

Cost-share Programs, Deer Habitat Enhancement, and PNIF Implications

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Background

Government cost-share programs provide both financial and technical assistance to Private Non-Industrial Forest (PNIF) landowners. Practices like “wildlife food plots” have been designed specifically to benefit white-tailed deer. Conifer tree plantations have been established to provide winter thermal cover for deer. Forest stand improvement (or “timber stand improvement”) has been used to create openings, improve deer visibility, and generally design the perfect deer stand. Are state and federal cost-share programs still being used to improve habitat for white-tails? How do program managers steer assistance away from wildlife species that don't need it and toward those that do? A look at a few of the more well known programs that address wildlife habitat will give an idea of present program direction.

The Landowner Incentives Program (LIP)

Administered by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), the purpose of LIP is to “...enhance, restore, and protect wetland and grassland habitats for species at risk.” LIP provides private landowners with advice, management plans, technical and financial assistance to: plant prairies, restore wetlands, remnant prairies and savannas, remove invasive species, and conduct prescribed burns on grasslands and wetlands. LIP also assists in establishing or restoring jack pine habitat on the Northern Lower Peninsula and mesic conifers on the Upper Peninsula. Although deer may benefit indirectly from LIP projects the focus of the program is providing habitat for rare, endangered, or declining wildlife species.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife

Administered by US Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife provides technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration and improvement projects on private lands. The Partners Program focuses on improving habitat for federal trust resources: migratory birds, federally-listed endangered or threatened species, and inter-jurisdictional fish. In Michigan, restoration of wetlands has been, and remains, the primary focus for the Partners Program. The program also includes restoration of grasslands, streams (both in the channel and within the riparian corridor), and specific habitats used by federally-listed endangered or threatened species. Although Partners for Fish and Wildlife is not mandated to work only on rare and declining species and habitats, it is clearly focused on wildlife species other than white-tailed deer.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), with some technical assistance from USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and MDNR, the purpose of CRP is to “... establish long-term, resource conserving covers on eligible farmland.” CRP goals include reducing soil erosion, protecting water and air quality, restoring wetlands, and improving wildlife

*A paper delivered at the Michigan Society of American Foresters “Forests & Whitetails-Striving for Balance” Conference
9-10 June, 2005 at the Little Bear Conference Center in St. Ignace, Michigan*



habitat. Wildlife habitat goals include "...establishing vegetative covers defined as best suited for wildlife." Wildlife vegetative covers must "...generally meet multiple seasonal (e.g. nesting cover, winter cover) requirements for wildlife of local or regional concern". Another wildlife goal of CRP is "Sensitive wildlife ecosystem restorations", specifically "...wetland restoration, wildlife corridors, riparian buffers, longleaf pines and rare and declining habitats." Ranking criteria are used to emphasize plant species composition and seed mixes that most favor priority wildlife. The Hardwood Tree Planting practice (CP3A), for example, awards the most points to applicants who include at least 3 mast-producing species in their tree plantations. Wildlife Food Plots (CP12), on the other hand, cannot earn an applicant additional points. Since CRP is very competitive, food plots will not help an applicant qualify for the program. In addition, food plots must conform to the NRCS Upland Wildlife Habitat Management standard, which emphasizes wildlife species diversity and pre-settlement vegetation establishment. Food plots are only eligible in conjunction with certain other CRP practices, most of which call for native grasses and deciduous trees and shrubs. Food plots are limited in size (no more than 10% of a field, a maximum of 5 acres). Cost-share is not available for establishment of wildlife food plots. Can deer habitat be established through CRP? Perhaps, but the program is clearly directed toward other, less common habitats and wildlife species.

Environment Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Administered by NRCS, EQIP resource concerns for Michigan include: threatened, endangered, or special concerns species systems, integrated (into cropland) wildlife management systems, riparian corridor management systems, and forestry systems. The wildlife emphasis in EQIP is on creating wildlife habitat in areas (particularly cropland) where there is presently little or none. The wildlife species targeted for habitat creation are described as "threatened, endangered, or of special concern". White-tailed deer would not fit this description in most Michigan counties, so obviously EQIP is aimed at other species and habitats.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Administered by NRCS, the purpose of WHIP is to create or enhance wildlife habitat on non-cropland systems (as opposed to EQIP, which is directed at cropland systems). WHIP in Michigan is focused on specific Priority Habitats: herbaceous habitats (grassland prairies, savannas, and barrens), aquatic buffers (adjacent to wetlands, streams, and water bodies), forestland expansion or improvement, and habitats preferred by threatened or endangered species. Cost-share for annual food plots is explicitly excluded from WHIP.

To summarize the direction of the programs described above, assistance is being focused as much as possible on specific rare or declining habitats, which in turn most favors rare and declining wildlife species that utilize these habitats. The means used to focus assistance includes clear descriptions of the plant species composition, hydrology and landscape location of individual practices, using ranking criteria to favor certain practices (e.g. warm season grass plantations) and limiting other practices (e.g. annual food plots). It's been pointed out that despite the best intentions many cost-shared practices will still benefit deer, but other wildlife species may be even more benefited.

The dilemma facing agency personnel who administer cost-share programs is how to respond to a PNIF owner who seeks assistance in establishing practices specifically to favor deer. NRCS uses a conservation planning process that requires identification of all resource concerns on each tract. If deer impacts can be identified, such as browse lines and lack of forest regeneration, during the resource inventory process, the landowner can be introduced to the idea that maybe the deer population does not need to be increased. In the conservation planning process several alternatives can be developed to address the identified resource concerns. Alternatives can include practices that favor wildlife species other than deer. Finally, if deer habitat improvement is still the goal, the conservation planner can point out that the forestry/wildlife assistance programs in most cases can't help because they are not targeted at white-tailed deer. Even if the landowner is willing to proceed without program assistance a conservation planner can explain that workload and agency policy makes technical assistance for



deer habitat a low priority. It may be some time before a site visit or conservation plan can be completed. Although it's a subtle, voluntary process a good conservation planner is often able to assist a PNIF landowner to identify and begin to address resource concerns, even if the resource concerns, such as deer impacts, are not at first fully appreciated.

References

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www.fws.gov/partners

USDA-NRCS electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG):
<http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/treemenuFS.aspx?Fips=26065&MenuName=menuMI.zip>

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