

WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM OKLAHOMA IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

INTRODUCTION

In 1947, Aldo Leopold wrote, "*Everyone ought to be dissatisfied with the slow progress of conservation on the land. Our 'progress' still consists largely of letterhead pieties and convention oratory. The only progress that counts is that on the actual landscape of the back forty, and here we are still slipping two steps backward for each stride forward*". This statement has often been quoted over the last 50 years, usually followed by a remark about how much truth these words still hold today. Perhaps, because of recent farm bill conservation provisions and efforts on the part of other federal, state, and private agencies and groups, we are closer to making this an archaic statement than ever before. The opportunities for stepping forward are available and the wildlife partnership in Oklahoma will make the best possible use of WHIP and other available programs for the benefit of the state's fish and wildlife resources.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF OKLAHOMA FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITATS

Fish and wildlife habitats in Oklahoma are determined by vegetative cover types and land uses. National Resources Inventory (NRI) data describes the following major cover types within the state: Cropland - 11,500,000 acres; Rangeland - 15,060,000 acres; Pastureland - 7,100,000 acres; and Forestland - 6,500,000 acres. Duck and Fletcher (1943) described 15 distinct vegetative cover types that strongly influence the wildlife populations of the state. Fishery habitat is provided by over 250,000 farm ponds providing approximately 500,000 acres of surface water. NRI data also describes 124,000 acres of aquatic habitat in small and intermediate streams throughout the state. These totals do not include the hundreds of thousands of acres of water in larger rivers and lakes across the state. Over 43 million acres (97 percent) of these lands are in private ownership and virtually all of it is used for some type of agricultural production (typically production of livestock, timber, hay, and crops).

OKLAHOMA FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCE ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Many of the current trends seen on private agricultural lands today tend to be more detrimental to wildlife than the agricultural operations found on the same lands three to four decades ago. A major shift from diversified farms with good interspersed cover types to a more simplified agricultural landscape dominated by crop and pasture monocultures has reduced the number and diversity of many wildlife species associated with agricultural

lands (Farris and Cole, 1981). Remaining native habitats on rangeland and forestland have been negatively impacted by overgrazing and poor management practices that destroy required food and cover for wildlife. Riparian habitats along streams and rivers have also been negatively impacted by livestock use and encroachment by intensive crop and pasture production. The elimination or narrowing of riparian corridors has adversely impacted terrestrial habitat and associated stream aquatic systems. Collectively, the impacts have resulted in the loss of biodiversity at both the species and community levels.

OKLAHOMA OBJECTIVES FOR WHIP

The detrimental impacts described above typically occur because fish and wildlife habitat on privately owned lands are considered to be a by-product of agricultural land use. The status of wildlife has been closely tied to agricultural economics and the intensity of land use. Agricultural landowners have production goals and the bottom line is profit with maintenance of the land resource base over time (Sebert 1985).

Because of landowners economic and production oriented goals, we believe that it is unreasonable to assume that large scale changes in existing agricultural land use toward intensive wildlife habitat development will occur through implementation of the WHIP program alone. This is especially true where cost-share practices, rather than incentive payments, will be emphasized. It should also be noted that other farm bill programs, including WRP, CRP, and EQIP, contain opportunities for fish and wildlife habitat development with incentives that may be at least as attractive to landowners as WHIP. While these programs should be complimentary rather than competitive, it is reasonable to assume that many potential WHIP applicants will utilize other available programs to accomplish their goals.

McConnell (1981) identified four key points in successful wildlife habitat development through private lands programs: (1) Programs must be acceptable to landowners. Therefore, their interests, benefits, and their role in making the program a success must be carefully considered; (2) The program must be compatible with the primary land use of the land in question; (3) Programs are most successful when habitat can be made suitable with little or no costs to the owner; (4) Habitat type is an influential factor and least successful when applied to intensively used agricultural lands. These key points will influence our efforts to meet the following objectives for implementing WHIP in Oklahoma.

Objective (1) Provide statewide technical and financial assistance in developing fish and wildlife habitat as a viable secondary use of land that is currently devoted to agricultural production.

Objective (2) Provide statewide technical and financial assistance in developing fish and wildlife habitat as a primary use of the land where landowners are willing to forego agricultural production in favor of more intensive fish and wildlife habitat management.

