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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to discuss conservation programs authorized by the Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill). We appreciate the ongoing support and leadership that this Committee has provided for voluntary, private lands conservation and want to clearly communicate that this support is making a critical difference in our ability to accomplish our goals and mission. Farm Bill conservation programs provide America's farmers, ranchers and landowners with technical and financial assistance to enable conservation of valuable natural resources while protecting and improving agricultural operations. Our hope is that this testimony will help inform conversations that you will have with your constituents and key stakeholders in preparation for the 2018 Farm Bill.

This Committee's efforts to consolidate the Conservation Title's 23 programs into the 13 current programs in the 2014 Farm Bill allowed NRCS to focus on critical resource concerns, provide streamlined assistance to agricultural landowners and producers to address existing resource concerns with the flexibility to still give attention to emerging issues. The 2014 Farm Bill also provides NRCS with more tools to reach historically underserved producers through prioritization given to veteran farmers and ranchers and increased program flexibility for practice implementation.

NRCS provides technical and financial conservation assistance to individual, private landowners. More than 70 percent of land in the U.S. is held by private landowners. Decisions those landowners make every day not only have an impact on their land, but on that of their neighbors, on their communities, and ultimately on the entire U.S. population.

America's farmers have been able to achieve tremendous success through the 2014 Farm Bill's Conservation Title. The 2014 Farm Bill created or improved a series of programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, to help NRCS facilitate its unique delivery system, carried out through local field offices that provide assistance to individual landowners across the Nation. Through these programs, NRCS has made tremendous strides in helping farmers, ranchers, foresters, and other private landowners restore and enhance our Nation's natural resource base in a voluntary, incentive-based fashion. Perhaps most importantly, the decisions surrounding the implementation and prioritization of these programs and funding are made on the local level, through Local Working Groups and State Technical Committees to ensure that your State's local needs are addressed.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
EQIP promotes agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals. Since the 2008 Farm Bill was implemented, EQIP participants have impacted nearly 94 million acres (93,776,393) through 267,202 active and completed contracts made possible with $7.2 billion ($7,241,507,182) in financial incentives. Many of these incentives are leveraged with local, State and other partnership financial and technical assistance.

EQIP has helped producers improve soil health using practices such as planting cover crops, using conservation tillage, and conservation crop rotation, which help protect farms from soil erosion, increase resiliency to drought and help break pest cycles; thereby reducing the need for pesticide and other chemical applications, and saving energy by reducing the number of equipment runs across a field. In turn, farmers and ranchers save time and money, while increasing productivity.

Other examples include collaboration with livestock producers who pursue prescribed grazing systems for the purpose of managing livestock to best utilize feed and forage, resulting in healthier pasture and range lands, and healthier herds.

As consumers have driven the demand for increased organic production, EQIP provides farmers and ranchers technical and financial assistance to help implement their Organic System Plan through the National Organic Initiative (NOI). Additionally, EQIP NOI can help transition farmers and ranchers from conventional to organic production. In 2016, $5.4 million was obligated in NOI EQIP funds (2016 green sheets).

The U.S. Forest Service and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service are working together to improve the health of forests where public and private lands meet, especially in locations where insects and drought conditions have contributed to wildfire risk. Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the two USDA agencies are restoring landscapes, reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat. The Partnership began in FY 2014, and a total of $139 million has been jointly invested in 49 projects through FY 2017. Projects funded through this effort are designed to last three years, and the first round of projects concluded at the end of FY 2016. In FY 2017, the agencies are planning to work with partners to catalog and promote the successes and lessons learned from collaborative efforts.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
CSP is now USDA's largest working lands conservation program with more than 80 million acres enrolled in Fiscal Years 2010 through 2016. Through CSP, agricultural producers and forest landowners, who are already established conservation stewards earn payments for actively managing and maintaining the existing level of conservation on their land while also incorporating advanced conservation activities to take that stewardship to the next level. Advanced conservation activities include practices such as using cover crops, buffer strips, pollinator and beneficial insect habitat, and soil health building activities. These kinds of advanced conservation activities are keeping soil and nutrients out of the rivers and streams,

enhancing habitat for wildlife and improving the quality of the air we breathe – all while maintaining active agricultural production on working lands.

