

TECHNICAL NOTES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE STATE OF COLORADO NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

BIOLOGY TECHNICAL NOTE NO. 8

January 22, 2008

To: Area Offices
 Field Offices

From: Terri Skadeland
 State Biologist

Re: Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guides (WHEG)

The attached Technical Note contains Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guides (WHEGs) to be used in evaluating general wildlife habitat conditions on a variety of cover types. The WHEGs provide the NRCS planner with a relatively easy and objective means of determining the value of general wildlife habitat on any planning unit. The planning unit may consist of a field, tract, or an entire farm or ranch. The planning unit will be referred to as a Conservation Treatment Unit (CTU). The guides can be used on land where managing for wildlife is a primary objective, or on land where wildlife is a secondary objective. Boundaries of a CTU for wildlife evaluations may coincide with those delineated for cropland, rangeland, pasture land, hayland, or forest land; or a wildlife CTU may be delineated that includes two or more land uses. If a CTU is predominantly one land use, (for example, cropland with grassy irrigated corners and fence rows), the unit should be evaluated only for the predominant land use.

The guides are based on the following assumptions:

1. All land provides habitat for wildlife.
2. The quality of habitat is variable depending on the quality, quantity and interspersion of food, water, cover, and space.
3. We can measure habitat variables and compare them to optimum conditions.
4. Wildlife populations are proportional to the quantity and quality of habitat.

The guides can be used to determine if a CTU meets the minimum quality standard for wildlife found in Section III, electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG), for wildlife in a Resource Management System (RMS). The guides can help identify conservation practices and management measures that can be used to meet the RMS standard or to meet the habitat quality objective of the landowner. These guides are not to be used to evaluate the potential for introducing a species not presently found on the CTU.

The guides use a numerical rating to compare the value of existing wildlife habitat with the value of wildlife habitat under various alternatives. They are based on the idea that diversity is beneficial for many commonly encountered wildlife species. The guides have been developed to consider the needs of a variety of species using a particular land-use/cover type. They were not developed to evaluate the habitat quality for any particular species or for wildlife specialists (species with a very narrow range of habitat needs). Thus, complete habitat needs or home range requirements for a particular species may not be reflected in the guides.

If a landowner is interested in improving or managing habitat for a particular species, a Wildlife Species Model or Technical Note for that species should be used. See the index for Biology Technical Notes for current species specific models and technical notes (<http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/references/public/CO/index.doc>) If you have a need for a species-specific model that is not listed on the eFOTG, contact the Area or State Biologist.

Instructions for use of the guides:

1. Determine the landowner's objectives with regard to his/her overall conservation program, wildlife, specific practices he/she wishes to apply, etc. For example: Is the land to be managed primarily for wildlife or cropland, or both? Does he/she wish to increase wildlife populations or maintain present populations?
2. Based on the landowner's or your knowledge of the area, what wildlife species (game or non-game) are present in the area? Are threatened or endangered species present or other species that require special attention? You may have to refer to the literature or consult with an NRCS Biologist or Colorado Division of Wildlife Biologist.
3. All fields evaluated should be numbered on the plan map and identified on the appropriate evaluation worksheet.
4. Refer to the published Soil Survey or the Ecological Site Descriptions to find the wildlife habitat potential and plant interpretations for the sites you are dealing with.
5. Rating the habitat quality and quantity is best done in the field with the landowner. Evaluate the habitat based on what would be expected under normal, mid-growing season conditions. Enough of the CTU should be visited, referred to on the aerial photo and discussed with the landowner to accurately evaluate habitat condition. Keep in mind that this is a guide. When you encounter situations not specifically covered, use your judgment to rate that factor. Any rating between 0.0-1.0 is acceptable. If a factor is below the lowest listed rating, a 0.0 for that factor is appropriate. All 0.0 ratings should be counted in the total number of inventory factors rated. If you feel a factor does not apply, you may adjust the guide to rate only factors evaluated. The guides may be completed while collecting other resource data such as range condition, woodland site index, etc.
6. After the total habitat value has been determined, look back through ratings to find those factors that could be improved.
7. With the landowner, develop alternatives for improving deficient factors.
8. For additional information refer to animal guides, plant guides, job sheets, Ecological Site Descriptions, and the eFOTG for specifics on what to do and how to do it. Contact the Area or State Biologist if you have questions or comments.