

# **STATE INITIATIVES**

## **BOBWHITE QUAIL**

### **Background:**

The Northern Bobwhite Quail (*Colinus virginianus*) is iconic and highly valued, yet populations have declined by more than 85% since the 1960's. The southeastern United States was considered premiere quail hunting habitat and quail were common. This drastic decline is due primarily to the loss of quality early successional habitat (i.e. native grasses, legumes, weeds, briars, bugs, and shrubs). Changes in agricultural practices, lack of management, and other land-use change, have led to dramatic fragmentation of high-quality habitats as well.

Research shows that closed canopy and/or unburned pine stands provide poor quality habitat for bobwhites, and other grassland species, and may also serve as ecological sinks (i.e. high predation rates) thereby reducing bobwhite survival, even on adjacent high-quality habitats. When appropriately applied, forest thinning and frequent prescribed fire mimic the ecosystem processes that once occurred naturally across landscapes to create and maintain savanna habitats.

In addition to quail, restoring this habitat type across the Pine Savanna landscape benefits numerous songbirds, rabbits, wild turkey, deer, and many other wildlife species, improves water quality, reduces soil erosion, and can enhance local economies by stimulating quail hunting and wildlife viewing. Practices will be directed at establishing and maintaining habitat for several at-risk species as well. In the Eastern United States these include pollinators, gopher tortoise, Henslowe's sparrow, Bachmann's sparrow, Prairie Warbler, Pine Snake, Speckled Kingsnake, Pocket Gopher, Indigo Snake, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, and Bog Turtle. Refer to the WLFW 2.0 Bobwhite Quail Map for the counties that are eligible for this initiative.

## **FERAL SWINE**

Feral swine have been sighted in most of the 67 counties in Alabama and can reproduce at an alarming rate. Sows can begin breeding at six months of age and produce up to four litters per year with each litter consisting of four to 12 piglets. Wild pig rooting can damage native plant communities that provide habitat and food sources for native wildlife species and cropping systems and productivity. In addition, they degrade water quality and pose a serious disease threat to livestock and humans.

### **Guidelines:**

Each trapping scenario (roughly 200 acres) will require a corral style trap in place on site that meets NRCS specifications. See Alabama NRCS guide sheet AL645G. NRCS will allow the use of remotely triggered trap doors that are moved to multiple trap locations. Landowners will not be required to have a remotely triggered door for each trap. One door may be rotated around multiple trap locations. In these cases, landowners will be required to have a corral trap meeting NRCS specification on multiple sites, but a door is not required at each location. The existence of the door must be verified at one trap location. This is also valid for multiple landowners. If multiple landowners are sharing a remotely triggered door system, then the door does not need to be verified on each landowner's property. Door only needs to be verified on one property. This initiative is available in all of Alabama's 67 counties.

## **HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED**

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) includes provisions that address the unique circumstances and concerns of socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran farmers [historically underserved (HU) producers]. The 2018 Farm Bill provides for voluntary participation, offers

incentives, and focuses on equity in accessing NRCS Programs. To accomplish these goals in Alabama, all HU participants receive a higher rate of financial assistance, and two fund pools have been established for individual competition: Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and New and Beginning Farmer. Definitions for qualifying individuals can be found in the previous 'General Program Guidance' section. All Resource Groups are eligible for assistance (although only one may be addressed per application) and Veterans of these qualifying individuals will receive priority in the ranking process.

## **HIGH TUNNEL**

### **Definition:**

A High Tunnel is a polyethylene covered structure at least 6 feet in height, which modifies the climate to create more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crops grown in the natural soil within the covered space. The purpose of the High Tunnel is to extend the crop growing season and improve plant quality.

### **Eligibility:**

- 1) Applicant should have open land that is in crop production or can be cropped.
  - a. Eligible crops: vegetables, fruits, flowers, bulbs.
- 2) An adequate water source must be present at the time of application to be eligible.
- 3) Irrigation history must be documented if associated irrigation practices are planned.