In the fall of 2016, we made several updates to this popular program, making a good program even better. These changes include new tools and methods for evaluating operations, expanded options to address the contract recipient's conservation and business objectives and a greater emphasis on local resource priorities. The result has been more flexibility to meet producer needs and even greater opportunities for and interest in participation, as evidenced by a greater than 30 percent increase in applications just this year.

We also reexamined the conservation practices and enhancements offered through the program, making adjustments where the science tells us we should, and creating a direct linkage to existing conservation practice standards. These adjustments will result in better reporting tools and metrics to provide information on what these enhancements mean for a landowner's operation, and also better tell the story of what the nation's largest conservation program is doing for natural resources and agriculture.

We have received positive feedback from customers, partners, and field staff as we work to deliver these changes to CSP in this first year. We are working to further refine the tools and processes to introduce greater efficiencies in the evaluation process, streamline activity choices and provide even more implementation tools to provide even more options and information to help producers take their conservation activities to that next level of stewardship.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The 2014 Farm Bill consolidated the purposes of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), the easement component of the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) into ACEP, greatly streamlining easement program delivery in NRCS. ACEP is a voluntary program, consisting of two components: 1) an agricultural land easement (ALE) component under which NRCS assists eligible entities to protect agricultural land by limiting nonagricultural uses of that land through the purchase of agricultural land easements; and 2) a wetland reserve easement (WRE) component under which NRCS provides financial and technical assistance directly to landowners to restore, protect and enhance wetlands through the purchase of wetland reserve easements.

Demand for NRCS conservation easements remains significantly higher than available funding and the split between the two components continues to be 70 percent for ACEP – Wetland Reserve Easements and 30 percent for ACEP – Agricultural Land Easements. This is consistent with the historic trends under the individual predecessor programs. In FY 2015, approximately 26 percent of the ACEP-ALE applications and 18 percent of the ACEP-WRE applications were funded. In 2016, available funding allowed for the enrolment of 14 percent of ACEP-ALE applications and 16 percent of the ACEP-WRE applications.

In FY 2016, NRCS used $188 million in ACEP financial assistance funding to enroll an estimated 170,785 acres of farmland, grasslands, and wetlands through 373 new ACEP easements. States are actively utilizing the FY 2017 allocation of ACEP financial and technical assistance to enroll the highest ranking applications in each State.

We are also pleased to report that we are over 65 percent of the way through the approved creation of a national Easement Support Services (ESS) Branch that will perform real estate acquisition functions and the associated administrative tasks for the easement programs administered by NRCS. The ESS Branch will improve the delivery of private lands conservation through NRCS easement programs by centralizing the real estate acquisition functions and associated administrative tasks. The ESS Branch will improve conservation delivery by providing easement administrative and acquisition services to all States and territories. Additionally, NRCS easement acquisition functions will align nationwide under a strengthened, centralized process, with a complimentary oversight role, which will improve accountability, strengthen consistency, strengthen customer service, and increase efficiencies in the delivery of NRCS easement programs.

With over 17,000 easements totaling almost 3.5 million acres, NRCS now manages close to 50,000 miles of easement boundaries – if added together that would stretch around the earth twice! Because most of the easements NRCS acquires are perpetual, our management responsibility is also perpetual. Managing a large number of acres brings any number of challenges including, changes in ownership, incompatible development pressure, and boundary disputes and encroachments. However, the 2014 Farm Bill included an important provision that now allows NRCS to work with utilities, governments, and landowners to modify an easement when impacts to the easement are unavoidable – something that was unavailable under previous Farm Bills. Thus far, NRCS has been very successful in partnering with road, pipeline, and transmission line developers to allow for necessary infrastructure development while still protecting the public investment and mitigating impacts to the land.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

RCPP is a partner-driven, locally-led approach to conservation administered by NRCS. It offers new opportunities for NRCS, conservation partners, and agricultural producers to work together to harness innovation, expand the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation. In four years, NRCS has invested about $800 million in 284 high-impact projects, bringing together more than 2,000 conservation partners who have contributed an estimated $1.4 billion in financial and technical assistance. By 2018, NRCS and partners will have invested at least $2.4 billion. Conservation partners represent a wide variety of groups, including Indian tribes, nonprofit organizations, State and local governments, private industry, water districts, universities and many others.

