

Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI)

Under a new Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, USDA will work with farmers, ranchers and other landowners to manage portions of their land to enhance habitat for migrating birds. The initiative includes portions of eight States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas. USDA will use conservation programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which is coordinating with State and private organizations. NRCS will assist producers in developing, enhancing and managing habitat for the migratory birds expected to pass through two major North American flyways to the Gulf in the coming months. In cooperation with its conservation partners, NRCS has identified priority areas in each state that offer the greatest habitat potential for migrating bird populations. NRCS anticipates improving habitat on up to 100,000 to 150,000 acres based on projected producer participation. The signup will run from June 28 to August 1. Interested producers should contact their local USDA Service Center for additional information.

Background

Migration is the regular seasonal journey undertaken by many species of birds in response to changes in food availability, habitat, or weather. Successful migration often depends on the availability of key food resources at points along the migration route. During migration, stop-over and staging areas are important for migratory birds to “fuel up” for the long-distance journey. Most shorebirds travel north each year to historical breeding areas in the arctic and subarctic where disturbance is low and food availability is high. Later in the year, they travel from these arctic breeding grounds to winter in areas as far south as the tip of South America. In the coming months, they will instinctively be looking to stop for food and rest in the marshes and coastlands of the northern Gulf of Mexico. These migratory birds are expected to pass through major North American flyways, including the Central and Mississippi, in the coming months. The Central Flyway merges with the Mississippi Flyway between Missouri and the Gulf of Mexico. About 40% of all North American migrating waterfowl and shorebirds use these major flyways. Breeding ducks from central Canada arrive in the region surrounding the Gulf of Mexico in late fall (November) and usually spend the winter on flooded crop fields, reservoirs and refuges.

The NRCS Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative will focus on maximizing and enhancing habitat on private lands for the migratory birds most immediately affected by the loss of habitat as a result of the oil spill. Emphasis will be placed on shorebirds, Neotropicals and waterfowl species that use shallow water and mudflat/sandflat habitats.

Where does the Initiative apply?

The Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative will maximize migratory bird habitat and food resources on private lands in portions of eight States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas.

These States are in major North American flyways, the primary routes shorebirds and waterfowl follow in their annual migration to and through the Gulf region. Each of these States has identified priority counties in the flyways where agricultural lands and conservation easements could be enhanced to maximize habitat and food resources for migrating bird populations. These states, due to their more southerly latitudes, provide critical wintering habitat for a significant number of waterfowl, wading birds, sparrows and other birds considered short distance migrants who are escaping cold temperatures farther north. These areas are also important agricultural regions for grain crops such as rice, corn, soybean, wheat, and milo. These same areas are "seed bank rich" with native annual grasses (wild millets) and forbs (duck potato, yellow nutsedge, smartweeds) that will quickly respond to properly managed soil and water enhancements.

When does the Initiative begin?

Because some species arrive in the Gulf as early as mid-July, the need for enhanced habitat and food resources is urgent. NRCS will begin working with applicants to develop or enhance habitat conditions starting as early as mid-July. The signup will run from June 28 to August 1, 2010.

How will the Initiative work?

NRCS will use its technical expertise and the financial assistance from existing Farm Bill programs to enhance wetlands, maximizing habitat and available food resources. NRCS has thousands of wetland conservation easements enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in the initiative states. Through the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, NRCS will help farmers, ranchers, and other landowners implement additional management strategies on these easements to optimize habitat on coastal and inland wetlands for migratory birds and other species. Using the technical expertise of two other programs—the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)—NRCS will work with producers to enhance available habitat. Eligible lands include wetlands farmed under natural conditions, existing farmed wetlands and prior converted croplands. Rice fields are particularly suited for this initiative, as are aquaculture farms (catfish and crayfish) no longer in production, since they can easily be flooded to provide these immediate habitat conditions. Shallow water, ranging from mudflats to less than one foot, is key to creating suitable habitat. Most shorebirds forage in water less than 4 inches deep; most other water birds, including waterfowl, forage in water less than 12 inches deep.

NRCS will provide financial and technical resources to agricultural producers to install practices which control water levels and enhance habitat to attract migratory birds. NRCS has identified three essential practices (along with supporting practices) to achieve this. NRCS anticipates improving habitat on up to 100,000 to 150,000 acres based on expected producer participation.