

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge Complex Seeks Agricultural Producers for Cooperative Agriculture Program

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is seeking agricultural producer(s) to farm under a Cooperative Agriculture Agreements (CAAs) on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge and Key Cave National Wildlife Refuge in Northern Alabama. Producers may apply to split-cost share on one or more of seven farms totaling approximately 3,325 acres on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and one farm totaling about 235 acres on Key Cave NWR for a period of five years (2025-2029), with the agreement renewed annually.

To apply, please complete the accompanying application. The application process is a competitive process, where the applicant's experience, equipment, and capacity will be taken into consideration. The applicant must address how the criteria will be met outlined in the announcement and identify a specific farm(s) of interest. Complete applications can be submitted by email to nick_wirwa@fws.gov, by mail or in-person to 2700 Refuge Headquarters, Decatur, AL 35603 by September, 20 2024.

For questions or more information please contact Program Coordinator, Nick Wirwa, nick_wirwa@fws.gov or by phone: 256.353.7243 x46144

Background

Wheeler NWR is managed primarily to provide important habitat needs for wintering waterfowl, cranes, and resident wildlife. Key Cave NWR is primarily managed for wildlife forage and grassland-dependent birds, such as bobwhite quail. There is a long history of farming for wildlife on Wheeler NWR and Key Cave NWR has been farmed prior to and since its establishment.

Our goal for farming at Wheeler NWR is to provide energy rich agricultural crops for waterfowl, which together with wetland management and sanctuary, contributes towards a healthy, viable waterfowl population. Unharvested agricultural crops provide the greatest energy density food for waterfowl. Our goal for Key Cave NWR, as noted above, is to supplement food sources for quail and other migratory birds. This is in support of the National Bobwhite Quail Conservation Initiative. Cooperative agriculture can also help control invasive plant species and support communities and local economies.

Proposed Cooperative Agriculture Agreement

The cooperative farming program uses local producers to provide high energy foods such as corn, milo, rice or millet for wildlife. The producer has the option to plant and harvest corn or soybeans and for rent, provide a percentage of corn, milo, rice, millet, or other grains for the refuge's share.

Agricultural producers are being sought for seven farms on Wheeler NWR located mainly in Limestone and Morgan Counties, with a small amount of acreage of one farm (8764) in Madison County. Maps of farm units are provided below. Each farm will be managed for five years under a separate Cooperative Agriculture Agreement (CAA) with annual updates/work plans required

to address crop rotation, soil conditions, local issues such as flooding, and other factors.

Cooperative farmers are being sought for one farm on Key Cave NWR located in Lauderdale County. Below there is a general description of this farm, a map of the fields, and an associated table of field acreages following the information for Wheeler NWR farms. As is the case with the farms on Wheeler NWR, that on Key Cave NWR will be managed under a five year CAA with annual updates/work plans required. However, the agricultural fields on this refuge may be converted to native grasslands during this five-year period. Therefore, this conversion may occur over a 10-year period, with reduction in farm acres by approximately 30 acres per year.

Selected Cooperators will enter into an initial CAA with the refuge. The FWS Form 3-1383-C (Commercial Special Use Permit application) will be completed once the refuge selects the cooperator for each farm. Beginning with the first year and each year thereafter a Plan of Operations (PO) will be signed by both parties. This PO will include information specific to each year, such as crop types to be planted in each field and approved pesticides and related chemicals. Several appendices to the PO will further define the process by which the program will be administered and further delineate the requirements and restrictions of the USFWS and the Cooperator. Any needed changes will be incorporated in the annual PO. Farming operations cannot commence each year until the PO for that year is signed and dated by both parties.

General Operating Requirements

Below are just a few of the operating requirements which will also be covered in detail in the PO. Because farming operations occur on a national wildlife refuge, general farming procedures, pesticides and methods may not be allowed. Below is a PO **example** and may be partly modified.

- Annual POs are required for addressing current objectives, opportunities, restrictions, and other details, and may be amended by both the Project Leader (manages both Wheeler and Key Cave NWRs) and cooperator. However, the Project Leader has the final decision making authority about farming on both refuges. POs and amendments become attachments to and part of the CAA.
- Either the refuge or farmer may initiate an amendment(s) to the CAA to insure the refuge lands meet their resource management objectives or to insure the cooperator is attaining his incentives for engaging in cooperative agriculture on the refuge. The amendment(s) must be documented in writing and signed and dated by both the refuge representative and farmer.
- Cooperator agrees to a share-split farming agreement. The Refuge share of the crop will be left in the field with locations to be determined by the Project Leader or his/her designee. In some cases shares may be increased if the cooperator is unable to fulfill his requirements for refuge shares. For example, more shares of millet will be required if the farmer is unable to plant corn shares. In-kind services may be required in lieu of leaving crops for refuge shares. The value of these services will be equivalent to that of the crops which would have been left as refuge shares in the fields.
- The refuge only provides land for farming. There is no cost-sharing for that needed to properly plant and maintain the crop, including, but not limited to, chemicals, seed, and soil amendments. All labor and equipment is also provided by the cooperator.

