

**State of Wisconsin \ DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

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March 13, 2009

Mr. Greg Johnson
Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 5237S
Washington DC 20250-2890

Subject: NRCS-IFR-08005: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Dear Mr. Johnson:

I am writing to request modifications to the interim final rule, 7 CFR Part 1466, that amends the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) as authorized in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Act 2008). Through the additional forestry components added to EQIP, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) sees this as an additional avenue to partner with NRCS to complete our mutual goals in addressing private landowner needs. The increased inclusion of forestry in EQIP will provide additional financial resources for Wisconsin's non-industrial private forest landowners, encouraging them to responsibly manage their land and the state's valuable resources.

A few key points the WDNR supports include the clarification and reaffirmation of nonindustrial private forest lands as EQIP eligible lands and the inclusion of forest management as a 'conservation practice.' Through making EQIP more inclusive of forestry related practices and woodland owners, state cost share funding will be stretched and the overall health of Wisconsin's forests will benefit.

While statutory language allows for "practice plans" in EQIP, the definition of a "forest management plan" restricts interpretation to only include Forest Stewardship type plans which may limit participation and hinder the involvement of forestry in the Program. The requirement of a Forest Stewardship plan for participation by woodland owners can potentially consume the financial resources of EQIP. Much of Wisconsin's forestland is currently not being managed under a Forest Stewardship plan and the capacity of the public and private sectors to provide the resources, time and funding necessary for this requirement is limited. By including 'practice plans' in the definition of forest management plans for short term management goals, such as erosion control practices, timber stand improvement, tree planting and invasive control, EQIP may be able to include more participants and extend the available funding. However, a Forest Stewardship Plan is appropriate for long range management activities such as timber harvesting. It appears as though forestland is being held to a higher standard than cropland in the draft rule. The inclusion of practice plans for appropriate practices on all eligible lands will help keep EQIP requirements consistent for all landowners.

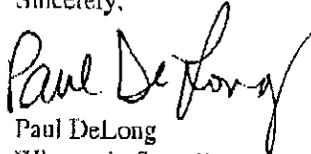
Another concern the Division has with the interim rule is the requirement for program participants to be in the Farm Services Agency system. This will not typically be true for most of Wisconsin's woodland owners. This

requirement could potentially be a limitation and an obstacle for NTPF landowner participation. If necessary for program administration, a targeted approach to outreach will bridge the gap between agricultural landowners and forestland owners.

The Division would also like to see the inclusion of forestry within the National Priorities for EQIP. NRCS currently lists Plant Health as a resource concern but EQIP does not specifically include Plant Health as a National Priority. By adding Forest Health as a National Priority, thereby making it a point scoring ranking criteria, forest related EQIP applications will have a better chance of receiving funding through the scoring process completed by the local work group. In addition, creating a funding pool for forest related projects would also facilitate funding for forestry related practice applications, enhancing the outcomes produced through EQIP. The combination of a Forest Health National Priority and a funding pool for forestry practices will help ensure local workgroups are funding projects that meet the purpose and requirements of EQIP.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the interim final rule: 7 CFR Part 1466. The WDNR looks forward to a continued partnership with NRCS to ensure the valuable natural resources of Wisconsin are protected and enhanced for the benefit of all.

Sincerely,



Paul DeLong
Wisconsin State Forester

Cc: Pat Leavenworth, NRCS
Nicole Potvin, WDNR

Pat Murphy, NRCS