RCPP projects, underway now in all 50 States and Puerto Rico, are born locally. These projects aim to clean and conserve water, improve the quality of soil and air, enhance wildlife habitat and result in more resilient and productive agricultural lands and stronger rural economies. RCPP brings an expanded approach to investing in natural resource conservation that empowers local communities to work with multiple partners and agricultural producers to design solutions that work best for them.

With over 70 percent of the lower 48 States under private ownership, RCPP plays a critical role in connecting partners with producers to design and implement conservation solutions that benefit both natural resources and agriculture. The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal

funding for private lands conservation, and RCPP is one of the important Farm Bill conservation programs contributing innovative conservation solutions to America's communities. RCPP enables NRCS, partners and producers to work together to overcome natural resource challenges, including unhealthy forests, wildfire risks, drought and poor water quality.

Proven Success

Our latest science-based modeling under the Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) and assessment through the Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) continues to show voluntary, incentive-based conservation is effective. In the Chesapeake Bay, voluntary adoption of conservation practices has led to reductions in erosion and sedimentation by over 60 percent, and reductions in nutrient losses, specifically of nitrogen, approached 40 percent. Since 2009, NRCS has provided $890 million in financial and technical assistance within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Through a landscape focus to our conservation investments, some 80 percent of the Bay's critical cropland acreage has had conservation measures implemented on them. NRCS conservation investments in the Bay have resulted in a reduction of 15.1 million tons of sediment per year, enough to fill 150,000 train cars – which would stretch from Washington, DC to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Improvements in water quality monitoring data and aquatic habitat identified by external parties also confirms the positive impact of these investments.

This science-to-solutions approach has been demonstrated to positively affect critical wildlife species as well. Through another targeted landscape initiative, our Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative, NRCS has helped private landowners install appropriate science-based conservation practices on over 6.7 million acres. Wildlife species targeted for listing on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Threatened and Endangered Species List have recovered to the point where a pending listing decision is no longer being considered. As a result, thousands of landowners will not face increased regulatory pressures.

NRCS uses a Long Leaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) to achieve restoration and reestablishment goals for longleaf pine forests, consistent with the objectives of the public/private America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative. In FY 2016, NRCS invested $12.8 million to support restoration efforts on 107,000 acres. LLPI includes the nine Southeastern states in the longleaf range, and it plays a crucial role in stitching together public and private lands. Overall, more than half of the forests conserved are located near military installations, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, state forests or heritage reserves. From 2010 to 2016, NRCS has invested $65 million to help over 4,500 forest landowners restore nearly 400,000 acres on private lands. In FY 2017, NRCS is investing $15.6 million to continue restoration efforts.

Utilizing Landscape-Scale Approaches

Such landscape-scale approaches are foundational to progress toward meeting today's challenges. NRCS uses Landscape Conservation Initiatives to accelerate the benefits of voluntary conservation programs, such as cleaner water and air, healthier soil and enhanced wildlife habitat. NRCS conservation programs help agricultural producers deliver these benefits while maintaining a vibrant agricultural sector.

These initiatives also enhance the locally-driven process to better address nationally and regionally important conservation goals that transcend localities. They build on locally led

efforts and partnerships, and they are based on science. Through the initiatives, NRCS and its partners coordinate the delivery of assistance where it can have the most impact.

These landscape-level efforts have seen success across the country. From the removal of streams from the list of "impaired" waterbodies to the determination not to list the Greater Sage Grouse and New England Cottontail under the Endangered Species Act, NRCS' work with producers benefits wildlife, natural resources and agricultural operations across the country. Most of these initiatives have outcome-based goals and strategies established for implementation through the life of the current Farm Bill. I am attaching to my written testimony an update on these exceptionally successful initiatives.

