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PLANNING MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES ON CONSERVATION RESERVE FIELDS TO MANAGE FOR WILDLIFE

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides an unparalleled opportunity to improve wildlife habitat on many acres of land in Mississippi. Conversion of cropland to native grasses, forbs, legumes, shrubs, trees, and wetlands has had an immediate and positive impact on wildlife populations on not only CRP fields but adjacent lands as well. Wildlife can continue to flourish if the vegetative conditions are properly managed/maintained on CRP areas. Plants left alone will advance into the less desirable stages of plant succession and produce unfavorable habitat for openland wildlife such as bobwhite quail and cottontail rabbits.

Wildlife habitat can be protected or enhanced by appropriate and timely maintenance activities. Normal maintenance for most grass, forb, legume and shrub CRP plantings consists of mowing, prescribed burning, disking, or herbicide application. These maintenance practices, when properly applied, can have a positive influence on wildlife habitat for a number of years. The lasting effects of the maintenance techniques will depend upon the soil conditions and type of vegetation. The more fertile soils will generally require frequent maintenance to maintain plant communities in favorable plant succession conditions.

A plan should be prepared to provide the CRP participants with the best practical maintenance activities for the approved cover and desired wildlife habitat. These maintenance practices shall meet CRP and participant objectives. **Maintenance activities on CRP fields for wildlife purposes should always be consistent with Conservation Reserve Program policies and be appropriately recorded in the Conservation Plan of Operations.** Practice narratives, job sheets and other acceptable documentation specifically addressing maintenance shall be included in the plan. For additional guidance on plans and specifications for managing/maintaining desired wildlife species and/or habitat types, refer to NRCS practice standards, specification sheets, technical notes, and job sheets, or contact a NRCS biologist.

Prescribed burning is the most effective maintenance method for most open land stands of native vegetation and plantings. Burning is best accomplished in late winter or early spring. Burning once every 2-3 years will stimulate production of grasses, legumes, and other plants beneficial to wildlife. CRP participants are responsible for fire management on CRP fields. However, the prescribed burning write-up in the conservation plan should state that the burning will be conducted by or under the supervision of a certified prescribed burn manager. <u>Although prescribed burning is economical and beneficial to most wildlife species, it may not be practical for many landowners.</u>

PLANNING MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES ON CONSERVATION RESERVE FIELDS TO MANAGE FOR WILDLIFE (continued)

Light disking is a very effective, low-cost wildlife maintenance technique for CRP fields. Light disking can significantly alter plant succession, increase plant community diversity, and help control woody vegetation and noxious weeds. Disk in strips or alternate areas of the field on a 2-3 year cycle. Rotating the location of the lightly disked strips will maintain undisturbed areas for ground nesting birds and animals. Disking of CRP fields must be in accordance with soil loss guidelines. For upland areas disking lightly from October 1 to March 31 will usually provide the best results. Light disking can be used as a management tool for moist-soil areas in wetlands and shallow water areas for wildlife.

Mowing is the most widely utilized maintenance technique for CRP fields. Many wildlife managers do not recognize mowing as being beneficial for wildlife management purposes except for brush control and access road maintenance. Mowing can be useful in helping maintain succulent and more productive stands of winter grass and legumes such as clover and annual/shrub lespedezas. Mowing may be needed during the plant establishment period to control weeds.

Chemical herbicide application may be applied using spot treatments to control noxious or invasive species. Spot treatment is limited to the affected areas of the field.

After a final status review, all maintenance activities are not to be conducted during the CRP nesting period set to avoid disrupting nests of quail, turkey and other ground nesting species. However to avoid interference with upland nesting activities and to promote the growth of desirable plants, maintenance activities should not be conducted between April 1 – October 1 in Mississippi.

Annual mowing or disking of entire fields or same portions of fields for generic weed control and/or cosmetic purposes is prohibited. Rotate and/or alternate the location of maintenance activities every year, using a 2-3 year cycle. Performing maintenance activities in strips or alternate portions will maintain a portion of a field in undisturbed nesting conditions and also provide sufficient permanent cover to provide wildlife habitat and soil loss protection. No more than one-third of the acreage in a contract may be disturbed in a 1-year period.