OKLAHOMA FISH AND WILDLIFE PRIORITIES

We propose to implement the WHIP program statewide on all offered lands that would provide high quality benefits as determined by the WHIP ranking criteria. The goal is to emphasize restoration, enhancement, or protection efforts on areas of farms and ranches that will maximize fish and wildlife benefits while minimizing the loss of agricultural production. At the same time, provisions in the ranking criteria will elevate the status of applications involving targeted resource areas and/or species. As an example, opportunities to improve habitat for the lesser prairie chicken on short grass prairies of the High Plains Region would receive additional points in the ranking process. The priorities, rationale for selection, and associated practices for achieving fish and wildlife habitat benefits in Oklahoma are presented below.

Priority 1 - Restore and protect native habitats with an emphasis on prairie ecosystems.

Rangeland still makes up over 40 percent of the land area of Oklahoma. Consequently, this cover type influences the overall health of wildlife resources more than any other vegetation. Virtually all rangeland is used for intensive livestock production. Overgrazing and poor management on much of this land has diminished the quantity and quality of food and cover for wildlife.

Several cost-share practices are available that can improve habitat on these lands without sacrificing livestock production. The selected priority practices and benefits to wildlife are as follows: Brush Management - Species such as Eastern red cedar and mesquite have invaded over 3 million acres (20 percent) of native prairie in Oklahoma. These invaders have changed the kind, amount, condition, and interspersions of habitats. Native plants and animals have declined or been eliminated over much of this area. Invasion of these species shades out forage plants for wildlife and livestock and reduces stocking rates and carrying capacities. Cost-share for brush management would benefit wildlife and provide increased forage production for livestock. This is an excellent example of habitat restoration that is compatible with the landowners objectives. Prescribed Burning - Burning is an effective, relatively inexpensive method of controlling excessive brush and improving forage for wildlife and livestock. Forbs and legumes in the plant community increase and stimulate seed and insect production. Most indigenous wildlife species such as deer, quail, turkey, rabbit, prairie chicken, songbirds, raptors, and furbearers benefit from burning as long as a mosaic of nesting and protective cover is protected. Landowners are typically receptive to

this practice, especially where cost-share and technical assistance are provided. Fire Break - This practice would be utilized as a necessary companion practice to prescribed burning. Range Seeding - Re-seeding of native grasses, forbs, and legumes on poor condition rangeland is often the most effective and timely method of restoring desirable habitat. This practice would have to be accompanied by fencing to restrict livestock and would most often be used on relatively small areas or where landowners were willing to defer grazing until the seeding was established. Fencing - This practice would be used to restrict grazing on re-seeded areas, protect nesting habitat, protect critically eroding areas having good habitat potential, or as part of a grazing management system that had special provisions for wildlife.

Priority 2 - Restore and protect buffers and corridors.

Buffers and corridors, as defined in this proposal, include lands that are directly adjacent to water bodies such as streams, ponds, and wetlands. Buffers are important wildlife habitats because they provide reliable water supplies, increase wildlife diversity through interspersed distinct plant communities, and provide important travel corridors. Associated vegetation can also improve fish habitat by moderating water temperatures. Overgrazing by livestock and encroachment for crop and pasture production are primarily responsible for the deteriorated condition of these habitats.

Priority practices that can improve or restore these productive buffer and corridor habitats include: Riparian Buffer - This practice provides general guidance and management recommendations on zone widths, types of vegetation, and environmental benefits. Fencing and Use Exclusion - Fencing of buffer areas requires relatively small areas of land with a tremendous potential for habitat improvement. These practices would be used to exclude livestock grazing or crop production immediately next to streams, ponds, and wetlands. The fencing practice would provide multiple benefits including nesting cover, improved fish habitat, travel corridors, and streambank or shoreline erosion protection. However, alternative livestock water sources must be considered in order to make it attractive to landowners. Tank or Trough - Cost-share for freeze-proof tanks in combination with fenced buffers around farm ponds is one of the most attractive practices in terms of fish and wildlife benefits and landowner acceptance. Tree/Shrub Establishment - This practice would be used within the protected buffer areas to restore native tree and shrub species that have been lost to agricultural use or degraded by livestock and erosion damage. The benefits of re-establishing woody vegetation along riparian areas are documented above. Range Seeding - Re-establishment of native grasses, forbs, and legumes within the protected buffer would be accomplished with this practice.

Priority 3 - Increase habitat diversity within agricultural areas dominated by cropland and pastureland monocultures.