However, the synergy NRCS creates between science and program implementation is not limited to informing our landscape initiatives. The sound science that NRCS brings also directs policy development to ensure that taxpayers receive the greatest return on their conservation investments. Many of the aforementioned accomplishments have been realized through our Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program, which is the backbone of our Agency's conservation delivery machine. Many customers begin their relationship with NRCS through requests for technical assistance that later evolve into conservation plans that may include financial assistance through one of the farm bill programs. Our CTA Program, in combination with our organizational delivery system, affords us the opportunity to visit with landowners on their property, to analyze their land, learn their objectives, and then collaboratively formulate a plan to help them meet their objectives, comply with federal, State, and local laws and ordinances, sustaining their operation for future generations.

NRCS provides outreach to ensure historically underserved farmers and ranchers are aware of the conservation programs available to them, and have access to these programs. Military veteran farmers and ranchers who are also beginning farmers and ranchers, and historically underserved producers, may be eligible to receive advance payments and increased financial assistance. Additionally, veteran farmers and ranchers are provided "preference" to conservation programs by being screened or ranked as high priority applicants.

NRCS's technical and financial innovations have proven beneficial for both producers and the Nation's resources. On June 14, 2017, seven farmers – two from California and five from Arkansas and Mississippi – tested an innovative idea and implemented conservation practices on their crops to reduce methane emissions, which led to the first ever carbon credits generated from rice farmers. As voiced by our Arkansas State Conservationist, Mike Sullivan,
"The partnership that enabled this first-of-kind carbon offsets began with the growers and leveraged the expertise of many, many organizations. Getting innovative conservation on the ground requires forward-looking growers and a team of experts to support their efforts. This project had all of the components of success. It wasn't easy but innovation is never easy. That's where the NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants program provides such important value to our nation's rural economies and rural innovators."

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of this Committee, the Farm Bill's Conservation Title has historically provided NRCS a full range of technical, scientific, and financial resources

to assist America's producers, providing the greatest impact on the sustainability and resiliency of our Nation's resources. These programs reflect our commitment to local leadership on critical conservation issues and have a reach that touches every Committee Member's District. As I mentioned in the conclusion of my testimony before the House's Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee two weeks ago, NRCS continually seeks to take responsible steps toward streamlining and modernizing our operations, while maximizing opportunities to get more conservation on the ground. Assisting with protecting our Nation's food security and ensuring the viability of future agricultural production is USDA's foremost mission. I would like to thank all of you for continuing to invest in voluntary conservation, and of course for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. I would be happy to respond to any questions.

Attachment One

NRCS Landscape Initiatives Update

Bay Delta Initiative

The 38 million-acre Bay Delta region of California includes the Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds in the Central Valley and drains to the San Francisco Bay, one of the most important estuary systems in the nation. The region provides drinking water for more than 23 million people and irrigation water to four million acres of farmland. Resource issues include balancing demands for water between agricultural and urban uses, against often scarce surface and ground water supplies; maintaining groundwater quality for drinking water use, and maintain surface water quality and quantity to support at risk wildlife species.

NRCS works with local partners where action plans have been developed to target high priority resource concerns. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to help producers implement practices that improve irrigation water efficiency, manage manure, nutrients and chemicals improving water quality, and improve habitat. Producers benefit from using less inputs and water while enhancing revenues through higher crop yields and improved crop quality.

Chesapeake Bay Initiative

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States. The Bay and its rivers, wetlands and forests provide homes, food and protection for diverse groups of animals and plants and supports more than 17 million people who live, work and play within the watershed. Agricultural lands compose nearly 30 percent of the watershed, and the region – which includes Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia – has more than 83,000 farms responsible for more than $10 billion of agricultural production each year.

The Bay has suffered from high amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution. By working with farmers on a voluntary basis, NRCS has provided technical and financial assistance to implement “Avoid-Control-Trap” conservation systems on over 3.6 million acres that benefit water quality in the Bay watershed. Since 2009, NRCS has provided $890 million in financial and technical assistance within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. This federal investment is leveraged by the matching financial and management resources of the watershed’s farmers and forest landowners, increasing the investment by at least $400 million.

Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative

The Driftless Area is a 24,000-square-mile landscape that straddles the Mississippi River in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The area includes rocky bluffs, deeply carved river valleys and more than 600 cold-water springs and creeks. Its soils are highly vulnerable to erosion. When soil erodes, water quality and aquatic habitat is threatened.

