

## **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program**

March 2011

### **Overview**

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for private and Tribal land to develop or improve high quality habitat that supports fish and wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal, and local significance. Through WHIP, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland, wetland, aquatic, and other types of wildlife habitat on their property.

WHIP is reauthorized under Section 1240N of the Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3839bb-1) as amended by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill). The 2008 Farm Bill extends the authority to the Secretary for carrying out the program during fiscal years 2008 through 2012.

### **Eligibility**

Land eligible for WHIP includes:

- Private agricultural land including cropland, grassland, rangeland, pasture, and other land determined by NRCS to be suitable for fish and wildlife habitat development.
- Nonindustrial private forest land including rural land that has existing tree cover or is suitable for growing trees.
- Indian land.

Increased payments are available for eligible socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers in addition to beginning and limited resource farmers or ranchers and Indian tribes.

### **How WHIP Works**

The NRCS State Conservationist, with recommendations from the State Technical Committee and other partners, may identify priorities for enrollment in WHIP that complement the goals and objectives of relevant fish and wildlife conservation initiatives at the state, regional, and national levels. The priorities serve as a guide for the development of WHIP ranking criteria in a state.

Applicants interested in entering into a cost share agreement with NRCS to develop fish and wildlife habitat may file an application at any time. Applicants must own or control land and provide evidence that they will be in control of land for the duration of a cost-share agreement.

A WHIP plan of operations (WPO) is required for the area covered in the application and becomes the basis for developing the WHIP cost-share agreement. Cost-share agreements between NRCS and the participant are for a minimum of one year after completion of the last conservation practice up to 10 years. Through reimbursement, NRCS will provide financial assistance to install conservation practices for permanent, priority fish and wildlife habitat. Participants are expected to maintain cost-shared conservation practices for the expected lifespan of the conservation practice.

Up to 25 percent of WHIP funds will be available for long-term cost-share agreements (15 years or longer) to protect and restore



essential plant and animal habitat. NRCS can pay up to 90 percent of the cost to install conservation practices in these long-term agreements. Essential plant and animal habitat includes critical habitat designated under federal and state law, locations of listed or candidate species that can be improved with specific conservation practices, or particularly rare and unique habitats that could support at-risk wildlife species.

### ***Legislative and Regulatory Changes***

The 2008 Farm Bill amended Section 1240N by designating eligible land as private agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, and Tribal lands. Land ineligible for WHIP is publicly-owned lands (Federal, State, County, or Local government owned lands).

Cost share for long-term agreements for essential plant and animal habitat is amended to increase from 15 percent to 25 percent of funds made available for the fiscal year. Payments under WHIP made to a person or legal entity directly or indirectly, “shall not exceed, in the aggregate, \$50,000 per year.” Funding for WHIP through 2012 is authorized at \$85,000,000 per fiscal year. The new farm bill will allow landowners to receive payments to develop other types of wildlife habitat, including habitat established on pivot corners and irregular areas.

### ***More Information***

For more information and updates about WHIP and other Farm Bill topics please refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Website <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill> or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Website at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/>.