



American Forest Foundation

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April 17, 2009

Director Greg Johnson
Financial Assistance Programs Divisions
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Room 5237, P.O. Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

RE: Docket ID NRCS-2009-0001

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Interim Final Rule for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) as contained in the *Federal Register* on January 16, 2009.

The American Forest Foundation is a nonprofit conservation organization that strives to ensure the continuation of America's family forests. Each year we train 30,000 educators and help 91,000 landowners to manage over 24 million acres of forests for wildlife, habitat, recreation and sustainable products.

We are pleased with the strong inclusion of family forests owners (non industrial private forest owners) in the new WHIP rules, as directed by Congress. America's family forest owners are the largest forest ownership group in the U.S., owning over 264 million acres of forests and covering a significant portion of the country's land base. These owners are essential players in your efforts to address conserve wildlife habitat. Forests provide most of the habitat for endangered and threatened species in the U.S. Additionally, forest management is essential in efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change on wildlife. Without healthy, productive forests that are adapting to climate change, we will see significant losses in wildlife.

We offer the following comments to improve the implementation of the program for family forest owners, enabling greater participation and greater conservation benefits from the program. In particular, we focus our comments on 2 key issues:

- Ensuring national and state priorities for WHIP implementation are consistent with national environmental goals and state forestry priorities
- Ensuring family forest owner eligibility under the historically underserved producers provisions

Consistent National and State Priorities

National Priorities (Section 636.5). We recommend several improvements to the national priorities laid out in this section to more clearly reflect national environmental priorities and the recently outlined priorities of Secretary Vilsack. In particular, we recommend expanding the reference to invasives in paragraph (a)(3) to generally references threats to habitat, this could include invasives, other insects and disease, wildfires, or other natural disasters. Not only would this change make the priorities consistent with the national priorities for forest conservation outlined in Section 8001 of the 2008 Farm Bill, it reflects the broad array of the challenges we face with respect to conservation of forested habitat.

Additionally, we strongly recommend setting climate change adaptation in forested habitats as a national priority. WHIP can serve as an essential tool for assisting family forest owners with management activities that help their forests adapt in a changing climate and simultaneously help ensure wildlife habitat is protected. Given Secretary Vilsack's emphasis on USDA's role in addressing climate change, this would be consistent with overall USDA goals.

Establishing Priority for enrollment in WHIP (Section 636.6). In establishing specific priorities for program enrollment, we strongly urge consideration of the priorities laid out in State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies. Coordination with state forestry agencies in the implementation of WHIP and other conservation programs is critical for achieving comprehensive, landscape scale conservation of habitat. Habitat conservation only makes sense when it is accomplished on a landscape scale, since wildlife don't respect ownership boundaries. With this in mind, we urge amending paragraph (c)(2) in this section to include forest priority areas.

Historically Underserved Producers

Definitions (Section 636.3). It is unclear whether family forest owners qualify as historically underserved producers. Historically underserved producers are defined as "beginning farmers and ranchers," "socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers," or "limited resource farmers and ranchers." While some might interpret the term "farmer" to include family forest owners, to avoid confusion, we recommend clearly stating family forest owner inclusion wherever these terms are used.

Just like farmers and ranchers, forest landowners face similar issues, getting their business up and running, hiring professional help from a forester to help guide the running of their "operation," and in many cases, investing up front in forest management activities that will improve their forest investment with little return for many years.

Just like farmers, family forest owners are aging—one out of every five acres of family forest land is owned by an individual over the age of 75. These families want to pass their land on to the next generation in their family or to a new owner that will be a good steward of their land. Assistance to help these beginning landowners will be essential to this transition and ultimately help ensure the land stays in forest.

Additionally, many family forest owners face the same challenges of limited resources and social disadvantages as traditional farmers and ranchers. Clarifying this point will eliminate any uncertainty in the field regarding forest owner eligibility.

In addition to these two priority areas, we offer the following suggestions to further improve program implementation.

Administration (section 636.2). We strongly support provisions that enable NRCS to enter agreements with partners to implement the program, including providing technical assistance. These agreements should also enable partners to cover costs of education and outreach to landowners in conjunction with the program.

WHIP Plan of Operations (Section 636.8). There should be a clear connection between the wildlife plan of operations and any forest management plan in place for family forest land. In many cases, the forest management plan, if it contains applicable guidance for wildlife habitat, should be sufficient in meeting the wildlife plan of operations requirements. This will prevent unnecessary duplication of planning efforts and streamline applications for family forest owners.

Accountability and monitoring requirements. While we recognize that the WHIP regulations themselves do not specify the accountability and program monitoring requirements, we encourage NRCS to track family forest owner participation in WHIP and all other conservation programs. It will also be important to track the conservation benefit from entering these lands, including acres of forest where management improvements were accomplished, habitat was improved, wildfire threats were reduced, and carbon sequestration was enhanced.

In conclusion, we greatly appreciate NRCS' leadership and commitment to family forest conservation and we look forward to working with you to successfully implement the WHIP and other conservation programs on family forest lands.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

/s/

Rita Neznok

Vice President, Public Affairs