## **IRRIGATION**

Irrigation efficiency is improved via system conversions (traveling gun to center pivot) and retrofits (high pressure to low pressure or adding Variable Rate Technology). Irrigation history of two out of five years is mandatory for eligibility. Prime farmland that has no irrigation limitations with regards to the soil will be targeted. Additionally, retrofits will rank higher than conversions, and all conversions must be to low pressure systems. All of Alabama's 67 counties are eligible for this initiative. Irrigation Water Management (449) is encouraged to be planned with all contracts. Eligible Practices: 441, 442, 443, 449, 533, 642

## **SHORTLEAF**

The Shortleaf Pine Initiative was created in 2013 to address multiple threats affecting the shortleaf pine ecosystem. Shortleaf pine forests and associated habitats once covered a vast area of North America stretching from eastern Texas and Oklahoma to the eastern seaboard from New Jersey down to Florida. Over the last 30 years, this extensive shortleaf pine ecosystem has lost over 50% of its former acreage with most of the significant decline taking place east of the Mississippi River. All forestry practices are eligible; however, forest stand improvement practices of existing Shortleaf stands and the establishment of new stands will be prioritized. Eligible counties include Blount, Calhoun, Cherokee, Cleburne, Colbert, Cullman, DeKalb, Etowah, Fayette, Franklin, Jackson, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marshall, Morgan, Marion, St. Clair, Talladega, Walker and Winston.

## **CLIMATE SMART**

This initiative will focus on increasing soil health through planting cover crops. Alabama has over 1 million acres of cropland with soil organic matter lower than 1.25% and more than 375,000 acres with soil organic matter less than 1%. The incorporation of cover crops in crop rotations as well as reduced tillage should reverse the trend of OM depletion over time. Cover Crop (340) is the only eligible practice. All of Alabama's 67

counties are eligible, and cover crop mixes will be prioritized. Do not implement the practice on acreage already planting cover crops unless planning a more intensive management (i.e., going from a single species to multiple species cover).

## **STRIKEFORCE**

USDA's StrikeForce aims to increase investment in rural communities through intensive outreach and stronger partnership. USDA partners with rural communities and regions on locally supported projects. Unfortunately, 90 percent of America's persistent poverty counties are in rural America – and we can't allow these areas to be left behind. In 2010, USDA launched the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity – an effort to leverage partnerships in poverty-stricken rural areas to ensure that every community has equal access to USDA programs. There are 24 counties in Alabama that meet the criteria to be included in the StrikeForce Initiative. Additionally, state leadership has partnered with entities to further target these funds to address certain resource concerns for eligible individuals. Refer to the StrikeForce eligibility map for the counties that are eligible for this initiative.

### ***GRAZING:***

Any producer located in a StrikeForce county (map located in Appendix A) is eligible to apply for the Grazing StrikeForce Fund Pool. All grazing related practices are eligible. Socially Disadvantaged participants will receive priority ranking points.

### ***POARCH:***

This Fund Pool was established for the long-time partner of NRCS, The Poarch Band of Creek Indians. This federally recognized Tribe and associated members may apply for assistance to address their resource concerns. All practices are eligible for this Fund Pool.

### ***TUCCA:***

The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA) has partnered with NRCS to assist both Livestock and Vegetable producers in the Blackbelt Region to address their resource concerns.

Eligible Counties for both Grazing and Irrigation are Bibb, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Wilcox. All practices are eligible to address the associated resource concerns. Only applicants that worked with TUCCA and associated partners are eligible for applying in this fund pool.

### ***US FORESTRY ENDOWMENT:***

Alabama NRCS has initiated a collaborative effort to reach forestry landowners in West Alabama by partnering with the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and the Limited Resource Landowners Educational and Assistance Network (LRLEAN). Eligible counties are Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Wilcox. Small forestry landowners will be targeted to address their forest related resource concerns, and Socially Disadvantaged applicants will receive a higher ranking. All practices benefiting forest land are eligible,

but practices facilitating forest stand improvement on existing stands will be prioritized.

