

NRCS and FWS reach historic agreement to extend wildlife conservation efforts on working agricultural lands

Regulatory predictability will help Mississippi farmers and ranchers improve gopher tortoise habitat

JACKSON, Sept. 24, 2012 – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Dave White and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Director Dan Ashe recently announced an agreement that will provide long-term regulatory predictability for up to 30 years to Mississippi farmers, ranchers and forest landowners participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) initiative. Participants voluntarily implement proven conservation practices designed to protect wildlife habitat, such as the gopher tortoise, on private lands.

“This agreement provides Mississippi landowners with a way to keep working lands in production while complying with the Endangered Species Act (ESA),” State Conservationist Homer Wilkes said. “It helps our farmers, ranchers and forest landowners rest a little easier knowing their operations are protected in the long term and that they are helping conserve gopher tortoise habitat and essential natural resources.”

The agreement builds on a \$33 million investment NRCS announced last spring dedicated toward producers who develop and implement conservation plans to manage and restore high-priority habitats for seven specific wildlife species across the country. The species are greater sage-grouse, New England cottontail, bog turtle, golden-winged warbler, gopher tortoise, lesser prairie-chicken and the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

NRCS, Fish and Wildlife Service and numerous state and local entities such as Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain, The Nature Conservancy, local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Mississippi Forestry Commission, National Wild Turkey Federation, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks and U.S. Forest Service are partnering to implement this initiative.

Following the recent agreement, farmers, ranchers and forest landowners who implement and voluntarily agree to maintain the proven conservation practices in this initiative will have addressed the related ESA regulatory responsibilities for up to 30 years. These landowners will be able to operate their farms and ranches as agreed upon, providing economic benefits and species conservation simultaneously.

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Under the WLFW partnership, federal, state and wildlife experts jointly identified at-risk or listed species that would benefit from targeted habitat restoration investments on private lands. Using the best available science, these wildlife experts prioritized restoration actions on a large regional scale to focus assistance most cost effectively.

The federal government will grant farmers, ranchers and forest landowners regulatory predictability in return for voluntarily making wildlife habitat improvements on their private agricultural and forest lands. Participating producers must adhere to the requirements of each conservation practice during the term of their contract, which can last from one to 15 years. If landowners would like to receive regulatory predictability for up to 30 years, they must maintain the conservation practices as outlined in the NRCS and Fish and Wildlife Service agreement.

For more information about Working Lands for Wildlife, please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/home/?&cid=stelprdb1047006>.

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