

## NRCS Florida State Technical Committee – Agency Responses

Meeting Date: June 18, 2020

- **Question from Melissa Hill, Alachua Conservation Trust:** is there a formal NRCS definition of Ag Land?
  - **Agency Response:** Cropland, grassland, rangeland, pasture, and other agricultural land on which agricultural products, forest-related products, or livestock are produced and resource concerns may be addressed. Other agricultural lands include cropped woodland, marshes, incidental areas included in the agricultural operation, and other types of agricultural land used for production of livestock (Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 502, Subpart A).
  
- **Question from Erica Hernandez, Alachua Conservation Trust:** how is the 2/3 forestland calculated [for ALE]? Is this based on the tree species, size, canopy cover, or density? Are there guidelines?
  - **Agency Response:** Forest land is areas of native trees grown under natural conditions regardless of the products harvested (timber, nuts, berries, vines, mushrooms). Forest land is defined as land cover or use category that is at least 10 percent stocked by single-stemmed woody species of any size that will be at least 13 feet tall at maturity. Also included is land bearing evidence of natural regeneration of tree cover (cutover forest or abandoned farmland) that is not currently developed for nonforest use. Ten percent stocked, when viewed from a vertical direction, equates to an aerial canopy cover of leaves and branches of 25 percent or greater (Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 528, Subpart D)
  
- **Comment from Peter Kleinhenz, Tall Timbers Research Station & Land Conservancy (provided via email after meeting):** As Tall Timbers has conducted outreach to contractors and practitioners related to prescribed burning, we have received a few common threads of feedback. First, is that prescribed burning, especially in the Panhandle is increasingly being utilized as a management tool. Interest really is growing at a rapid rate. Second, the rates applied to prescribed fire should be increased. Due to long-term fire suppression, the vulnerability of lands surrounding prescribed fire sites to wildlife has been increasing for some time. A few high-profile burn escapes illustrate this. As a result, prescribed burn rates must account for the additional costs that contractors and other burn practitioners must absorb. A private lands burn team member at Tall Timbers provided the following information:

"A reasonable number for vendors is a minimum of \$3500 per day to make a profit plus about \$500 to write the burn plan, initial site visits, etc. That number is derived by amortizing equipment, insurance, paid labor, plus a meager profit (like 15%IRR). Fire breaks

would not be included. This means that larger acres typically get burned as they are profitable when the NRCS cost share is \$21-25/ac. For example, a 100 acre burn is approaching that threshold. However, smaller properties (of which most NRCS potential projects fall under) do not get burned as a result of current pay rates.

As more landowners, particularly those with smaller acreage, look to implement burning, the above information should be considered to incentivize a greater number of sub-100 acre burns in order to improve habitat and reduce wildfire risk.

- **Agency Response:** NRCS has a regional payment team that sets the rates for our practices, including prescribed burning. For them to consider an increase in rate, we will need additional information. NRCS has requested from the partner information in the form of receipts or quotes/contracts from vendors to producers to support increased payments for prescribed fire. NRCS will review the documentation and determine if it can be submitted to the regional payment team.
- **Comments and Questions from Melissa Hill and Erica Hernandez, Alachua Conservation Trust (provided via email after meeting)**
  - Local working groups from the technical committee: Is there a way for a representative from ACT to join one of these working groups?
    - **Agency Response:** Yes, the local working group is typically convened by the Soil and Water Conservation District with representation from NRCS and local partners and producers. ACT can learn more about local working groups from the local Soil and Water Conservation District or NRCS District Conservationist.
  - Feedback and Questions on ACEP ALE Program:
    - Provide a checklist next fiscal year to include all items that entities need to provide for their application.
      - **Agency Response:** Yes, NRCS will provide a checklist next fiscal year.
    - What activities are considered agricultural for an ACEP ALE Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS)? (example: planted pine, row crops, cattle). Does this definition define thresholds, proportions densities that help define these categories? Can this definition please be shared publicly with partners?
      - **Agency Response:** ALE-GSS must meet a specific land eligibility category and include at least one of the land uses below:
        - **Land eligibility category:** Protection of Grazing Uses and Related Conservation Values.—To meet this land eligibility criterion, the enrollment of such land must result in the protection of grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring or conserving eligible land. Such land must also meet the definition for grassland of special environmental significance (GSS). GSS is defined as grasslands that contain little or no noxious or invasive species, as designated or defined by State or Federal law; are subject to the

threat of conversion to nongrassland uses or fragmentation; and the land is—

- Rangeland, pastureland, shrubland, or wet meadows on which the vegetation is dominated by native grasses, grass-like plants, shrubs, or forbs, or is improved, naturalized pastureland, rangeland, or wet meadows. And the land provides, or could provide, habitat for threatened or endangered species or at-risk species, protects sensitive or declining native prairie or grassland types or grasslands buffering wetlands, or provides protection of highly sensitive natural resources as identified by the State conservationist, in consultation with the State technical committee.
- **Eligible Land Uses:** Rangeland; Grassland or land that contains forbs, or shrubland for which grazing is the predominant use; Located in an area that has been historically dominated by grass land, forbs, or shrubs and could provide habitat for animal or plant populations of significant ecological value
- For parcels determined eligible based on protecting grazing uses and related conservation values, the agricultural land easement deed must address the protection of those grazing uses or grassland values.
- How does NRCS FL calculate what is considered forested land according to the new ruling that a property may not have more than 75% forested land. How is 75% cover calculated? Is it a density of specific tree dbh and height? Stem count? Canopy cover? Is a GIS analysis done to determine this?
  - **Agency Response:** Forest land is areas of native trees grown under natural conditions regardless of the products harvested (timber, nuts, berries, vines, mushrooms). Forest land is defined as land cover or use category that is at least 10 percent stocked by single-stemmed woody species of any size that will be at least 13 feet tall at maturity. Also included is land bearing evidence of natural regeneration of tree cover (cutover forest or abandoned farmland) that is not currently developed for nonforest use. Ten percent stocked, when viewed from a vertical direction, equates to an aerial canopy cover of leaves and branches of 25 percent or greater (Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 528, Subpart D)
- Does this mean that planted pine does not count as agricultural land? Is this because planted pine is only part of HFRP program and not eligible to ALE cost shares?



- ACEP ALE GSS Supplemental Ranking Worksheet:
  - Ranking Factor A: Is this determined by a specific data layer?
    - **Agency Response:** This is determined using the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) natural community layer.
  - Ranking Factor B: Is there a time window of relevancy for crop history? Example after 90 years it restarts as habitat has been able to recover. If not, it could be useful to determine an alternative metric for "Biodiversity" and crop history is not always a strong correlation for a site past a certain amount of years.
    - **Agency Response:** NRCS asks the landowner if the area has been cropped. NRCS also reviews FSA's records of cropping history.
- Can an internal handbook that defines and brackets many of these questions be shared?
  - **Agency Response:** NRCS will consider developing state-specific program handbooks.