



WILDLIFE HABITAT CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LANDS

Background

People rely on wildlife to fulfill everyday needs, from food to recreation. Natural habitat loss and destruction are an increasing threat to the survival of wildlife. Through cooperative conservation partnerships with private landowners, USDA helps establish and improve fish and wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations.

USDA conservation programs work to enhance upland habitats, including grassland, shrub/scrub, forest, and wetland habitats such as flooded crop fields, salt marshes, wetland hardwood hammocks, mangrove forests, and wild-rice beds as well as riparian and instream aquatic habitat along streams, rivers, lakes, sloughs, and coastal areas.

These programs assist in the installation of many conservation practices to create and improve fish and wildlife habitat, emphasizing benefits to at-risk species. This includes: restoring gravel spawning beds and removing barriers to fish passages; seeding and plantings; creating alternative watering facilities for livestock; installing culverts or water control structures; installing buffers; managing brush; and more.

Section 2502 of the 2002 farm bill reauthorized the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) as a voluntary approach to improving wildlife habitat in our Nation. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers WHIP, which was originally authorized by Section 387 of the 1996 farm bill.

WHIP is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to enable eligible participants to develop upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, threatened and endangered species, and other types of wildlife habitat in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner.

Although the primary purpose of the program is wildlife habitat development and enhancement, the benefits are not limited to wildlife. The practices are often compatible with and beneficial to farming and ranching enterprises. In fact, some practices enhance farm profitability by improving grazing conditions, reducing management expenses, and producing noncrop income. The program has been utilized to control invasive species; re-establish native vegetation; manage nonindustrial forestland; stabilize streambanks; protect, restore, develop, or enhance unique habitats; and remove barriers that impede migration of certain species.

WHIP priorities include (1) wildlife and fishery habitats identified by local and State partners in each State; (2) habitats and wildlife species experiencing declining or significantly reduced populations including rare, threatened, and endangered species; and (3) practices beneficial to fish and wildlife that may not otherwise be funded.

To be eligible for WHIP, the land must be privately owned land, tribal land, or State/local government land—or Federal if the primary benefit is on private lands and the project cannot meet its objectives without inclusion of the Federal land.

Program Operation

States Set Wildlife Priorities. USDA works at the local level and through the State Technical Committee to establish wildlife priorities. This process allows for local input as well as coordination with other wildlife interests in the State encouraging the leveraging of other State, Federal, and private dollars. States generally select two to six priority habitat types, consistently including one or more upland and riparian habitats. Wetlands, aquatic instream habitat, and other unique wildlife habitat such as caves and salt marshes are also identified as priorities in a number of States.

Wildlife Habitat Plan. USDA and its partners provide program participants with an assessment of wildlife habitat conditions, as well as recommendations of various practices that would improve these habitat conditions, and they develop a plan for maximizing habitat for target species. This wildlife habitat development plan becomes the basis of the agreement between NRCS and the participant.

WHIP Agreements. The wildlife habitat development plan identifies the cost-share practices that will be installed as well as the operation and maintenance requirements for the life of the agreement. Agreements usually last from 5 to 10 years. WHIP also provides additional cost share to landowners who enter into an agreement to protect and restore essential plant and animal habitat for a term of at least 15 years.

Implementation Assistance. Under this program, USDA provides up to 75 percent of the cost of installing the wildlife habitat development practices. Examples of practices authorized under WHIP include native grassland seeding, prescribed burns, hardwood planting, and fish passage structure installation.

Partners Play Significant Role. In addition to providing technical assistance, partners provide financial assistance through additional cost-share dollars, supplying equipment, or installing practices for the participant. The partners that play an essential part of the success of the program include public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other Technical Service Providers.

In fiscal year (FY) 2005, USDA enrolled over 3,300 WHIP agreements on approximately 458,000 acres; the average agreement size is 137 acres. In that same year, partners contributed almost \$10 million to help WHIP participants establish wildlife habitat practices on enrolled lands. In FY 2005, \$46 million was obligated. USDA provided more than \$34.3 million in financial assistance from the Commodity Credit Corporation. On average, USDA agreed to

reimburse participants approximately \$10,200 for each long-term agreement. Since the program began in 1998, national enrollment has included a total of more than 21,500 agreements on more than 3.3 million acres.

General Opinions Expressed

- Maintain a strong, effective conservation title in the next farm bill to ensure that producers have tools necessary to continue conserving and protecting soil, air, water, and wildlife habitat.
- Offer financial incentives for farmers to set aside parts of their land to benefit wildlife.
- Continue support and fully fund existing conservation programs—CRP, EQIP, WRP, WHIP, GRP, and CSP.
- Keep the co-equal status of soil, water, and wildlife as the standard.
- More incentives are needed to provide strategic wildlife cover such as buffers placed where they will be of greatest value to wildlife.
- The safe harbor provisions should be incorporated into the application process to encourage participation when endangered species are a concern.
- Make leveraging of the WHIP funds with State and private organizations a national priority.
- More financial incentives on private forest lands for wildlife are needed.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- Suggestion that the Wetland Reserve Program, the Farmland Protection Program, and the Grassland Reserve Program be combined under one umbrella to be more efficiently administered, allowing some possibilities for new producers to come into the business by paying for aspects of the land that are not currently producing income.
- Recommend a strong conservation title so that farmers and ranchers benefit from the additional income and the public benefits from better water quality and quantity and more wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation.
- Given the significance of our coldwater fisheries, a certain amount of 2007 farm bill conservation funds should be focused on stream habitat restoration—providing incentives to protect streamside areas, repair instream habitat, improve water flows and water quality, and initiate watershed management and planning.