

MINNESOTA WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVES PROGRAM (WHIP) STATE PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Minnesota has been endowed with a very rich and diverse natural heritage. Lying at the crossroads of three major biomes, it harbors an array of habitats. Minnesota is unique among the Midwest states because of its extensive boreal forest, eastern deciduous forest, and grassland habitats, each of which contributes to Minnesota's wildlife heritage.

Home to over 1800 vascular plants, 600 vertebrate animals, and countless thousands of invertebrates and non-vascular plants. Within hours one may encounter species ranging from those characteristic of a mid-grass prairie, to those characteristic of an old growth northern hardwoods forest. 83 percent of lands in Minnesota are rural, and privately owned. Thus the greatest potential to affect wildlife habitat and populations is to reach private agricultural producers. The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) offers an enormous opportunity to complement existing private, local, state, and federal fish and wildlife initiatives.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

A comprehensive review of the "State of Fisheries and Wildlife" was completed by a diverse subgroup of the Minnesota State Technical Committee. Membership of this committee covers a broad spectrum of fish and wildlife interests including governmental agencies, environmental and wildlife organizations, farmer organizations, and private landowners.

One result of this planning committee was the development of an overall goal relative to implementing WHIP. The goal of WHIP in Minnesota is to: "Maintain a healthy, diverse ecosystem through the improvement, enhancement and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat, in cooperation with private agricultural landowners".

Minnesota landowners, conservation partners, and NRCS plan on reaching the above mentioned goal through the following objectives:

1. Promote wildlife habitat restoration and management on private lands through cooperative endeavors between landowners and Federal, state and local conservation partners. This will provide maximum WHIP exposure.
2. Provide technical and financial assistance to landowners to identify and meet their wildlife goals.
3. To maximize habitat/species benefits, focus WHIP financial and technical resources towards projects statewide which are a component of a comprehensive plan with the highest demonstrative outcomes.
4. Utilize WHIP, to the extent practicable, to benefit State and Federally listed endangered, threatened, and special concern species.
5. Develop an information and education outreach program to coordinate promotion of WHIP.
6. Utilize a network of interagency specialists, and other qualified resource managers to deliver WHIP to landowners.
7. Periodically monitor the progress, success, and acceptance of WHIP in achieving stated goals.

In emphasizing a coordinated approach in which WHIP resources will be matched to identified high quality projects statewide, habitat suitability after project completion is expected to increase substantially.

Recognizing the diversity of habitat, wildlife species, and restoration/management needs occurring throughout the state, the Minnesota State Technical Committee has elected not to geographically exclude any portion of the state. Thus, WHIP will be available statewide. The state ranking criteria will be utilized to focus WHIP resources towards projects demonstrating the greatest benefits relative to identified priority concerns.

PARTNERSHIP INVOLVEMENT

The state WHIP plan provides for the restoration and enhancement of habitats which have been adversely affected due to agriculture and other forces. To assure effective implementation of WHIP resources, WHIP will be utilized primarily to compliment existing comprehensive plans and incentive programs. This approach assures that WHIP is complimentary to, rather than competitive with existing initiatives.

Coordinating incentive projects assures the greatest habitat benefits per dollar expended, comprehensive projects result in successful implementation, and locally lead initiatives have grassroots support. The following list summarizes the primary wildlife initiatives in Minnesota that WHIP will coordinate with.

Governmental

Environmental Quality Incentives Program - USDA
Forestry Incentives Program - USDA
Partners for Wildlife Program - USDI
Pheasant Habitat Improvement Program - MDNR
Stewardship Incentives Program - USDA/MDNR
Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Resources Program - BWSR

Non-Governmental Organizations

Minnesota Forestry Association
Pheasants Forever Cost-Share Program
Minnesota Sharp-Tailed Grouse Association
Minnesota Ruffed Grouse Society
Minnesota Waterfowl Association
Minnesota Deer Hunters Association
Minnesota Trout Unlimited
Minnesota Wild Turkey Federation
The Nature Conservancy

APPLICATION AND RANKING

Applications are accepted on a continuous basis, with eligible applications ranked and funded on a periodic basis until dollars are exhausted.

