

## THE CURRENT STATE OF NRCS WHIP FUNDS:

State Technical Committee: Forestry and Wildlife Subcommittee Meeting Minutes  
February 22, 2012

Discussion began with past and present WHIP and WHIP Long Leaf Pine (LLP) Initiative.

NC NRCS staff had some indications in December/early January as a result of an inquiry from headquarters on WHIP LLP, "If you don't get any WHIP money how much EQIP money would you use?" Our initial thought was "tell us how much WHIP money we'll get and we'll give you our answer?" NC NRCS did not hear anything further beyond this inquiry.

NC NRCS elected to go ahead and set aside \$300,000 of EQIP for LLP since EQIP was in hand and WHIP funds had not yet arrived in time for our first batching period. At the time NRCS did not know how much WHIP money would be received in NC. As of yesterday (February 21, 2012) NC was informed there will not be a traditional WHIP allocation for Financial Assistance this Fiscal Year. NRCS Headquarters informed us that during the final year of the farm bill the appropriations for WHIP were set to decrease from \$85 million to \$50 million. The smaller funding will be relegated to the Chief of NRCS who has established a Working Lands for Wildlife national project in partnership with US Fish and Wildlife Service. (more detail later in the minutes)

During the first batching period of EQIP LLP, NC had \$700K of requests under the EQIP LLP Pool (February 3, 2012). Note, NC was only 1 of 2 states in the Southeast that set aside dollars for LLP under EQIP. NRCS still has two batching periods left this fiscal year, so NC anticipates more requests/application demand for the EQIP LLP

Applicants that have already applied for WHIP will be informed that there will be no funds, and that they are encouraged to re-apply for EQIP. Our field offices will be sending that letter in the next two weeks. NRCS will not be deferring any WHIP remaining applications until the end of the year, just in case traditional WHIP money appears (if other states can't use it) in order to ensure NC does not have to pass up possible funds.

NC NRCS remains committed to the range-wide Longleaf Pine conservation initiative. NC NRCS field offices will continue to accept LLP applications and put them in the EQIP LLP ranking pool. WHIP applications that are Forestry related but not Longleaf focused, will be able to be ranked separately from LLP in our EQIP forestry pools. State office staff will need to make a decision on how to handle LLP applications for the next batches because we are already unable to fund \$400K worth of additional demand left over from the first batching period.

NRCS Programs staff is anticipating there may be some potential for left over EQIP funds within our FY 12 allotment that may become available towards the beginning of summer. It may be possible to re-allocate funds from other ranking pools for LLP at a later date. Headquarters is aware that NC, VA, SC, TX will come up short with LLP. Headquarters would like to re-allocate funds turned in by other states and apply these funds towards priorities such as LLP. If this happens at all, these funds may not be available until after May.

### **Questions:**

Sean Brogan: What kind of feedback are you looking for from the group?

Greg: Well a lot has changed. We wanted to get the group up to speed on where we are. If you have thoughts I'd be happy to hear them.

Sean: If there may be a delay in funding some of these LLP applications, I think the biggest thing NRCS needs to do from the standpoint of the applicants, esp. going into the summer of site prep, is to communicate to folks that these things may not be funded, or they may be funded late. Landowners get frustrated if the timing of the funding does not jive well with planting or site prep season. As long as NRCS does a good job with communicating this it will alleviate frustration, so they are not tapping their toes and waiting until the last minute so they can make their best decisions on site prep and lining up contractors.

Greg: That's excellent advice. I agree with you.

JohnAnn: I really appreciate the quick response to put EQIP money aside. It certainly is misleading to landowners to have the plug pulled on them. To accommodate us at the last minute is very helpful. I just hope NRCS can get the landowners past this.

Don Riley: I think NC-NRCS probably needs to be thinking that sometime between now and the summer we'll need to have another meeting to discuss FY2013. NRCS will need to be proactive in our assumption with the future of WHIP. Who would have thought NRCS would have been here a year ago? Do we need to revamp state ranking criteria and screening tools for the EQIP program? One disadvantage is it's now under EQIP. That may confuse the issue. NRCS will need to identify opportunities for transparency and good communication.

Greg Walker: Reflecting on what we heard in a teleconference with headquarters, they were talking about Long Leaf as if nothing had happened to funding. There is a national push from partners to begin to establish a baseline and tracking progress. What I heard, NRCS will keep LLP separate so that NRCS can track it appropriately.

