

MISSISSIPPI WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM STATE PLAN FY2013



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MISSISSIPPI
WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVES PROGRAM
(WHIP)
STATE PLAN
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Mississippi Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) State Plan

I. INTRODUCTION

The WHIP program was established by Congress to provide technical assistance and financial incentives for projects that benefit wildlife species and habitats that have declined due to agricultural practices. The 2008 Farm Bill allows for minimum contract duration of one year after the completion of conservation practices but not more than 10 years. The State Conservationist for Mississippi, with recommendations from the State Technical Committee developed this handbook for implementing and administering the WHIP program in this state. The handbook ensures that resources are targeted to the highest priority habitat needs. Species and habitats of concern within Mississippi have been cooperatively identified. Practices needed to address those concerns have been carefully selected.

Financial incentive payments will be made using the WHIP State Payment Rate Schedule that is based on a unit of compensation for planned conservation practices. The rate of compensation is 75% of the estimated total cost associated with the conservation practice. A historically under-served producer category has been established in Fiscal Year 2010. Historically underserved producers include beginning farmer, limited resource farmer, or a socially disadvantaged farmer. Producers meeting these designations may receive a rate of compensation that can be up to 90% of the estimated total cost associated with the conservation practice.

Many partners have expressed interest in and support for the Mississippi WHIP program. Partners may provide technical assistance to NRCS and/or participants in the planning process. In addition, some partners may provide reimbursement to the WHIP participants for all or a portion of the practice cost. However, partnership on technical assistance in no way obligates the partner to financial assistance on practice implementation.

II. OBJECTIVES

The Mississippi WHIP Plan as approved by National Headquarters and in keeping with the guidelines of the national goals is designed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To offer the opportunity to participate in the WHIP program to as many landowners as possible.
2. To establish priorities that will add selected wildlife management practices that quickly enhance the agricultural and forest landscape and contribute to the state and national goals of WHIP. Priorities will apply statewide.
3. To provide technical assistance to eligible participants with regard to the priority wildlife habitat needs as identified and the development of Wildlife Habitat Development Plans (WHDP) and implementation of authorized practices under WHIP.
4. Provide financial assistance for the purpose of providing pollinator habitat/corridors, restoring upland wildlife habitat; wetland wildlife habitat; threatened and endangered species habitat; habitat for declining species of National or State significance; declining native habitats of National or State significance, such as longleaf pine ecosystem; aquatic habitat; and other types of wildlife habitat on eligible land.
5. Foster a positive change in public attitudes toward wildlife, wildlife habitat, and its relationship to the agricultural landscape. This will be accomplished utilizing technical assistance funds through newsletters, outdoor classrooms, workshops, on-sight consultation and plan preparation.

III. WILDLIFE PRIORITIES

Wildlife priorities were developed by team members with knowledge of state, regional, and national wildlife and fisheries resource concerns. Knowledge of these concerns came via the State Technical Committee process, personal communication with organizations and individuals with interests in wildlife on agricultural and forested landscapes. As a result practices to emphasize community or ecosystem restoration were identified for cost share. The practices were selected for the purpose of providing pollinator habitat/corridors, restoring upland wildlife habitat; wetland wildlife habitat; threatened and endangered species habitat; habitat for declining species of National or State significance; declining native habitats of National or State significance, such as longleaf pine ecosystem; aquatic habitat; and other types of wildlife habitat on eligible land.

Priority Community/Ecosystem Concerns

A. Lack of desirable early successional components:

1. Lack of transition zones in cropland, pastureland and hayland fields.
2. Lack of quality nesting habitat and rearing areas in old fields, pastureland, hayland, and utility rights-of-ways.
3. Lack of corridor habitat, including pollinator corridors, in open areas such as agricultural fields, pastureland, hayland, and old fields.

Solutions - Use these practices alone or in combination: wildlife/pollinator buffers (386); wildlife transition zones/corridors (422); light strip disking (647); prescribed burning (338); firebreaks (394); herbicide conversion of introduced grass species, such as fescue or Bermudagrass (315) to desirable native vegetation ; control or eradication of cogongrass, kudzu or other species of invasive herbaceous vegetation (315); early “successional vegetation” establishment (327); re-vegetate forest harvest trails and landings (655); tree/shrub planting (612); and quality vegetation management in abandoned fields (314).

Species or ecosystems benefited: bobwhite quail, Bachman’s sparrow, cottontail and swamp rabbits eastern wild turkey, grassland guild of birds, Black Belt and Jackson Prairies, and native and non-native pollinators, such as honey bees.

B. Lack of winter water for waterfowl habitat, shallow water areas, and other seasonally flooded wetland areas for wildlife.

Solutions – Use the practices: wetland wildlife habitat management (644) may include structure for water control (587) and/or dike (356) to create shallow water impoundments and create microtopography (644) if needed; shallow winter water for wildlife (644) includes placing boards in a structure for water control pipe (587) and using a dike (356) to collect and hold water for winter feeding habitat by November 1st each year; water control structures may include beaver resistant water level control devices (587).

Species or ecosystems benefited: Migratory birds, including ducks, geese, shore and wading birds, also turkey, deer, reptiles, amphibians, and wetlands.

C. Lack of desirable early successional wildlife habitat components in the under and midstory of woodlands dominated by pine or pine/hardwood.