As stated earlier, farming practices of 30 to 40 years ago that resulted in good interspersed and variations in vegetative cover types have been replaced by large-scale plantings of one or two species that do not meet the habitat requirements of most indigenous wildlife. Almost 40 percent of the native plant communities in Oklahoma have been converted to intensive pasture and crop production. These changes are particularly noticeable in the central and western part of the state where, as part of the "wheatbelt", entire landscapes are dominated by a monoculture of annually planted small grains.

Once again, it should be pointed out that large scale changes in land use are not anticipated through WHIP implementation. However, there are opportunities to improve habitat diversity within these monocultures by establishing trees, shrubs, and herbaceous vegetation using a multiple-use approach or in combination with programs such as WRP and CRP where there are greater incentives to restore natural vegetation on larger areas.

Practices that would be emphasized under this priority include: Range Seeding - This practice would be used to encourage planting of native warm season grasses, forbs, and legumes on existing or new Grass Waterways, Contour Field Strips, and odd areas such as corners in fields under center pivot irrigation systems. Wind Breaks, Hedgerow Planting, and Tree Planting - Multiple benefits to wildlife and soil resources would be gained from installation of these practices around field boundaries and on small, odd areas adjacent to fields.

As a final statement on priority resources and practices, we want to re-emphasize that all good quality habitat projects will receive consideration. In particular, wetland restoration, enhancement, and creation projects were not specifically addressed (with the exception of buffer areas) because a multitude of other farm bill programs, Fish and Wildlife Service programs, and Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation programs already emphasize this important resource. However, we would not hesitate to utilize WHIP for these or other projects, if needed to accomplish wildlife habitat restoration goals.

OKLAHOMA WILDLIFE PARTNERSHIPS

Both long standing and new partnerships with resource agencies, private conservation groups, and landowner associations are in place to insure the success of WHIP in Oklahoma. Partners who are presently committed to cooperative efforts for implementing fish and wildlife programs in the 1996 Farm Bill include: The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Farm Services Agency (FSA), Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC), Oklahoma Forestry Services (OFS), Cooperative Extension Service (CES), Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD), Oklahoma Chapter of The Wildlife Society (OCTWS),

Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Quail Unlimited (QU), Ducks Unlimited (DU), Oklahoma Wild Turkey Federation (OWTF), Oklahoma Indian Tribes, Oklahoma Cattleman's Association (OCA), Oklahoma Farm Bureau, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Oklahoma Riparian Workgroup, Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group, The Noble Foundation, Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV), Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture (LMVJV), and the Sutton Avian Research Center.

All of the listed partners are expected to contribute to the successful implementation of WHIP and other important farm bill programs by informing landowners and respective members of their organizations about the benefits and opportunities available through these programs. Many of these groups are represented by membership on the State Technical Committee and will provide oversight on the expenditure of program funds and technical assistance.

Several state and federal agencies and conservation groups with responsibilities for management and protection of Oklahoma's natural resources will provide financial assistance, in-kind services, and/or technical assistance. These partners include ODWC, FWS, OCC, OFS, QU, DU, PLJV, LMVJV, and the Noble Foundation. More specific information on specific contributions of these groups is provided in the following section on funding needs.

As mentioned earlier, efforts to inform landowners will be shared by all of our partners. More specific responsibilities for information and education rest with CES, ODWC, FWS, FSA, and NRCS. Information fact sheets, slide programs, television programs, newspaper articles and group presentations have already been accomplished or are planned in the future. More intensive information activities will begin when the state funding allocation is finalized.

Biologists of ODWC and FWS will assist NRCS staff in ranking WHIP applications, assessing habitat, and developing WHIP plans. These agencies have principal responsibility for fish and wildlife resources in Oklahoma and have initiated strong wildlife programs on private lands.

Memorandums of Understanding and Cooperative Agreements are in place with ODWC, FWS, OCC, QU, DU, NWTF, and Oklahoma's conservation districts. These agreements provide for the interagency transfer of funds and/or shared staff positions, equipment, and technical assistance. We believe these agreements have been mutually beneficial and fully expect the benefits to continue.

Letters of support for WHIP have been received from six federal, state, and private conservation groups including: ODWC, FWS, QU, DU, OWTF, and OCTWS. Additional letters are being prepared, but did not arrive in time to meet the deadline for submitting this proposal.

