

## **MISSISSIPPI HEALTHY FORESTS RESERVE PROGRAM SIGNUP ANNOUNCED**

### **Program Will Improve Wildlife Habitat in Forests**

Jackson, MS March 1, 2010—USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) today announced the signup for the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP). The signup is available in Mississippi from March 1 through March 19, 2010. HFRP protects and enhances forested wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species and other declining populations of fish and wildlife habitat. HFRP is being made available to help private landowners restore and enhance forest ecosystems and promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species on private forestlands.

Homer L. Wilkes, Mississippi State Conservationist for NRCS, announced that the federally listed threatened or endangered species targeted for habitat and population recovery activities in Mississippi are the gopher frog, the gopher tortoise, and the black pine snake, a candidate for listing. The program will be offered in 14 counties including Covington, Forrest, George, Greene, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Jones, Lamar, Marion, Pearl River, Perry, Stone, and Wayne.

“The Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), authorized by the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, and reauthorized to be carried out in the 2008 Farm Bill, is a voluntary program established for the purpose of restoring and enhancing forest ecosystems to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species, improve biodiversity, and enhance carbon sequestration,” said Wilkes.

HFRP is being implemented in coordination between NRCS and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Eligible private forest landowners in selected counties in Mississippi can apply for HFRP at their local NRCS field offices. Applications received by March 19, 2010, will be prioritized according to ranking criteria used for protecting or enhancing the habitat of the gopher frog, gopher tortoise, and black pine snake in Mississippi's significantly declining Longleaf Pine Ecosystem.

To be eligible, interested landowners must develop a forest management restoration plan that includes the implementation of conservation practices necessary to restore and enhance forested habitat for selected species listed as threatened or endangered, species eligible for listing, or a State species of special concern. NRCS will provide technical assistance to help program participants develop and implement their HFRP forest management restoration plans.

Three enrollment options will be available to eligible landowners: a 10-year cost-share agreement where the landowner may receive 50 percent of the average cost of approved conservation practices; a 30-year easement where the landowner may receive 75 percent of the easement value of the enrolled land and 75 percent of the average cost of approved habitat conservation practices; or a permanent easement where the landowner may receive up to 100 percent of the easement value of the enrolled land and up to 100 percent of the average cost of approved habitat conservation practices.

"Landowner Protections" will be made available to HFRP participants who agree, for a specified period, to restore or improve their land for threatened or endangered species habitat so that there is a net conservation benefit to the species. In exchange, the program participant will avoid future regulatory restrictions on the use of that land protected under the Endangered Species Act.

For additional information on the 2010 HFRP signup, contact your local Mississippi USDA Service Center or visit: <http://www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/>.

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