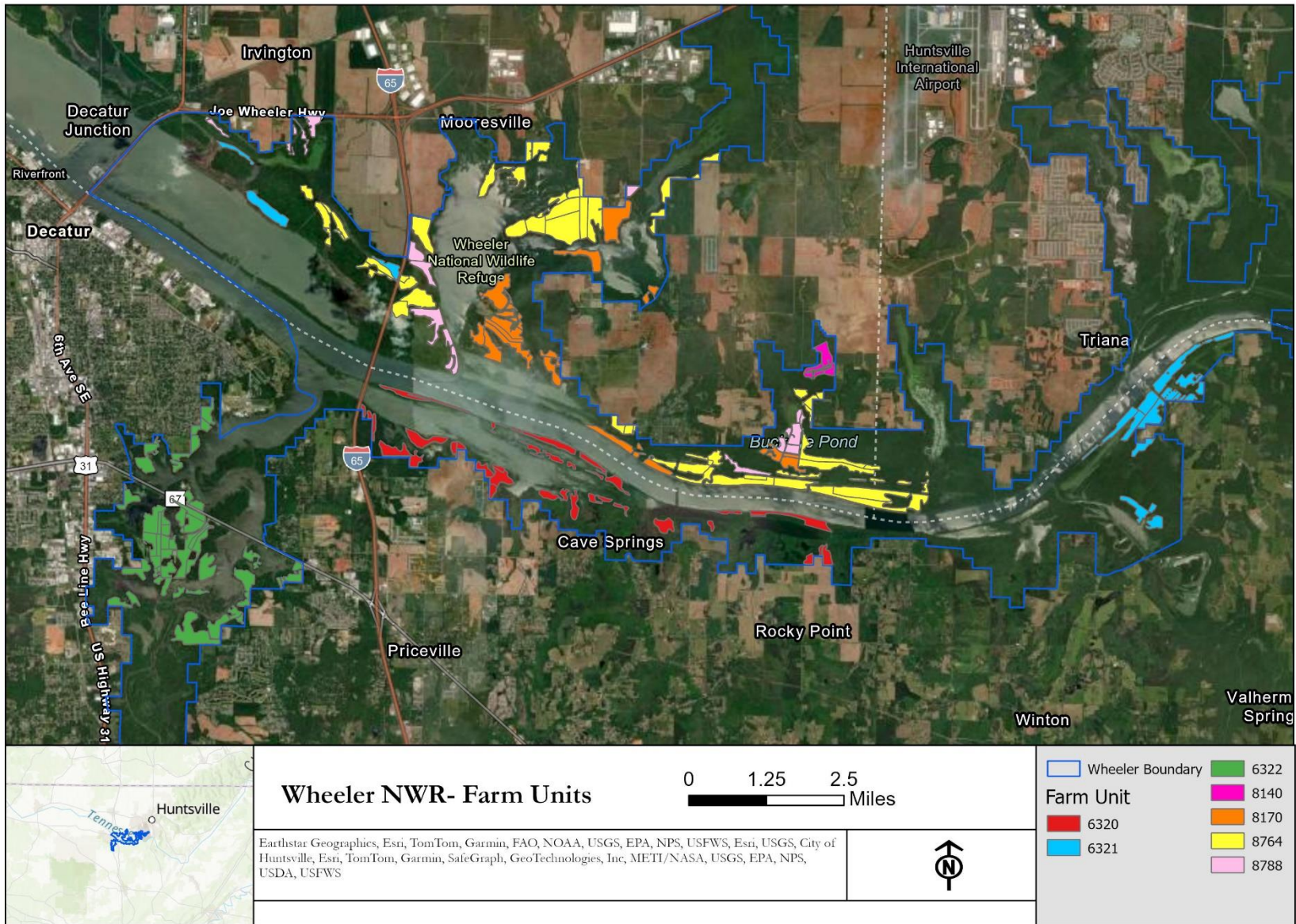
- POs will renew no later than April 1 each year, for up to 5 years. The farmer will typically meet each year with a refuge staff member to discuss the PO. Pertinent refuge staff normally meet with all cooperators once each year to discuss changes to the operations, issues, and related matters.
- Use of neonicotinoids are currently prohibited.
- All pesticide use must be pre-approved through a federal approval process. Some pesticides requested by the farmer may not be approved for use on the refuge.
- Cooperators must follow the specific application requirements provided by the refuge. These may be more restrictive than pesticide labels.
- All requested information must be provided to the refuge by set deadlines. Examples include requests for pesticides the farmer wishes to use the following year, information related to what pesticides they used the current year, crop yields, and amendment application information.
- 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 farm lands, in whole or in part, shall be cause for cancellation of a Cooperator's privileges at the discretion of the Project Leader.
- The refuge or the cooperative farmer may terminate the CAA with 45 days' notice if either party is not carrying out his roles and responsibilities under the CAA. The refuge may immediately terminate the CAA if necessary to protect human or wildlife health and safety.
- After the term of the CAA has ended, the refuge may review the opportunity for cooperative agriculture for renewal. If it will be renewed, the refuge must publish a notice and award the CAA again using the same