The initiative focuses on restoring cold-water stream corridors. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding helps producers install practices to protect streambanks from erosion, install fish habitat structures, fence livestock out of streams, and implement soil and

water conservation practices on adjacent farm and forest land. By 2017, NRCS aims to help producers restore 25 miles of streams, increase brown trout numbers by 30,000, reduce runoff of sediment by 150,000 tons and improve 20,500 acres of upstream habitat.

The Driftless Area initiative concludes at the end of FY2017. NRCS state offices will support practices used in the Driftless initiative through their regular EQIP programs. Partners will be able to use RCPP to develop new targeted efforts.

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) was authorized by Congress and launched in 2010 as a collaborative effort of 11 federal agencies, including NRCS, to accelerate the restoration and protection of the Great Lakes. EPA is the lead federal agency and provides funding for NRCS activities through and interagency agreement. NRCS has entered into more than 1,900 conservation contracts, with over $81 million in GLRI funding, to help farmers implement conservation practices on over 370,000 acres to improve water quality and address other needs within the Great Lakes Basin. Through Farm Bill conservation program authorities, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to landowners, enabling them to make conservation improvements to their land. This assistance helps producers plan and implement conservation practices that address priorities of the Great Lakes Action Plan including combating invasive species, protecting watersheds and shorelines from non-point source pollution, and restoring wetlands and other habitat areas.

Illinois River/Eucha-Spavinaw Watersheds Initiative

The Illinois River Sub-Basin and the Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed provide drinking water for the urban center of Tulsa, Oklahoma, as well as many smaller nearby municipalities. As part of the Illinois River Sub-Basin and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed Initiative, NRCS is working with its conservation partners in northwestern Arkansas and northeastern Oklahoma to ensure an adequate supply of healthy drinking water for local residents. Utilizing EQIP, NRCS is helping agricultural producers implement a suite of conservation practices that decrease agricultural runoff and nutrient-loading into rivers and streams. Besides clean drinking water for Tulsa citizens, these conservation practices also will help benefit local recreation opportunities, since the Illinois River is designated a Scenic River.

Longleaf Pine Initiative

NRCS uses the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) to support voluntary private lands conservation that restores and reestablishes longleaf pine forest, consistent with the objectives of the public/private America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative to restore 4.6 million acres of longleaf pine forest. In FY 2016, NRCS invested $12.8 million to support restoration efforts on 107,000 acres. LLPI includes the nine Southeastern states in the longleaf range, and it plays a crucial role in stitching together public and private lands. Overall, more than half of the forests conserved are located near military installations, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, state forests or heritage reserves. From 2010 to 2016, NRCS has invested $65 million to help over 4500 forest landowners restore nearly 400,000 acres on private lands. In FY 2017, NRCS is investing $15.6 million to continue restoration efforts.

Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI)

MRBI was initiated in 2009 to accelerate voluntary, private lands conservation investments to improve water quality through a targeted approach, and complements efforts by the Hypoxia Task Force (HTF) states within the Mississippi River basin. Each HTF state has developed a Nutrient Reduction Strategy to reduce agricultural impacts to the Gulf, and MRBI funding is used to help implement these local strategies. From 2010 to 2016, $250 million (EQIP) was obligated for MRBI project contracts providing treatment on over 1.2 million acres. There are currently 72 active projects, with 385 local partners leveraging $8.5 million in financial assistance and providing over $16 million in technical assistance. Partners include state agencies, conservation districts, city governments, private industry, NGOs, and local organizations. Findings from a 2014 report by the USDA's Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) show that conservation work on cropland in the Mississippi River basin has reduced the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus flowing to the Gulf of Mexico by 18 and 20 percent, respectively. Since 2009, nitrogen prevented from leaving agricultural fields in MRBI project watersheds could be used to fertilize over 63,000 acres of corn in the basin.

National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)

NWQI is a cooperative program between NRCS, EPA, and state water quality agencies to accelerate voluntary, private lands conservation to improve water quality, focusing on conservation systems that have the greatest benefit. NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to implement practices that help avoid, trap and control run-off and erosion from agricultural fields in targeted watersheds. Since 2012, NRCS has obligated more than $120 million in funding for water quality–related conservation systems in over 250 small high-priority watersheds throughout the country, treating almost 600,000 acres. NWQI has significantly increased the installation of primary water quality practices, compared to General EQIP, increased average annual funding for conservation practices increased by 200%, and served twice as many producers. State water quality agencies and other partners contribute additional resources for watershed planning, monitoring, implementation, and outreach, and NWQI has fostered additional collaboration within watersheds. To date, 8 stream segments within NWQI watersheds have been recommended for delisting from the impaired waters list.

