

## Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program Subcommittee Meeting

July 20, 2011

Present were: Scott Wessel, Eric Zach, Paul Johnston, Brad Soncksen, Ritch Nelson and Rich Torpin.

We want to be ready on October 1 to start ranking applications in the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) or when the money is available.

Rich gave a PowerPoint presentation on the WHIP program.

One concern we have is that nearly every application that was received in the WHIP program has been funded and yet we still had to return money to our National Office. The Legacy Initiative is an EQIP special initiative to treat Biological Unique Landscapes (BUL). Certain management practices were unavailable in WHIP that are now available. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) local work groups were concerned that we have too many initiatives. The reason we have the Legacy Initiative in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is to dedicate to BUL. We might want to think about reducing the funds in the Legacy Initiative in the EQIP and increase it in WHIP.

Scott asked if with the initiatives we have been able to show producers that there is a positive correlation between grassland stewardship and wildlife. Through EQIP we have reached a lot of producers who would not have applied for WHIP. They have learned the benefits to wildlife and how it fits in with their grazing needs. EQIP has allowed us to reach places that WHIP could not. Scott would like the Legacy Initiative to remain in both programs. We did not spend our entire Legacy fund this past year (second year in a row). We allocated \$1,000,000 but spent \$737,697 in Fiscal Year 2011.

We do not know what our budget is going to be for EQIP or WHIP in 2012. Have not heard that we are going to have huge cuts, but at this point we do not know what is going to happen. If we are short of funds in 2012, Rich would like to be able to change the amount in the EQIP Legacy program.

Brad stated we need more applications in WHIP. The last three years we could have received the funding we requested. We may need to provide more WHIP training in our field offices.

Scott stated that we have a problem of inundating our Field Office employees with all the programs at one time. If you cut the legacy program in half we need to let people know that the money is still there in the WHIP to fund the projects. The committee was OK with cutting the legacy funds in half.

The Legacy Initiative has been a real success story. We have been delighted to have the opportunity to work with this program.

Local work group issue(s):

- No longer offer dams as a practice eligible for payment.

Scott is supportive of dams as an option. They do have value, where the site is appropriate and no threat to Endangered and Threatened species. Dams are great as stand-alone practices. Wildlife do use and hang out by the water, but we would hate to see a really good site excluded. It has been felt that the ranking changes over the years have minimized dams dominating the WHIP funds. We do not want to go back to the days where dams consumed the majority of our dollars.

Rich wanted to know if there is something we can do to the rankings? Ritch stated we have taken some steps on the ranking so ponds do not come out on top. Plus there is more workload on dams with the process of getting 404 permits. Brad stated we need to show the benefits to wildlife, i.e., habitat creation, what are the outcomes, what it is going to be used for. Rich proposed that the practice be written so that the important practices are completed before the pond is installed. Sometimes the contract is written and all that is completed is the pond. Paul also voiced his support for keeping the dams in WHIP contract. Rich said, "So I am hearing that you do not want to eliminate the dams. Correct?"

Scott – I have visited with the field Farm Bill biologists and they are comfortable with WHIP.

Rich provided everyone with a copy of the rankings. The rankings were discussed and recommendations made. Ritch and Rich will update the rankings, as discussed.

Ritch reminded everyone that the practice that must be in all WHIP applications is either upland or wetland management habitat. One of the key items is a requirement that if we have an intact native habitat that we do not alter it in any way other than to maintain or enhance.

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