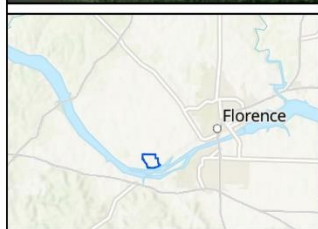
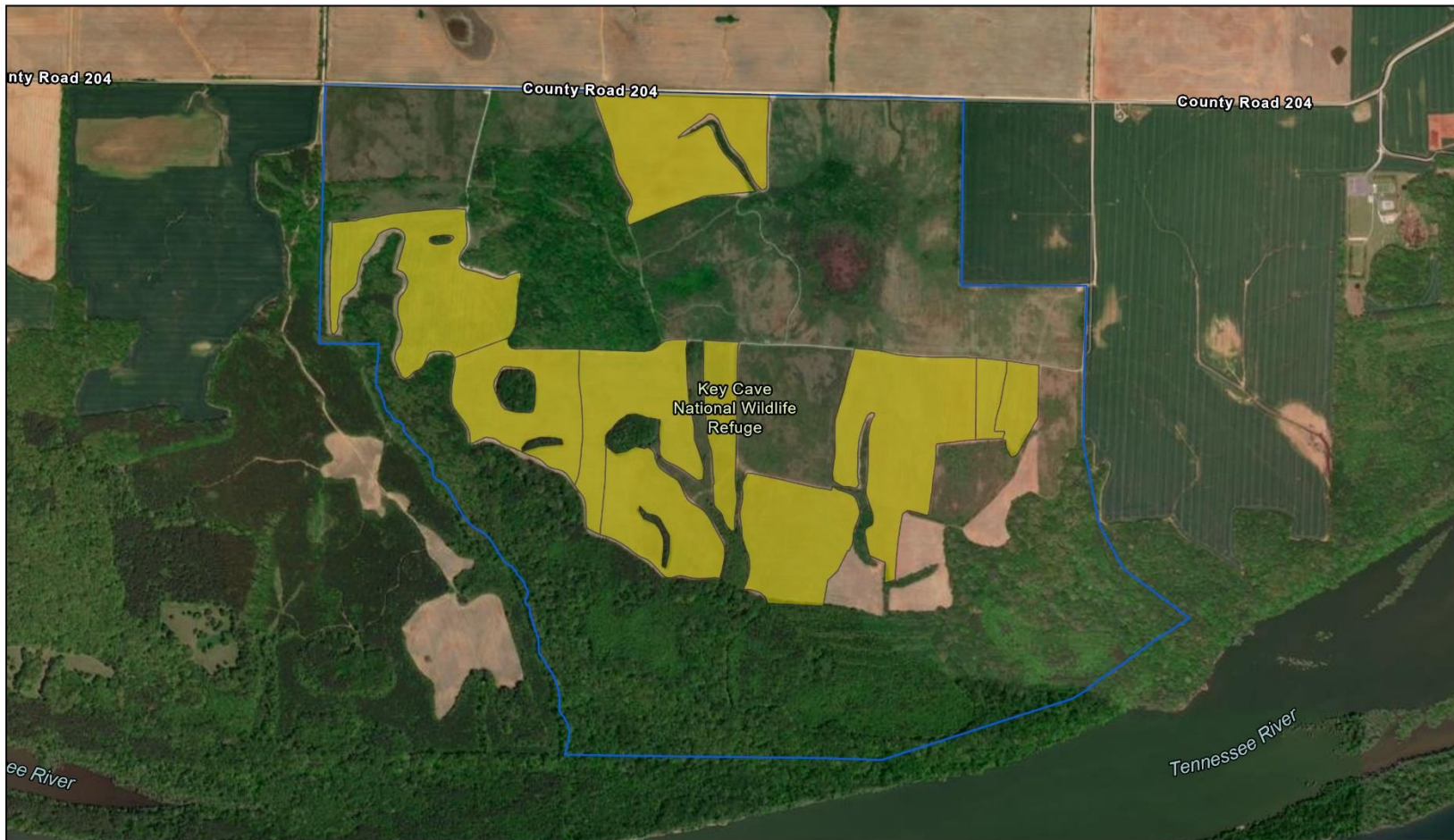
Cooperator Selection

Cooperator(s) will be selected through an open and competitive process where applications will be scored and ranked based on responses. Additional information related to these questions will also be used when ranking applications. General categories are related to the following:

- Farming experience and capabilities.
- Ownership or ready access to the proper equipment, materials, labor, or other resources to participate in the Cooperative Agriculture Agreement.
- Ability to provide in-kind services – conduct activities like mowing, disking, and erosion mitigation in lieu of and of equal value to the refuge shares of crops they replace.

Other relative criteria provided elsewhere in the application will be used to score applicants. We intend to select multiple cooperators for the seven farms on Wheeler NWR.





Key Cave NWR- Farm Units

0 0.15 0.3 Miles

Esri, CGIAR, USGS, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS, USFWS, Esri Community Maps Contributors, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS, US Census Bureau, USDA, USFWS, Maxar

Key Cave NWR Boundary

Farm Unit