Ogallala Aquifer Initiative

The Ogallala Aquifer underlies the Great Plains in eight states from South Dakota to Texas (CO, KS, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY) and covers about 174,000 square miles. Ogallala groundwater supports nearly one-fifth of the wheat, corn, cotton and cattle produced in the United States and is the main water supply for the Plains' population. In much of the aquifer groundwater is being pumped at a greater rate than it is being replenished, leading to significant declines in groundwater levels.

Funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is targeted to focus areas where NRCS and partners work with producers to implement projects that conserve ground water. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help producers implement practices that improve irrigation efficiency, manage nutrients, and help producers transition to dryland farming and grazing systems.

This helps maintain the long-term viability of the irrigated agricultural sector and offsets rising water costs and restricted water supplies on producers. By conserving water the useful life of the aquifer may be extended and flow is increased in rivers, benefiting wildlife.

Red River Basin Initiative

The Red River basin covers 25 million acres in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota and includes 16 million acres of cropland. It's part of the Prairie Pothole Region and is a critical migratory bird pathway. Severe flooding damages homes, businesses, and farmland, decreases wildlife habitat, and impacts water quality.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding helps producers implement soil and water management practices on cropland and pasture. Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) funding through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners restore and protect wetlands.

Water quality is improved through reduced delivery of nutrients and sediments to lakes, streams and rivers. Flood damage is reduced through detention of runoff water within restored wetlands and easement acres, and from improved water infiltration on agricultural land. Restored wetlands benefit migratory waterbirds and other water dependent species.

Attachment 2

NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife Initiatives (WLFW) Update

Bog Turtle

NRCS and state wildlife agencies have collaborated on habitat restoration and protection efforts under a WLFW partnership since 2012 when bog turtle was selected as a target species. The bog turtle's status under the ESA is endangered; the primary focus has been on the northern population distributed from New Hampshire to Maryland. NRCS approved in 2017 a complementary partnership effort in the Northeast and Midwest to conserve three additional at-risk turtle species (Blanding's, spotted, and wood turtles), and is currently considering combining these similar efforts to create one regional partnership. Benefits to landowners include reduction in the risk of additional ESA regulation, cost share for popular practices such as rotational grazing (e.g. fences and alternative watering systems), and income from voluntary conservation easements that secure the small habitats occupied by this species (home ranges average less than a few acres) and support reduced need to increase regulation of working lands.

Golden-winged warbler

In 2012, the golden-winged warbler was selected as a target species for WLFW after the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service received a petition to list it under the ESA. WLFW conservation actions are focused on forestry management practices that create young forests by harvesting mid-stage forests. Young forests currently represent only approximately 6% of private forest lands across Appalachia based on Forest Service data, but forestry experts say this percentage should be closer to 25%, or preliminarily up to an additional 3,500,000 acres of harvests needed on private lands to support forest health and promote stable rural economies. In 2016, with partner and private landowner input, new priority areas and a strategic plan were developed to renew and strengthen this effort through 2021. Outcomes include habitat creation for the target species as well as a host of other at-risk migratory birds, and game species including deer, turkey, woodcock and grouse; additionally, resulting improvements to forest health will be reflected in future timber production income. State forestry agencies and private forestry consultants are strongly engaged in writing forest management plans that reflect landowner goals, marking trees, and completing projects.

Gopher Tortoise

Designated as a WLFW target species since 2012, in 2016 WLFW narrowed its priority area focus and released a strategic plan that doubled our previous acreage commitment to recover this species through practices that prioritize timber stand thinning, prescribed burns, invasives control, and management actions. The tortoise is currently listed as threatened under the ESA in the western portion of its range, from Louisiana to central Alabama; from central Alabama to South Carolina it is a candidate for ESA listing. NRCS is working very closely with FWS in hopes that our partnership with state agencies and ag producers might be successful in not only precluding further ESA listing in the eastern portion of its range, but also delisting the gopher tortoise in its western range. Landowners benefit from financial and technical assistance for managing longleaf pine forests, and these practices increase the market value of pine stands. Other benefits include the strong potential to influence a reduction in regulatory risk to working lands across six of the southeastern U.S. States.