Solutions - Reduce the amount of invasive, undesirable woody vegetation in the under and midstory canopies and remove litter with the practices of prescribed Burning (338) with firebreaks (394), and/or strip disking (647) in pine stands with canopies that have been thinned enough to allow ground level vegetation to respond. Use selective herbicides to restore a diverse wildlife favorable under and midstory habitat in a pine stand (666). Utilize firebreaks (394) to create additional wildlife habitat by planting desirable vegetation.

Species or ecosystems benefited: Bobwhite quail, cottontail and swamp rabbits, red-cockaded woodpecker, eastern wild turkey, native and non-native pollinators, gopher tortoise, several guilds of song birds, and longleaf pine forests.

D. Restoration of declining native habitats.

Solution - Use the practices: early successional vegetation (native grass) establishment (including native legumes) (327); tree/shrub establishment (612); wetland wildlife habitat management (644); forest stand improvement (666); herbicide conversion of introduced grass species, such as fescue or Bermudagrass (315) to desirable native vegetation ; control or eradication of cogongrass, kudzu or other species of invasive herbaceous vegetation (315); prescribed burning (338) with firebreaks (394) .

Species or ecosystems benefited: Black Belt and Jackson prairie; longleaf pine; wetlands, and other native habitats.

E. Lack of habitat components for both Federal and State Listed Threatened and Endangered Species (TES).

Solutions - Benefits to TES and protection of the landowner's future options for use of the property should be protected through the voluntary agreement with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That agency has an established program called "Safe Harbor". In addition some limited protection may be provided to landowners that participate in the WHIP Working Lands for Wildlife – Gopher Tortoise Initiative. Points will be given for TES benefits when selected practices are applied within the identified area on the TES maps.

Species or ecosystems benefited:

- Gopher tortoises are benefited by the practices of prescribed burning (338) with firebreaks (394); light strip disking (647), conversion of fescue and Bermuda to native vegetation (315), planting long leaf pines (612), early successional vegetation (native grass) establishment (including native legumes) (327), and control of cogongrass (315). Use of selective herbicides to restore a diverse wildlife favorable under and midstory habitat in a pine stand (666). Any bonus points awarded under gopher tortoise criteria will cover any points potentially earned for Mississippi sandhill crane, dusky gopher frog, Eastern indigo snake, southern hognose snake, and black pine snake. The ranges of these species fall within that of the gopher tortoise and beneficial practices for these species are a subset of those for the tortoise.
- Red-cockaded woodpeckers are benefited in pine and pine/hardwood forests by prescribed burning (338) with firebreaks (394).
- Black bear are benefited by corridor habitat, including tree and shrub planting (612), riparian forest corridors (391) and transition zones/corridors (422) between cropland and forest land.

F. Infestations of invasive plants within wildlife habitats that have extremely adverse effects on native plant growth, habitat condition, and other environmental resources.

Solutions - Reduce the amount of invasive, undesirable vegetation on forestland, pasture or hay lands with the practices of prescribed burning (338) with firebreaks (394); light strip disking (647); and/or utilizing selective herbicides for control of undesirable herbaceous weeds, cogongrass and/or kudzu (315), herbicide conversion of fescue and Bermuda grass to native vegetation (315), application of selective herbicides to remove invasive, dense, undesirable woody species in pine stands (666) and in abandoned fields (314).

Species or ecosystems benefited: bobwhite quail, Bachman's sparrow, cottontail and swamp rabbits eastern wild turkey, grassland guild of birds, Black Belt and Jackson Prairie, red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, several guilds of forest song birds, and longleaf pine forests.

Habitat Improvements

Several habitats were determined to be of pressing concern for wildlife on the agricultural and forested landscape. These are native habitats and/or habitats of National or State significance. The needed diversity could be developed using WHIP to promote the use of practices which allow plant succession to proceed in some instances and to set plant succession back where it is necessary.

The established NRCS practices and standards will be used with only slight modifications added when necessary. For instance, the establishment of fescue, Bermuda, ryegrass, etc. would not be eligible for financial assistance under WHIP, except on critically eroding areas. Grass/weed areas should favor native species and introduced species that are non-invasive and preferred by wildlife such as select legumes.

In addition, some practices such as the establishment of firebreaks must be done annually while others must be reestablished on 2-5 year rotations in order to accomplish the habitat objectives. These necessary recurring practices will be established in the Wildlife Habitat Development Plan (WHDP) prepared for the eligible participant and be eligible for financial assistance when completed as per the WHDP.

Other Programs and Practices

Many practices were previously mentioned that would be emphasized to address WHIP priorities. Some practices are funded through other conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which should take priority. Where funds from these programs are not available WHIP funds could be used for improvements. CRP funds are available for riparian forest buffer on cropland or pasture, but not on cutover land, idle areas or backyard habitat. EQIP funds may be available for:

- wildlife buffers, pollinator corridors, and transition zones for resource concerns such as erosion control, animal waste, and water quality
- tree planting for erosion control, water quality, and sustainable forestry
- pond, trough or tank for grazing land concerns
- structure for water control for water quality and quantity concerns
- invasive plant species control.

IV. APPLICATION and RANKING PROCESS

State application procedures, the evaluation and ranking process, and ranking criteria are updated annually. This information is provided in the Mississippi WHIP Handbook FY2013.