



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

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Natural Resources Conservation Service
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Gentlemen:

The Missouri Department of Conservation is a state agency responsible for the management of the fish, forest and wildlife resources of the state of Missouri. The Department provides technical assistance to USDA-NRCS for the implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs including the Grassland Reserve Program. We offer the following comments on the interim final rule of the Grassland Reserve Program:

The rule allows for USDA to obtain longer term protection through easements on "lands considered valuable." Presently, the formula used for calculating easement payments has made easements less financially attractive to producers than a shorter rental agreement. It would be in the best interest of the resource (long-term protection) to change the formula to make easements more attractive financially. Language to this effect should be contained in the final rule.

Under Regulatory Certifications (page 29174), reference is made to using "consideration of interest within a state" as criteria for allocating funds among states. This will be a sound and reasonable criteria as long as the "interest within a state" is enrollment of grasslands that encompass all three areas of emphasis (i.e. support for grazing lands, biodiversity and conversion pressure). "Interest within a state" could be counter to conservation if it is based on overall interest. That interest could be a desire to enroll many acres that lack biodiversity, have little threat of conversion or not be used in a grazing operation.

Under Background (page 29175), there is reference to grassland conversion in a general sense but the issue of intentional conversion of native grasslands to exotics is overlooked and needs to be discussed in the Final Rule as a conversion pressure.

Under Discussion of the Program (page 29175 - 1st paragraph), the purpose of GRP is defined differently (much more generally) that what Congress mandated in the Farm Bill in Subtitle E,

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Sec. 1238N, subsections (a) and (c) which clearly states that the program is to "assist owners in restoring and conserving eligible land . . . that is grassland, land that contains forbs, or shrubland (including improved rangeland and pastureland); or land that is located in an area that has been historically dominated by grassland, forbs, or shrubland; and has potential to serve as habitat for animal or plant populations of significant ecological value if the land is retained in the current use of the land; or restored to a natural condition" In the Farm Bill, the requirement for enrolled land to "serve as habitat" appears mandatory but wording in the interim final rule seems headed in a different direction. For example, prairie now ranks well in Missouri but monoculture exotic grasses of no significant value to wildlife are eligible and will be enrolled if there isn't enough prairie offered (which there won't be since over 99% has already been converted). In addition, cost-share for conversion of fescue to prairie plantings isn't available. Only grasslands that do or could serve as habitat, if restored, should be eligible for the program.

Under Discussion of the Program (Page 29176), the 2 million acre cap for restored or improved grassland and restoration is defined in a way that might not have anything at all to do with biodiversity or prairie. First, native prairie is omitted in the characterization of grasslands in view of the cap, and restoration simply says move the grassland toward a 'higher function' which is a subjective term that could mean entirely different things to different people.

Under Provisions that Apply (page 29178), there is reference to protection for nesting birds that are in significant decline and USDA decides whether there are such birds that need protection. State and Federal listed ground-nesting species of birds are well documented and should be recognized by USDA. Management protections should be incorporated in the plan of operation for each GRP tract as per direction in the Farm Bill.

In Summary of Provisions . . . (page 29178), the purpose of GRP is established but the word "natural" as defined by USDA opens the door to any planted grasses, whether exotic or native. Therefore, the positive sounding emphasis of the program which is stated as "preserving native and natural species" could erode implementation of the biodiversity intent established by Congress since bermudagrass, bahiagrass, fescue and many other grassland species are often planted but do not contribute significantly to conservation of wildlife. The word "natural" as currently defined, used in conjunction with "native," could mislead some to think that "natural" grasses would achieve the biodiversity emphasis of GRP established in the Farm Bill. USDA should correct any chance of misdirecting the program by defining natural to mean grasses that are compatible with wildlife conservation within each state or region.

Elsewhere in Summary of Provisions . . . (page 29179), there is a comment about "maintaining the viability of the grassland" - viability needs to be defined to include species

diversity of the stand upon enrollment. In addition, USDA seeks input on whether a participant should be able to maintain the current cover even if it is a monoculture of a "less desirable species" versus requiring restoration. USDA further states a reluctance to require restoration because of the cost. This is illogical since native grass plantings cost less than tree plantings which is a USDA staple in WRP, CRP and other programs. In fact, FSA is cost-sharing many prairie and savanna plantings under CP-25 in CRP. USDA should also consider working with participants that have enrolled grasslands of low biodiversity to manage them toward higher biodiversity as an enrollment criterion.

Also in Summary of Provisions . . . (page 29180), there is discussion on ranking criteria that encourages participants to restore their land back to a "natural or native" plant community. Given the definition of "natural," this definition needs to have something that qualifies the cover as beneficial to wildlife species that are in decline and in need of attention.

In the Rule, specific suggestions are:

1415.1 Purpose. Write the purpose in a way that is consistent with the intent of Congress (in the context of providing wildlife habitat).

1415.2 Administration. Qualify the "program demand" part of the allocation formula by placing demand in the context of acres that achieve all program areas of emphasis so that the limited funding does the most good nationally.

1415.3 Definitions. Redefine "natural" to say "a native or an introduced species that is adapted to the ecological site, provides benefits to wildlife species on decline and can perpetuate itself in the community without cultural treatment or invasive impact on adjacent lands." Also, add a definition of "viability" (of grasslands) that clarifies this is the grassland species diversity present on enrollment in the program. Redefine restoration to mean improvements to the grassland in the direction of the functions and values that would have been provided by native grasslands in the area. Lastly, broaden the definition of restored grassland to include conversion of grasslands dominated by exotic species to diverse native species.

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1415.8 Establishing priority for enrollment of properties. Item (c) discussed ranking criteria and "native and natural grassland" and, again, the use of "natural" as defined greatly diminishes the biodiversity emphasis of GRP and the definition should be corrected to clarify that these grasslands provide habitat for declining grassland species.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,


for JOHN D. HOSKINS
DIRECTOR

JDH:BW:cgl

cc: Bill White
Private Land Programs Supervisor