MINNESOTA WHIP - PRIORITY HABITAT TYPES

NORTHERN TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

This ecoregion once dominated by tallgrass prairie, is concentrated in western Minnesota. All prairie types are now rare, including dry prairie, glacial till hill prairie, mesic prairie, wet prairie, and calcareous fens. Over 25 species of plants, 6 mammals, 11 birds, 1 reptile, and 6 insects occur as either endangered, threatened or of special concern. Including; Western prairie fringed orchid, Prairie bush clover, Baird's sparrow, Greater prairie-chicken and Marbled godwit, and Burrowing owl.

Wildlife conservation concerns: Continued destruction of prairie habitat due to development, mining and agriculture as well as the impacts of altered hydrology on fens are issues of concern. Practices will include restoration and enhancement of wetlands, establish and manage prairie habitat, and establishment of stream riparian corridors.

DRIFTLESS/DISSECTED PLATEAU

This region is a highly eroded, highly dissected river valleys. Several major rivers flow through the region, forming steep ravines of hard bottom cold water streams (most of which are trout streams), to broad alluvial floodplains of the Mississippi.

Prairies and savannas are now rare. Calcareous seepage fens and floodplain forest also occur in remnant parcels. The Mississippi River corridor is a primary travel route for neotropical migrant songbirds. This region also supports much of the states remaining bat hibernacula. Over 12 species of rare plants, 8 fish, 2 mussels, and 2 insects occur in this region. Including; Cliff goldenrod, Leedys roseroot, Pallid shiner, Karner blue butterfly, and Higgin's eye pearly mussel. Practices include: prairie restoration and enhancement, stream habitat improvement, riparian corridor establishment and forest improvement.

EASTERN BROADLEAF FOREST

This region bridges the transition zone between prairie to the west and true forest to the east. Pre-settlement vegetation included bur oak savannas, brush prairie and oak forest. Tallgrass prairie occupied the least dissected portions, and ground cover of open savannas. Sugar maple-basswood forest occupied the steeper sites. Most of the level to rolling topography is intensively farmed. Animal agriculture is intensive resulting in erosion and overgrazing.

Wildlife conservation concerns: Maintain oak, oak savanna component in the forests through prescribed burning and prescribed grazing. Preserve and restore prairie habitat, Greater prairie chicken habitat, and wetland restoration/enhancement.

LAKE AGASSIZ-ASPEN PARKLAND

This region gets its name from the mosaic of aspen groves, prairie, and wetlands. Low dunes, beach ridges, wet swales, and shrub-aspen dominate. Livestock grazing, gravel mining, and row crop agriculture are the primary land uses. Plant communities represented in this region include: aspen brush prairie, dry prairie, lowland hardwood forest, mesic brush prairie, wet prairie, and calcareous fen.

Wildlife conservation concerns: The Aspen Parkland priority landscape represents a concentration of native habitats, rare and non-game species. Fire suppression has allowed brush prairie to become aspen parklands. Prescribed burning and timber harvest is practiced to benefit species diversity, and upland bird habitat.

LAURENTIAN MIXED FOREST

This region comprises the true forested region of Minnesota. Pre-settlement vegetation consisted of continuous conifer, conifer-hardwood mix, and hardwood vegetation. Swamp forests were dominated by black spruce, tamarack, N. white cedar, aspen and birch.

Numerous high gradient streams lead directly from the highlands, to the shores of Lake Superior. These cold water streams support native sustaining populations of brook and rainbow trout, and also serve as breeding waters for several species of anadromous fish common to Lake Superior.

Wildlife conservation concerns: wetland alteration, and accelerated timber harvest with loss of old growth and large blocks of mature forest. Forest fragmentation relative to forest interior nesting species. Logging and residential development along Lake Superior resulting in degradation to trout stream habitat. Practices include: forest improvement, stream habitat improvement and brush/browse management.