Don: Maybe we need to revisit ranking and prioritization in order to address questions from the field. Would it be advantageous to know our total demand?

Greg: Yes, I think so. That way we can reflect on how headquarters will react.

Sean: Is this related to an overall drop in WHIP appropriations? Or is this related to redirection towards species of concern. Can you clarify?

Matt: It does relate to pre-planned lower spending limits in the last year of the farm bill. Headquarters is looking at how to make the most out of the limited amount of money. They are going to match money from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with WHIP somehow.

John Ann: The gopher tortoise money leaves us out for LLP.

Matt: Texas voiced their same concern yesterday and said exactly what we would have said. I don't know what the outcome will be for those states with LLP and no tortoises.

John Ann: So is North Carolina competing with Texas then?

Greg: Yes, most likely we are in the same boat with VA, SC, and Texas. Those are the states that don't have overlap with the Gopher tortoise habitat. I wouldn't call it competition so much though.

Greg: We've shifted all LLP applications over from WHIP to EQIP for this year.

Don: Our general WHIP, the HPAPs need to also be addressed. Keep in mind NRCS had a fairly successful HPAP "program" where we've had ongoing projects. This will also cause a delay in service with those.

Mark: There is a lot of talk in Congress in rolling WHIP into EQIP. Do you think this is a step towards this process? Will forestry stuff have to come under EQIP in the future?

Greg: It's hard to speculate on Congress. Your guess is as good as mine.

Sean: How about you guys coming up with a landowner friendly update. If you can get me a one pager I can get it out on our website which will reach the tree farms, consultants, foresters. Whatever you want to tell folks about timing, amount that has been put in, here's what NRCS will do in the future, anything to tell current or future applicants. Clarify what's different now and what's been communicated in the past. One thing to stress is to communicate to folks who haven't traditionally participated in federal programs, they may see that it's not reliable. We're trying to build momentum of interest and dedication to LLP, make sure they don't feel like they got burned. We've built momentum, said there was money, granted there may be challenges, but NRCS are looking to continue to support. Just because there is a bump in the road, don't bail out.

Greg: We can do that. I will e-mail that to the group too, hoping you can help us spread that message.

Don: Shifting gears, Greg mentioned the shift in priority for WHIP. The title will be **Working Lands for Wildlife**. The gopher tortoise has been mentioned. The intent is to target certain species with the idea that either the species can come to a point where they are no longer listed, or in cases where they are not yet listed, improve their status where they don't have to be listed. We mentioned this morning that North Carolina isn't fortunate enough to have gopher tortoise. The one species North Carolina does have in this initiative is the Golden-wing Warbler. NRCS currently has information that has been transferred to some of the partners. We are looking at focal areas, ranking and screening criteria now. For those of you who are not familiar with where this initiative will be applicable, it will be the high altitude, extreme Western part of the state (2,500 ft. and higher). The focus of the program will be developing suitable habitat through implementation of forest management practices such as thinning and understory management and early successional habitat in those regions. I know everybody that has the opportunity to hear about this has been quick to point out the hurdles. It is the initiative NRCS has to offer now. Not sure how much funding there will be, or when funds will arrive.

Renee: Has the program already been awarded?

Don: I'm not sure I can say awarded. General focal areas and species have been identified. As far as funding amounts, no. The first step will be how much funding will go to each of the focal areas nationally. Then how much funding will go to each state within each focal area. Step 3 will be distributing those funds within our state

Sean: Does anybody know if Wildlife Action Plan has a plan for the Warbler?

Don: I'll take a stab, Mark I'll depend more on your help too. Yes. The action plan does identify targeted habitats and targeted species. There is a group of individuals that started having conversations about targeted areas and best management practices. Interest in Golden-wing is not something new. It's been on the radar within the bird community for quite some time.

Mark: It's a good point that it's not anything new. NRCS have groups already working on that in the mtns including Audubon and US Forest Service.

Greg: Any other questions or comments.

Hearing none, I'd just like to conclude from my perspective, I just wanted you to know where WHIP is, but I also wanted to reassure everyone that NC NRCS recognizes there has been a lot of effort that we do not want to abandon. We've seen tremendous effort. We're going to do everything we can to pick it up with EQIP. We are in here plugging along for the LLP effort. We will probably get back together in June or Julyish for discussion for 2013 funding program.

I appreciate you taking the times to be with us and offer your thoughts.