

ACEP-WRE Ranking:

What Landowners Need to Know

Why Does NRCS Rank Offers?

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) helps landowners restore, protect, and enhance wetlands. Because funding is competitive, NRCS uses a point system to rank each application. Offers with the highest scores are funded first.

What Does the Ranking System Measure?

- NRCS scores each easement offer in several categories:
- Wetland restoration potential
- Wildlife habitat quality and diversity
- Landscape priorities (like waterfowl breeding, threatened and endangered species, water quality)
- Long-term feasibility
- Threats and environmental conditions
- Program priorities (cost effectiveness, conservation benefits)
- Agricultural use context

Each category contains ranking questions with specific point values. The total possible score is 360 points.

What Can Landowners Influence?

You have direct control over several ranking factors:

- Restoration plans: The more acres you restore to native wetland vegetation and natural hydrology, the higher your score.
- Boundary complexity: Simpler property shapes (fewer corners) are easier to restore and manage and score higher.
- Financial contribution: If you or a partner contributes funds toward restoration or easement costs, your offer becomes more competitive.
- Long-term conservation commitments: Providing written or formal conservation agreements that continue after the easement expires can earn you extra points.
- Perennial grass buffers: Seeding a perennial grass buffer—at least 50 feet wide—next to wetlands that are currently cropped will add points to your offer.
- Program priorities met: The more program priorities your easement meets (such as migratory birds, water quality, floodwater attenuation, open space, native flora/fauna, education), the higher your score.

What Can't Landowners Control?

Some ranking factors depend on location or natural conditions:

- Wetland diversity (natural wetland classes)
- Waterfowl map zone (statewide duck nesting map)
- County threatened species priorities
- Impaired watershed status
- Existing legal drains you do not control
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These factors are naturally occurring, and the ranking simply acknowledges their conservation significance.

How to Improve Your Score & Submit a Strong Offer

- Simplify the boundary: Draw boundaries around contiguous blocks to reduce corners.
- Target feasible restoration: Work with NRCS on hydrology and vegetation plans that reflect actual site conditions.
- Use adjacency wisely: If you border protected wetlands, include that edge to qualify for adjacency points.
- Document support: Attach letters or agreements showing partner/stewardship support after the easement term.
- Provide complete evidence: Include crop history, field maps, and any historic records showing reduced productivity due to water levels.
- Consider a contribution: If feasible, offer a reduction in easement and restoration cost to the government to increase points.

Work With NRCS Early

NRCS can:

- Walk your land with you
- Help you identify restoration opportunities
- Clarify map-based scoring factors
- Ensure your application is complete and competitive

Contact your North Dakota NRCS office to begin.