Lesser Prairie Chicken

NRCS launched the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI) in 2010 to strategically focus conservation efforts to maximize biological benefits to prairie chicken populations. NRCS' efforts are part of WLFW, through which NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help ranchers restore and protect habitat for prairie chickens in five Great Plains states to improve habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken and improve sustainability and productivity of grazing lands.

LPCI is enhancing NRCS' ongoing conservation efforts to support prairie chicken recovery by strategically focusing resources to promote healthy grazing lands management. Anticipated long-term outcomes of this initiative are improved rangeland health, greater connectivity of core prairie chicken habitat, and stabilization or recovery of prairie chicken populations. Since 2010 NRCS has assisted about 770 ranchers treat nearly 1.5 million acres for the benefit of their operations and the lesser prairie chicken.

Monarch Butterfly

The most recently announced WLFW effort supports the monarch butterfly. NRCS is working with agricultural producers in the Midwest and southern Great Plains to combat the decline of monarch butterflies by planting milkweed and other nectar-rich plants on private lands. This region, which includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas and Wisconsin, is the core of the monarch's migration route and breeding habitat. Milkweed not only provides food for monarchs, it also supports other pollinators such as honey bees that are vital to agriculture. Milkweed also provides homes for beneficial insects that control the spread of destructive insects.

Meanwhile, NRCS conservation practices that benefit monarch butterflies and other insects also help reduce erosion, increase soil health, control invasive species, provide quality forage for livestock and make agricultural operations more resilient and productive. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to implement these practices, helping producers improve working lands and strengthening rural economies.

New England Cottontail

NRCS has worked closely with state agency partners in New England and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) since 2012 to implement voluntary habitat restoration projects on private lands that would result in recovery of this species and preclude the imminent need to list it under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2016, the FWS publicly announced a no-list decision. Leading up to this decision, NRCS had developed a strategic plan in 2016 that fulfills agency commitments made for additional conservation actions through 2018 (the end of the current Farm Bill). Beyond helping the New England Cottontail, the related benefits to private landowners include remedies to forest health issues such as invasive plants and diseases, as well as improvements to the abundance of both game and non-game species.

Sage grouse

NRCS has worked closely with private landowners, local, state, and federal agency partners since the 2010 launch of the NRCS-led Sage grouse Initiative (SGI) to implement voluntary

rangeland habitat restoration and protection projects on working private lands across eleven western states. Sage grouse occupy 186 million acres of western federal and privately owned lands. NRCS utilizes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help producers implement practices addressing habitat threats on their private land. Additionally, voluntary NRCS conservation easements through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs (ACEP) ensure private working lands are protected from fragmentation and continue as working lands that benefit Sage grouse.

SGI has supported ranchers to implement conservation actions on 5.6 million acres, reducing real threats facing both the bird and the grazing lands upon which those ranches depend. In 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced no-list decisions for both the Greater Sage grouse and the Bi-State population of Sage Grouse due to the unprecedented partnership in implementing conservation and the continued conservation implementation commitment. This conservation work benefits landowners through implementation of sustainable ranching practices that benefit both their agricultural operation and local communities, along with the sagebrush ecosystem, Sage grouse, and 350 other species of plant and animals.

Southwest Willow Flycatcher

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through WLFW to assist agricultural producers implement conservation practices that benefit the species on their working lands. Practices aim to protect and restore breeding habitat, combat habitat losses because of surface water diversion and groundwater pumping, address changes in flooding and fire regimens and manage non-native and invasive plants.

Landowners are restoring habitat for southwestern willow flycatcher and other riparian habitat species, aiding in the implementation of its recovery plan and increase landowner confidence that the conservation practices they implement will not harm the species or its habitat. Since 2012, NRCS has assisted about 70 landowners with over 11,000 acres of conservation treatments that have or will make significant progress for the recovery goals of the species.