

COMMENTS ON WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVES PROGRAM

Comments Must Be Submitted by: March 17, 2009

Submit by Mail: Financial Assistance Programs Division; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program Comments, P.O. Box 2890, Room 5237-S, Washington, DC 20013

Or

Fax: (202) 720-4265

- We commend NRCS' identified national priorities for WHIP as identified in the Interim Final Rule (i.e., promote the restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats; protect, restore, develop, or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species).
- The Interim Final Rule emphasizes the need to use the WHIP for the conservation of pollinators. We commend this emphasis but stress that the focus should be on "native" pollinators and not "managed" pollinators which are non-native (thus do not meet the rules for correct definition of wildlife) and often require non-native habitats to sustain them. Other programs such as EQIP could be used to further managed pollinators. In addition, WHIP should continue its emphasis on native habitats which will support pollinators.
- The Interim Rule's definition of agricultural lands should be broadened to include areas other than just those "on which agricultural and forest related products or livestock are produced." Many critical landscapes such as wetlands, riparian areas, streams, and aspen groves should also be eligible for cost share payments. These important wildlife habitats are often within lands that are used for agricultural purposes and provide important conservation values (e.g. groundwater recharge) related to the agricultural operation.
- Section 636.7 Cost-share Payments states that "The cost-share payment to a participant shall be reduced proportionately below 75 percent to the extent that direct Federal financial assistance is provided to the participant from sources other than NRCS, except for certain cases that merit additional cost-share assistance to achieve the intended goals of the program..." We recommend that NRCS readily grant this waiver, particularly as it relates to declining or at-risk species, because there is often little financial incentive for an agricultural producer to participate in activities that do not, inherently, result in increased agricultural profitability. If NRCS and other partners can eliminate the cost of this type of habitat work the landowner may be willing to allow the habitat to be restored or enhanced. This can help recover declining species and prevent Endangered Species Act listings.

- The Interim Rule allows for the NRCS State Conservationist, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, to give priority to WHIP practices that address unique habitats, or special geographic areas identified in a State. This will help focus resources, both staffing and funding, to maximize benefits where most needed. We are willing to work with you to achieve this end result.
- In some states, the stream bottom is often under jurisdiction of the state or federal government and, according to the rule, is not eligible for WHIP funding. However, these streams are integral parts of farming and ranching operations and provide critical habitat for many at-risk species. Private landowners have taken responsibility for management of these stream systems which are critical to their agricultural operations. Instream habitat practices can often both benefit at-risk fish and other aquatic species and help protect the viability of the land for food and fiber production. We recommend that NRCS allow these stream systems to be eligible for WHIP when the landowner who operates agricultural operations within these landscapes is willing to participate.