## **BIRMINGHAM/BESSEMER HIGH TUNNEL INITIATIVE**

The Urban High Tunnel Initiative is a collaborative effort between NRCS Alabama and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. This initiative was modeled after a successful pilot project that the Federation of Southern Cooperatives coordinated in Cleveland, Ohio. NRCS Alabama will provide financial assistance to urban farmers to install High Tunnels and supporting practices. Only Jefferson county producers are eligible, and the focal area can be found on the Alabama Urban High Tunnel Initiative map.

## **WHITE OAK INITIATIVE**

According to the US Forest Service's Forest Inventory, white oak regeneration is not keeping up with harvest of white oak sawtimber. The target landscape has mixed hardwood or mixed pine/hardwood uplands and mixed hardwood bottomlands with a significant component of white oak (*Quercus alba*). Ideally, this white oak component would not only include trees in a dominant/codominant position in the forest but also some trees in the intermediate canopy position and some regeneration in the sapling and seedling positions. Two other species in the white oak family are also at risk due to high value (harvesting) and low recruitment of smaller size classes: chinquapin oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*) and swamp chestnut oak (*Quercus michauxii*). These two species are included in this initiative. Eligible counties are Blount, Calhoun, Cleburne, Cherokee, Clay, Colbert, Cullman, DeKalb, Etowah, Fayette, Franklin, Jackson, Jefferson, Lamar, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marion, Marshall, Morgan, Pickens, Randolph, St. Clair, Shelby, Talladega, Tuscaloosa, Walker, Winston.

## **LONGLEAF PINE INITIATIVE**

### **Guidelines:**

Two fund pools will be available for the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) in Alabama:

- 1) Coastal Plain Longleaf, and
- 2) Montane Longleaf

The focus of the LLPI in Alabama will be the management of existing Longleaf Pine stands. This priority will be captured through the ranking process and burning/thinning applications will rank higher than tree establishment applications.

## **ON-FARM ENERGY INITIATIVE**

**Purpose:** The On-farm Energy Initiative will assist agricultural producers in two ways:

- 1) Identify measures to conserve energy on farm through the development of an Agricultural Energy Management Plan (AgEMP) (CPC 128), and
- 2) Provide financial assistance to implement recommended measures of an approved Energy Audit.

## **ORGANIC**

The goal of the Organic Initiative is to ensure that conservation technical and financial assistance are directed to applicants who grow or intend to grow USDA certified organic products. All conservation practices consistent with an Organic System Plan (OSP) are eligible for assistance.

## **NATIONAL WATER QUALITY INITIATIVE**

The National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation. NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds most in need and where farmers can use conservation practices to make a difference. Conservation systems include practices that promote soil health, reduce erosion, and decrease nutrient runoff, such as filter strips, cover crops, reduced tillage, and manure management systems. These practices not only benefit natural resources but enhance agricultural productivity and profitability by improving soil health and optimizing the use of agricultural inputs.

### ***NWQI Source Water Protection Area (SWPA):***

Eligibility: Pisgah Wellhead protection area

## **WORKING LANDS FOR WILDLIFE – GOPHER TORTOISE INITIATIVE**

**Purpose:** Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) will focus conservation dollars and wildlife expertise on the recovery of certain at-risk, threatened, or endangered wildlife species with Gopher Tortoise being one of seven species selected across the country. WLFW aims to keep at-risk species from needing to be listed as endangered wherever possible, and to hasten the recovery of those that are already endangered by using best available science and wildlife experts to jointly prioritize restoration actions on a regional scale. The Initiative demonstrates that conservation practices are fully compatible to support agriculture and productive wildlife habitat and economic viability.