

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)/Environmental Quality Incentives Program Meeting, Manhattan, September 13, 2012–Final Minutes

Attendance: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)—Mike Disney, Greg Kramos, and Tony Ifland; Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT)—Jim Pitman, Brad Rueschhoff, Cory Alderson, Dave Dalgren, Roger Wolf, Bob Culberson, Craig Curtis, Matt Smith; and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—Andy Burr.

Agenda and outcomes of the meeting were discussed. New Farm Bill, if passed, would combine Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). The NRCS is requesting recommendations on wildlife priorities, resource concerns to be addressed. Eligible areas, eligible land uses, practices, and ranking criteria.

Wildlife Priorities—Old WHIP focused on upland game birds, Threatened and Endangered (T&E), and priority native communities. General consensus from the group for re-tooling WHIP to address priority landscapes and associated species. Grasslands were suggested as the highest priority. Concern was raised about reducing focus on wetlands, but overall the group thought other programs, (Wetlands Reserve Program [WRP], and Continuous Conservation Reserve Program [CCRP]) will still be the most viable alternative to address wetland issues.

Although prairie-chickens are a “flagship” species and are high priority, the group decided to focus on all grassland species identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need by the Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan. This would hopefully begin to change the planning mindset that traditionally is based on single species needs to planning efforts that consider ecosystem needs.

Resource Concerns—Group identified “Fish and Wildlife—Threatened and Endangered Species: Declining Species, Species of Concern” as the only resource concern to be addressed. All concerns previously addressed with WHIP were thought to be covered by this concern.

Eligible Areas/Eligible Land Use—Much discussion on eligible areas and several maps were reviewed: land cover, species ranges, priority areas, and intact grassland habitat. Decision was not to define areas on a map, but allow the planner to address grassland species of greatest need on appropriate landscapes such as intact grasslands, expired CRP, savanna restoration, hayfields, native hay meadows, and other areas supporting grassland species. Species range maps and priority area maps would be only used in the ranking process to focus resources to the highest priority locations. Eligible land uses based on the National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH) were determined to be the following:

- 1) Crop (to ensure expired CRP is included and allowing conversion to native grass)
- 2) Grazed Range
- 3) Hay
- 4) Native or Naturalized Pasture (savanna areas particularly important for quail)
- 5) Pasture (conversion of brome to native)
- 6) Wildlife (land devoted to wildlife rather than agriculture production)

Eligible Practices—Current WHIP practice list was reviewed and modified. (draft copy attached). In the future, there might be an opportunity for a payment scenario for a liquid feeding station for cattle using seresia and biofuel byproducts (K.C. Olsen, Kansas State, is currently working on this). This might be a good candidate for a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) project.

Discussion on how to place more emphasis on patch burning was discussed. Currently can be done but payment rate is only slightly higher as other burning rotations. Since patch burning requires a higher level of management and knowledge, a higher payment level should be established. The group recommends the NRCS considers developing a higher payment scenario for patch burning under CPs 645, Upland Wildlife Habitat Management, or CP 338, Prescribed Burning.

Justification is based on the fact that it takes nearly the same amount of time and planning to burn all acres within a unit as it does a portion of a unit, particularly the Flint Hills where stopping fire and keeping other fires off a unit is a greater challenge. The group recommends a payment equal to the normal prescribed burning rate times the burn frequency in years. For example, if burning a third of the unit each year, the payment would equal to: acres burned X \$5.25 X 3. The group also discussed the concept of managing for multiple species (livestock and wildlife) which takes a higher level of attention than management for a single species and recommends the NRCS consider a higher payment scenario under CP 528, Prescribed Burning, that addresses wildlife considerations in the grazing plan. The group also recommends payments be allowed for brush management (trees) under the current 1 percent canopy requirement.

Ranking Criteria—Current WHIP Ranking criteria and criteria from EQIP Wildlife ranking category was reviewed. Elements from both were selected and formulated into the general concept below:

Ranking Category—Wildlife Habitat

- To be eligible under this ranking category, the conservation plan must address grassland species as listed in the Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan. Species of greatest conservation need and targeted habitats will be identified in the planning objectives.

National Issues (as required) 25 percent of score

State Issues—40 percent of score

1. Location of the application:

- The entire unit of concern is located within the current range of the Greater Prairie–Chicken or the Quail Initiative area (35 points)
- At least 75 percent of the unit of concern is located within the current range of the Greater Prairie–Chicken or the Quail Initiative area (25 points)
- Any part of the unit of concern is located within the current range of the Greater Prairie–Chicken or the Quail Initiative area (15 points)

2. Priority Landscape:

- Any part of the unit of concern is within the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) Core HABITAT area for Greater Prairie-Chickens (20 points)
- Any part of the unit of concern is within the PLJV Core BUFFER area for Greater Prairie-Chickens (10 points)

3. Prescribed Grazing:

- Grazing plan is implemented for **at least** 3 years that addresses habitat needs for grassland species identified in the Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan (20 points)
- Grazing plan is implemented for **less than** 3 years that addresses habitat needs for grassland species identified in the Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan (10 points)

4. Tree Invasion:

- Unit of concern has no trees present, except low elevations and riparian areas that do not fragment grassland habitat (15 points)
- Unit of concern has invasive trees widely scattered over the upland areas (1.0 to 5.0 percent coverage) (10 points)
- Unit of concern has invasive trees widespread over the entire area (5.1 to 15.0 percent coverage) (5 points)

Local Issues—25 percent of score

1. Prescribed Burning:

- Will patch burning be used to provide habitat for Species of Greatest Conservation Need? (25 points)
- Will CP 338 be included in the conservation plan? (10 points)

2. Expiring CRP:

- Expired CRP fields will be included in the conservation plan and managed to benefit Species of Greatest Conservation Need? (10 points)

3. CPs are scheduled to be completed within four years (5 points)

4. Participant requested a conservation plan for this application prior to _____ (5 points)

5. Participant has secured funding for portions of the project from other contributors, which may include but is not limited to, conservation districts, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, KDWPT or other cost-share programs. (10 points)

6. Is the unit of concern in close proximity (2 miles) to property with long-term (greater than 10 years) conservation easements, National Wildlife Refuges, or State Wildlife Areas that are actively managed for wildlife? (5 points)

Other discussion items—The group requested clarification on whether or not other federal agencies could provide cost-share on EQIP projects. Concern was also raised about landowner and land eligibility differences between WHIP and EQIP, further clarification is needed. Ranking criteria will be sent out to the group for further review and comments before submitting to the NRCS.