

NRCS WATERSHED PROGRAMS AT WORK

Building Resilience through Recovery

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When flood disasters strike, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the USDA agency to lead recovery by providing crucial technical and financial assistance to affected communities. Saving lives and protecting property is the core mission of the USDA NRCS Watershed Programs Branch.

By Lark Gilmer, NRCS

Property buyouts are often the best solution—providing a balanced approach that is strategic and cost-effective for reducing flood risk and protecting flood-prone areas. NRCS Watershed Programs works with local sponsors to purchase inundated properties to prevent future damage and convert them to open space.

RHODE ISLAND

Through the NRCS Watershed Programs, the Rhode Island Association of Conservation Districts (RIACD) is working with the City of East Providence, City of Cranston and Town of Johnston to offer relief to homeowners of flood-prone homes through the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program and the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program. **Both programs offer buyouts for flood-prone properties as part of a broader watershed conservation effort when it proves to be the best option to mitigate future flooding in low-lying neighborhoods.** Currently, RIACD is working to acquire three key areas impacted by Hurricane Ida in 2021 that are also flood prone.

[EWP Buyouts – East Providence, Rhode Island](#) (StoryMap editorial link)



Flooding in East Providence from Hurricane Ida – 2021 – Dyan Sierra

EWP assists project sponsors in protecting lives and property from flooding or soil erosion after a natural disaster. In flood-prone places like East Providence, RI, a property buyout may be the solution to reduce flood risk. EWP buyouts are advised when structural projects to reduce flooding and erosion threats are neither cost-effective nor beneficial.

In East Providence, NRCS spent over \$9.6 million to buy property in flood-prone areas within the Runnins River corridor. Thirteen eligible homes and three adjoining parcels of land were acquired as part of the overall flood prevention restoration plan.

“Sometimes we would have to move our cars at three in the morning, a couple blocks away, and walk home in knee-deep water,” Beth Galligan, an East Providence homeowner explained. “The flooding was pretty bad depending on the year. Sometimes it would be every couple of weeks or every couple of months.”

Homeowners like Galligan purchased their property knowing it was in a 100-year floodplain and like many others, were never concerned about potential flooding. A common misperception is that a 100-year flood will only occur once per century. The reality is that flooding is likely to occur more than once. For example, undeveloped land that has been converted into urban areas with buildings, infrastructure, and other structures has significantly transformed the natural landscape. Where there was water absorbing soil, there are now impervious surfaces such as cement or rooftops. With nowhere for the water to go, streets and sidewalks convey floodwaters to low-lying areas.

“This is a wonderful community, but nobody wants to be swamped by increased flood risk and the bills and hardships that come with it. This voluntary buyout program is an opportunity for repetitive flood loss victims to get fair market value so they can relocate while simultaneously improving flood mitigation and developing smarter long-term flood management solutions. I appreciate NRCS staff for their diligent, expeditious efforts to help people and we want this process to move forward before another high-water event occurs. We can’t undo the damage floods have done or replace treasured family photos and heirlooms that were destroyed, but hopefully we can help people out of difficult circumstances so they can get a fair deal and move forward with their lives away from flood-prone areas.

And we're also improving the environmental integrity of the floodplain," **Senator Jack Reed** of Rhode Island said in a statement.

The East Providence EWP buyout process began with public townhall meetings in 2022. At that time, the project sponsor (RIACD), began accepting applications from eligible landowners, securing appraisals and acquiring properties in 2023. Thirteen homeowners volunteered for the program. Demolition work was completed in February 2025 and all utilities were decommissioned. Restoration work is ongoing and scheduled to be completed this year.

"One of the benefits, is that the people who were living here, who had to deal with the flooding, mold and insurance issues, no longer have to deal with that problem," **Mayor Bob DaSilva** interjects. "What's special about the EWP Buyout program is that now, with NRCS assistance, those properties are being returned back to nature – creating an asset for our community as a green space. Our concept is to create a passive recreation area where there are walking trails, native fruit trees, and where the community can enjoy the outdoors."

[WFPO Buyouts – Johnston and Cranston](#) (StoryMap editorial link)

Recent flooding from the Pocasset River displaced many residents in the Town of Johnston and City of Cranston resulting in millions of dollars of property damage that continues to impact health and safety. Recurrent flooding is debilitating and costly. With NRCS WFPO assistance, these communities can begin to build flood resilience as part of a broader conservation plan. The Pocasset River Watershed Plan requires purchasing conservation easements and implementing prevention measures that reduce the risk of flooding.

"We are grateful to receive this project funding and support from the USDA, NRCS and representatives of our federal delegation," said Cranston **Mayor Ken Hopkins**. "Flooding along the Pocasset River has become a perennial issue with the increased frequency of extreme weather events. Investing in these strategies to protect Cranston's riverfront neighborhoods is crucial to preserve our resident's quality of life."



Photo: Julie Wright, NRCS – RI – Pocasset Buyout Townhall

In January 2025, NRCS and RIACD held a series of public meetings in Johnston and Cranston communities introducing the watershed plan and informing residents about the WFPO buyout program. The meetings provided detailed information on voluntary participation and eligibility for those willing to sell their homes. Phase 1 will acquire 148 homes. Some will be flood-proofed while others will be moved or demolished so that the floodplain can be restored to its natural resilient state.

The watershed plan combines voluntary buyouts with restoration of historic floodplains, limited use of floodwalls and pump stations. The scale of this \$48 million project requires phased restoration. Phase I includes a hybrid design that incorporates structural design elements with nature-based solutions. After homes are moved or demolished, the land will be restored to its natural state providing enhanced green space that mitigates flood risks.

"Floodplains can provide significant protection from flood damages to downstream landowners," said **Phou Vongkhamdy, Rhode Island State Conservationist for NRCS**. "This project would significantly limit future uses of land in this floodplain area to make it available to store flood water and provide open space and other community benefits."

NRCS watershed conservation buyouts help communities build long-term resilience. Buyouts provide flood-prone towns the opportunity of a future when the thunder rolls. Homeowners are made whole and no longer have to worry about ongoing economic damage to their property or their family's. Watershed Program buyouts, offered through EWP and WFPO, touch everyone...including NRCS.

"Buyouts protect the watershed and provide relief to many who never thought that was even an option," said Michael Viola, NRCS Rhode Island State Conservation Engineer. "When I share that we will make them whole financially, you can witness the relief in their disbelief. It's a great moment...for all of us."

Currently, there are eight states with 836 proposed acquisitions in areas prone to flooding caused by a natural disaster.

The key objective is finding balance between recovery and resilience that offers the best outcome for farmers, property owners, and communities—all living things within a watershed. Balance means choosing the right approach, the best conservation practice that serves the moment and offers 'the' sustainable solution for communities to thrive and one, that is both feasible and environmentally sound. Providing relief through conservation is a win...for everyone.

For more information about this story, contact [Lark Gilmer](#), communication specialist with USDA NRCS Watershed Programs.

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