

429

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF

444 North Capitol Street NW | Suite 340 | Washington DC 20001



202-624-5415 Phone | 202-624-5407 Fax | www.stateforesters.org

STATE FORESTERS

4/19/09

April 17, 2009

Mr. Gregory Johnson
Director, Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Room 5241, South Building
Washington, D.C. 20250-2890

Dear Mr. Johnson:

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is a non-profit organization comprised of the directors of all of the nation's state and territorial forest management agencies. Our members have a public trust responsibility for managing and protecting two-thirds of the nation's forestland, which is held in private or non-federal public ownership. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide the following comments regarding the Interim Final Rule for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) as contained in the *Federal Register* on January 16, 2009.

National Priorities (§ 636.5)

Considering the significant emphasis placed on non-industrial private forest lands in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill), NASF recommends the national priorities used in WHIP implementation be expanded to include other threats to wildlife habitat including catastrophic wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks and other natural disasters. Broadening these priorities to align with national forest conservation priorities identified in Section 8001 of the 2008 Farm Bill better reflects the broad threats facing forest habitat.

The nation's 264 million acres of family forest lands will be important migration corridors to help wildlife adapt to changing climates. To this end, WHIP national priorities should include promoting forest adaptation. In turn, selecting projects for financial and technical assistance should help family forest landowners install and implement adaptation practices that allows fish and wildlife habitat to respond to changing climates.

Establishing Priority for Enrollment in WHIP (§ 636.6)

The interim rules direct the State Conservationist to consider the relationship of WHIP projects to any established wildlife or conservation priority areas. NASF recommends amending 636.6(c)(2) to include priority forest areas or regions identified in the State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies required by section 8002 of the 2008 Farm Bill. Ranking considerations should prioritize projects which support strategies to address invasive species, catastrophic wildfire, insects and disease outbreaks and other threats to wildlife habitat that may be identified in the State-wide Strategies and State Wildlife Action Plans. State foresters are to complete the State-wide forest resource assessments and strategies by June 2010. Attention to forest resources in the WHIP should be immediate and not wait for completion of the state-wide assessments.

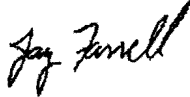
Reference to Landowner Categories

The Rule frequently references "farmers and ranchers." It is suggested that a collective reference to ownerships should also include nonindustrial private landowners. The absence of such might suggest that forest landowners are not covered by the Rule. Inserting "nonindustrial private forest owner" would also be appropriate in the definitions of "Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher" and "Socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher".

The definition for "Beginning Farmer and Rancher" should be broadened to include NIPF landowners. Twenty percent of the family forest lands in the U.S. are owned by individuals who are 75 years of age or older. As a result, a number of new private forest landowners are expected to assume ownership and—in many cases—will benefit from the assistance provided through WHIP.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of our recommendations and look forward to working with NRCS as the agency moves forward with program implementation. Please do not hesitate to contact us in the event you have questions as you move forwards in finalizing program rules.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jay Farrell".

Jay Farrell
Executive Director

429



National Association of
State Foresters

FAX

DATE	April 17, 2009
FAX	202-720-4265
TO	Director Greg Johnson
FROM	Jake Donnay, National Association of State Foresters
PAGES	3 including cover page
SUBJECT	WHIP Comments

Director Johnson:

Please find the enclosed comments regarding the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program from the National Association of State Foresters. Please do not hesitate to contact me in the event you have questions. I can be reached at jdonnay@stateforesters.org or (202) 624-5977.

Regards,
Jake