OKLAHOMA WHIP RANKING CRITERIA

A copy of the ranking criteria that will be used to determine eligibility and to establish the order in which projects will be funded is included as Attachment (A) of this proposal. Some of the criteria used in the WRP ranking process is consistent with WHIP requirements and was utilized where appropriate. However, the WHIP program will be implemented on a much broader range of habitat types and additional criteria was needed to address all wildlife concerns. The intent was to develop criteria that is easily interpreted by field staff, provides clear-cut distinctions between applications, and minimizes subjectivity. Biologists of the ODWC and FWS will assist field offices in ranking WHIP applications. Their participation will increase the level of technical expertise and improve consistency.

OKLAHOMA HABITAT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Oklahoma has already developed several habitat appraisal guides for individual species and others are being developed. A sample copy of the guide for bobwhite quail is included as Attachment (B) of this proposal. We will use these guides in situations where landowners are interested in managing for specific wildlife species. In situations where landowners are more interested in improving the habitat for overall wildlife benefits, we will use the procedures as described in SCS Technical Note Number 413 - Wildlife Habitat Evaluation for Resource Management Systems. Dated September, 1993. These procedures evaluate the overall health and condition of habitat provided by major vegetative cover types.

OKLAHOMA FUNDING NEEDS

Several issues were considered before finalizing Oklahoma's request for WHIP funding. The first issue is the difficulty in anticipating landowner response in advance of the first sign-up. As stated earlier, many interested landowners can meet their goals for fish and wildlife habitat development through other farm bill programs that may provide greater incentives. The second issue is that there will be less than six months remaining in the fiscal year in which to obligate all funds. The third issue is the amount of funding that may be received for fish and wildlife initiatives under other programs such as EQIP and CRP. Funding for fish and wildlife has been approved under Oklahoma's EQIP plan, but the amount of funding is not yet known. The new CRP sign-up will strongly emphasize wildlife and the funding level is likely to be substantial. With these considerations in mind, we are requesting the following fund allocations for WHIP implementation in Oklahoma.

NRCS WHIP Financial Assistance (FA). Oklahoma is requesting \$1,200,000 in FA funds. These funds would be used to install the practices associated with priority fish and wildlife habitat resource concerns. In combination with the \$125,000 in FA funds available from other sources described below, this amount is expected to restore, enhance, or create high quality habitat on over 24,000 acres of agricultural land.

NRCS WHIP Technical Assistance (TA). Oklahoma's request for TA funding in the amount of \$240,000 (20% of FA funding request) would be used to develop informational materials promoting WHIP, train employees on wildlife management techniques, and contribute to the salaries of field staff involved in ranking applications, assessing habitat, developing plans, and providing follow-up assistance to landowners.

Other Sources of Financial Assistance (FA). Other NRCS funding sources for fish and wildlife include EQIP, CRP, and WRP. We anticipate at least \$200,000 in FA funding for fish and wildlife through approved statewide and priority area EQIP contracts. Oklahoma has also received \$1,700,000 in FA funds for the WRP program in fiscal year 1997. If only 25 percent (175,000 acres) of the state's 700,000 acres of 1997 expiring CRP contract lands were re-enrolled during the upcoming sign-up, we could still anticipate over \$5,000,000 in cost-share for establishing or enhancing wildlife habitat on private agricultural lands.

Partnership contributions to private lands wildlife habitat development include \$50,000 through the ODWC Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (also referred to as WHIP) and \$75,000 through the FWS Partners for Wildlife Program. These two funding sources are especially compatible with WHIP and will collectively add \$125,000 in FA to the combined effort on private land wildlife habitat development.

Other Sources of Technical Assistance (TA). The majority of TA will be in-kind services provided in the form of staff days of technical assistance to NRCS field offices and landowners. Other in-kind services will be provided in the form of informational and educational materials. Estimated contributions from other partners include: Staff days - ODWC, 375 days (\$67,500); FWS, 125 days (\$22,500); CES, 90 days (\$16,200); OCC, 30 days (\$5,400); Conservation Districts, 225 days (\$40,500); OFS, 125 days, (\$22,500); Noble Foundation, 60 days,(\$10,800); Other Groups, 30 days (\$5,400). Total, 1060 days (\$189,500). Materials and Equipment - ODWC, \$3000; FWS, \$1000; CES, \$3000; OCC, \$1000; Total, \$8,000. These figures represent a cumulative total TA contribution from other sources of \$197,500.

SUMMARY

As emphasized throughout this proposal, we will attempt to develop a WHIP program in Oklahoma that is acceptable to landowners, compatible with the primary use of the land, economically feasible, and beneficial to the wildlife resources of Oklahoma. Hopefully, landowner interest will make this a very successful program in Oklahoma.

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