

SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
FOR VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM  
STATE OF IOWA  
February 2015

BACKGROUND

The Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, to implement the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The program provides grants to State and Tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately-held farm, ranch, and forest land to make land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, and other compatible recreation and to improve fish and wildlife habitat on their land. Administrative authority for the program initially was delegated to the Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA awarded a VPA-HIP grant to the State of Iowa, through the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), in 2011, resulting in FSA preparing a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). FSA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Iowa program in March of 2011.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2014, the Secretary delegated administrative authority for the VPA-HIP to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). IDNR applied for and was awarded another grant. The NRCS is adopting the FSA 2011 Programmatic EA for the Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program for the State of Iowa. Through the 2011 grant, the IDNR established a new public access program known as the Iowa Habitat Access Program (IHAP) to provide more opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching, and other compatible wildlife related recreation. IDNR used grant funds to expand its Private Lands Program (PLP) to enroll more private lands than would otherwise have been possible, and make the lands available for public hunting access. It also afforded more landowners an opportunity to receive payments through the IHAP for opening their lands for public recreation.

NRCS is supplementing the 2011 EA to clarify the habitat improvement activities and analyze their potential effects, paying particular attention to compliance with the Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act.

NEED FOR ACTION

The need for the 2014 VPA-HIP grant in Iowa remains substantially the same as the 2011 grant. As stated in FSA's Final Programmatic EA, the purpose of the Proposed Action is to use VPA-HIP grant funds to increase public access and improve wildlife habitat on private lands in the state of Iowa. The need for the Proposed Action is to: increase the value realized by private landowners for wildlife populations inhabiting their property; increase the types and amounts of public access on qualified private land; and

promote wildlife habitat restoration and improvement of watershed conditions on private properties.

The overall objective of this VPA-HIP grant is to develop and implement habitat improvements identified in comprehensive wildlife management plans covering 22,000 acres of private land, and make those lands available for public hunting for a period of 3 to 10 years. Game species of most interest to IDNR on managed lands include pheasant, quail, turkey, dove and deer.

## PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

### Proposed Action:

Through this grant, the IDNR Wildlife Bureau proposes to provide technical assistance to landowners to develop wildlife habitat plans and to pay for habitat improvements identified in those plans on 22,000 acres. In exchange for IDNR services and funding landowners will sign a contract allowing public hunting access for 3 to 10 years. Activities this grant will pay for include, grass and forb establishment, tree/shrub establishment, burning, disking, spraying, interseeding, foodplots, edge feathering, timber stand improvement, and wetland restoration. The program will be available statewide to maximize landowner participation. A portion of the funds will be used for signing properties and making the locations of enrolled lands available to the hunting public as well as evaluating program success.

The Iowa IDNR will use VPA-HIP funding along with State Habitat Stamp funds to enroll approximately 22,000 acres of land on an estimated 140 sites in the IHAP. The Pilot IHAP was initiated through a VPA-HIP grant Iowa received through the 2008 Farm Bill. Due to the program's overwhelming success, noted through hunter and landowner satisfaction evaluation efforts completed through the three year pilot effort, a second VPA-HIP grant is being sought to expand the original efforts. Funding will be used to provide incentive payments for the completion of habitat improvement projects on private land in exchange for the site being open to the public for hunting recreation.

The Iowa IDNR will use the existing PLP staff to promote and administer IHAP. The PLP Coordinator will administer the VPA-HIP grant and the IHAP program. PLP field staff are co-located in USDA offices and are covered under a Memorandum of Agreement which has been in place in one form or another (i.e. Contribution Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding) since the inception of the program in 2000. The PLP staff provide technical and financial assistance to landowners interested in improving and managing wildlife habitat on their property. Since 2000 the IDNR's PLP has provided habitat improvement assistance to an average of 1,000 landowners each year on 520,000 acres of private land.

Management activities will generally be conducted in accordance with NRCS conservation practice standards (CPS). The primary practices for habitat restoration or enhancement will include the following NRCS CPS's:

- 314 – Brush management
- 315 – Herbaceous Weed Control
- 327 – Conservation Cover
- 340 – Cover Crop
- 338 – Prescribed Burning
- 490 – Tree/Shrub Site Preparation
- 550 – Range Planting
- 612 – Tree planting
- 644 – Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 645 – Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 657 – Wetland Restoration
- 666 – Forest Stand Improvement

The practice standards and specifications are found at:

[http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg\\_locator.aspx?map=US](http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx?map=US). In order to access the standards: click on the state, county; select "Section IV" from the pick list, and then "Conservation Practices". Practices are listed in alphabetical order.

#### No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would result in the 2014 VPA-HIP project not being implemented in the State of Iowa. Expansion of the IHAP would not occur and habitat improvement projects would not be conducted on enrolled acreage. The No Action Alternative does not meet the need of the Proposed Action, but serves as reference point to illuminate the net difference in effects between those that will occur without NRCS action and those that will occur by implementing the proposed action.

### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

This supplemental EA analyzes potential environmental impacts at a broad program scale, identifying the qualitative effects that are a reasonably foreseeable result of each alternative. NRCS will rely on environmental review processes to be conducted by IDNR on each site that will identify the resources present and the potential effect of planned actions and provide for site-specific avoidance or other mitigation of adverse effects as required by NRCS policies.

