WASHINGTON (AP) — Landowners will have another chance soon to enroll their wetland areas in a federal program designed to protect and restore such lands.

The Agriculture Department has set its third sign-up under the Wetlands Reserve Program for May 30 through June 30.

This year's program is funded at \$92 million and about 118,000 acres are expected to be enrolled.

The program protects and restores wetland areas as habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, helps purify water supplies and helps absorb flood waters, the department says.

Under the program, the government pays landowners for the agricultural value of wetland areas that previously were drained and used for crop production. Landowners retain ownership and access control, but agree to allow

the area to be restored as wetland.

"This is a good opportunity for landowners who would prefer to return some of their cropland back to wetland," said Paul W. Johnson, chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which administers the program.

"There is a public benefit, too, in improved water quality, floodwater control and wildlife habitat," he added.

The second sign-up under the program was conducted last year, with \$39 million budgeted to buy conservation easements on 75,000 acres in 20 states. But the program proved far more popular than its budget could accommodate, as landowners sought to enroll 590,000 acres. This year, \$43 million was made available to help buy easements on about 70,000 acres of the backlog.