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North American Grouse Partnership

Willard Heck, Board Chair
P.O. Box 23
Causey, NM 88113
575/273-4360
Fax: 575/273-4270
email: wrnm@yucca.net

RECEIVED MAR. 10 2009

FAX TRANSMISSION COVER SHEET

Date: March 10, 2009
To: Financial Assistance Program Division, Comments on WHIP Interim Final Rules
Fax: 202-720-4265
Re: Comment on Interim Final Rules for WHIP
Sender: Willard Heck

YOU SHOULD RECEIVE 4 PAGE(S), INCLUDING THIS COVER SHEET. IF YOU DO NOT RECEIVE ALL THE PAGES, PLEASE CALL 575/273-4360.



*"Our mission is to promote the conservation of grouse and the habitats
necessary for their survival and reproduction."*

March 10, 2009

TO: Financial Assistance Program Division, USDA Natural Resources
Conservation Service, Wildlife Incentives Program Comments, P.O. Box
2890, Room 5237-S, Washington, DC 20013

SUBJECT: Comment on Interim Final Rules for WHIP

The North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) is a national and international
advocacy group for grouse, formed in 1999 in response to the clear conservation
needs of several species

North American grouse species, especially those occupying prairie and sage
communities, have experienced dramatic population declines during the last 50
years. Most recently, petitions have been filed with the U. S. Fish & Wildlife
Service requesting that sage grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse be
placed on the threatened and endangered species list. The lesser prairie-chicken
is a candidate species for near-term ESA listing. Some data suggest that within
10 years most prairie grouse could be endangered.

Grouse habitat encompasses millions of acres of private and public land. These
magnificent birds function as excellent indicator species for the health of their
particular habitats, and they are held in especially high esteem by sportspersons,
birders, biologists and land managers.

NAGP works to bring the plight of declining grouse species and their habitats to
the attention of the public, provides oversight for the health of grouse
populations, implements solutions to the problems causing grouse declines and
encourages sound policies and management decisions that will enhance
important habitats and grouse populations.

The Farm Bill programs are important tools for furthering the conservation of
grouse and other wildlife habitat. Therefore we are providing you the following
comments to help improve delivery of this important program.

Sincerely,

Willard Heck
Board Chair

NAGP OFFICES

Willard Heck, Chair
Chairman: Dr. Rick Baydack, President: Mary Sealing, Secretary:
Allie Trewhitt, Treasurer: Ralph Rogers, Executive Director

NAGP, c/o ACSOL, 1670 N. U Road, Fruita, Colorado 81521 office 970-858-9659
www.nagp.org www.acsol.net naggp@acsol.net

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- We commend NRCS' identified national priorities for WHIP as identified in the Interim Final Rule (i.e., promote the restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats; protect, restore, develop, or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species)
- The Interim Final Rule emphasizes the need to use the WHIP for the conservation of pollinators. We commend this emphasis but stress that the focus should be on "native" pollinators and not "managed" pollinators which are non-native (thus do not meet the rules for correct definition of wildlife) and often require non-native habitats to sustain them. Other programs such as EQIP could be used to further managed pollinators. In addition, WHIP should continue its emphasis on native habitats which will support pollinators.
- The Interim Rule's definition of agricultural lands should be broadened to include areas other than just those "on which agricultural and forest related products or livestock are produced." Many critical landscapes such as wetlands, riparian areas, streams, and aspen groves should also be eligible for cost share payments. These important wildlife habitats are often within lands that are used for agricultural purposes and provide important conservation values (e.g. groundwater recharge) related to the agricultural operation.
- Section 636.7 Cost-share Payments states that "The cost-share payment to a participant shall be reduced proportionately below 75 percent to the extent that direct Federal financial assistance is provided to the participant from sources other than NRCS, except for certain cases that merit additional cost-share assistance to achieve the intended goals of the program ..." We recommend that NRCS readily grant this waiver, particularly as it relates to declining or at-risk species, because there is often little financial incentive for an agricultural producer to participate in activities that do not, inherently, result in increased agricultural profitability. If NRCS and other partners can eliminate the cost of this type of habitat work the landowner may be willing to allow the habitat to be restored or enhanced. This can help recover declining species and prevent Endangered Species Act listings.
- The Interim Rule allows for the NRCS State Conservationist, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, to give priority to WHIP practices that address unique habitats, or special geographic areas identified in a State. This will help focus resources, both staffing and funding, to maximize benefits where most needed. We are willing to work with you to achieve this end result.
- In some states, the stream bottom is often under jurisdiction of the state or federal government and, according to the rule, is not eligible for WHIP funding. However, these streams are integral parts of farming and ranching operations and provide critical habitat for many at-risk species. Private landowners have taken responsibility for management of these stream systems which are critical to

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their agricultural operations. In-stream habitat practices can often both benefit at-risk fish and other aquatic species and help protect the viability of the land for food and fiber production. We recommend that NRCS allow these stream systems to be eligible for WHIP when the landowner who operates agricultural operations within these landscapes is willing to participate.