#### Impacts of the Proposed Action:

PLP staff will conduct a site visit with landowners that express interest in enrolling property in IHAP to evaluate existing habitat conditions. Staff will develop comprehensive wildlife management plans incorporating landowner and program objectives. The PLP staff will complete an IHAP application for landowners who are interested in applying to participate in the program. The application will include the tasks

necessary to carry out the comprehensive wildlife management plan and the associated incentive payment costs. The DNR will use a ranking process to prioritize which tracts of land are enrolled into the program. The application process will prioritize factors including but not limited to: whether or not the tract is located within an area identified in the Iowa Wildlife Action Plan as High Opportunity Areas for Cooperative Conservation Actions; proximity to existing public lands; size of tract; quality of habitat (proportion of the tract in habitat, whether regular management is conducted and habitat is appropriate for species of interest); whether the land is or will be enrolled in a USDA conservation program; and length of contract landowner is willing to sign. All applications will be reviewed by an internal review committee. Applications will be evaluated and landowners notified of their application's acceptance or denial into the program within 30 days of submission of their applications. DNR will enter into an IHAP contract with those landowners with successful applications. DNR staff will coordinate the implementation of habitat improvement tasks identified in the IHAP application directly with landowners or with private contractors. An incentive payment will be made for associated habitat improvement practices through VPA-HIP funds as well as State Habitat Stamp funds. As stated previously, habitat improvement activities which will qualify for an incentive payment include but are not limited to grass and forb establishment, tree/shrub establishment, food plots, edge feathering, habitat management activities, burning/disking/spraying/interseeding), timber stand improvement, and wetland restoration. In exchange for this wildlife/habitat management and incentive payment, landowners will be required to allow public hunting access on lands enrolled in the DNR's Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP). Landowners may choose a contract length of 3 to 10 years. Habitat management activities may take place in any year of the contract as determined necessary within the comprehensive wildlife management plan.

Habitat improvement activities carried out with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds will generally follow NRCS conservation practice standards that have been adopted for use within the State of Iowa for the primary purpose of restoring healthy ecosystems and/or creating suitable habitat for desired wildlife species. Each CPS contains information on the purpose of the practice, conditions where the practice is to be applied, and sets forth the minimum quality criteria that must be met during implementation. To illustrate the chain of expected direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of applying each conservation practice NRCS has developed network effects diagrams according to the standard for the land use on which it is intended to be applied. Copies of the network effects diagrams are available on the NRCS website.<sup>1</sup>

Habitat improvement projects using NRCS CPS for the purpose of restoring healthy ecosystems and improving habitat on existing agricultural and non-industrial private forestland fall within existing NRCS NEPA categorical exclusions. Specifically, the

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<sup>1</sup> *Practice Network Effect Diagrams* are available at [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/cp/ncps/?cid=nrcs143\\_026849](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/cp/ncps/?cid=nrcs143_026849)

majority of projects will fall in one or more of the following categories of actions found to have no individual or cumulative significant effect on the human environment:

- Planting appropriate herbaceous and woody vegetation, which does not include noxious weeds or invasive plants, on disturbed sites to restore and maintain the sites ecological functions and services;
- Restoring an ecosystem, fish and wildlife habitat, biotic community, or population of living resources to a determinable pre-impact condition;
- Undertaking minor agricultural practices to maintain and restore ecological conditions in floodplains after a natural disaster or on lands impacted by human alteration (e.g., mowing, haying, grazing, fencing, off stream watering facilities, and invasive species control that are undertaken when fish and wildlife are not breeding, nesting, rearing young, or during other sensitive timeframes).

The focus of the habitat improvements will be on promoting native species and conducting the management necessary to maintain a high level of plant biodiversity. Each site will be evaluated individually to establish appropriate management objectives. IDNR personnel will determine what type of restoration or enhancement is possible based on existing land use, historical land cover, and soil types.

NRCS designated IDNR as its non-federal representative to conduct informal consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for actions to be implemented with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds. IDNR has completed consultation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) concurred that the proposed actions are not likely to adversely affect species listed or proposed for listing. If additional consultation needs are identified, IDNR will re-initiate consultation with USFWS and has agreed to avoid actions resulting in adverse effects.

IDNR has entered into a programmatic agreement with the Iowa State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) which provides a methodology for identifying historic properties. This agreement describes a screening process used by field biologists to determine how and when to consult with the Iowa SHPO. Thirty-three work activities, which are defined in this agreement, are excluded from SHPO review if they pass the screening requirements. The agreement has been reviewed in regards to the practices planned to be used in conjunction with the VPA-HIP program. The majority of the foreseeable practices fall under practices that are exempt from SHPO review through this agreement, as most projects are expected to be implemented on previously disturbed ground.

Any required project modifications will be discussed with the IHAP participant and must be agreed to before the project can proceed. If a project must go to construction bid, the modifications must be included in bid specifications. If the project cannot be modified to mitigate for the adverse action, the action will be abandoned.

Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

If the Iowa VPA-HIP is not implemented, the State of Iowa will not expand the IHAP public access campaigns to provide new and expanded opportunities for upland game hunting and outdoor naturalist activities. The IHAP will not have the capacity to further satisfy public demand with improved opportunities for the citizens of Iowa, in addition to assist in the management of wildlife for private landowners.

The program currently provides public access to over 8,000 acres for hunting opportunities. Without action, the forecasted additional 22,000 acres on 140 sites would not be enrolled into the program and made available to for public access and habitat needs identified in comprehensive wildlife plans will not be met.

AGENCIES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

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