PENNSYLVANIA

WILDLIFE HABITAT EVALUATION WORKSHEETS

INTRODUCTION

Implementation of conservation practices is generally considered to be beneficial for fish and wildlife resources. Conservation practices such as residue and tillage management, cover crops, riparian buffers, and prescribed grazing generally increase food and cover, and improve habitat diversity for many wildlife species. On the other hand, conservation practices such as subsurface drainage, obstruction removal, and brush management can reduce needed wildlife food and cover when applied without consideration for wildlife habitat. The effect of conservation practice implementation on wildlife habitat largely depends on practice selection, design, and maintenance.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) policy for assistance on private lands requires that conservation practice planning and implementation be accomplished with consideration for fish and wildlife resources, regardless of land use. Conservation practices are often designed and installed with little thought given to their effects on wildlife habitat, unless the land user indicates a specific wildlife interest. Persons who provide technical assistance to land users need to evaluate the impact of implementation and explain to their clients what effect a planned system of conservation practices will have on various natural resources, including fish and wildlife. When provided with this information, clients are able to make informed decisions about their land.

Adopting a Resource Management System (RMS) in conservation planning requires that emphasis be directed to plants, air, and animals, in addition to soil and water (SWAPA). The animal resource is comprised of both domestic animals and wildlife, and wildlife includes both terrestrial and aquatic species – non-game as well as game species. Quality criteria are established for each of the individual natural resource concerns within the five SWAPA resources. Resource Management Systems, consisting of various combinations of conservation practices, are measured against these quality criteria to determine if acceptable levels of conservation are being met.

In order to measure the degree to which existing conditions and any alternative actions selected meet established resource quality criteria, a method of evaluation is required. The attached wildlife evaluation procedure is to be used to determine the quality rating (overall score/index) for an individual field or other conservation planning unit. To meet the quality criteria for Fish and Wildlife – Inadequate Cover, the wildlife habitat rating for each land use must be at least 50% of optimum conditions, 0.5 on a scale of 0 to 1.

When planning a conservation system where wildlife habitat is an objective and the evaluation index is less than 0.5, recommendations will be made to improve the existing habitat so that the planned condition will have an index of 0.5 or more. Similarly, when the evaluation determines that the existing condition is already 0.5 or higher, recommendations will be made to either maintain or improve the existing conditions – according to the land user's objectives.

This evaluation procedure is based primarily on habitat diversity and provides a general rating applicable to many different wildlife species. It is intended to both assist the land user in understanding the effects of various agricultural practices on wildlife habitat and to provide documentation of those effects. The worksheets are simplified to limit data input and the time required to complete them. The worksheets alone can not be used to make detailed management recommendations required for intensive wildlife management or for individual wildlife species.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Select the appropriate worksheet for the land use (Cropland or Pasture & Hayland).

- Use one worksheet per management system or conservation planning unit, which may include one or more fields.
- Only land under control of the decision-maker can be included in the evaluation.
- Crop fields with the same crop rotation and management practices (tillage & residue management, cover crops, etc.) should be grouped together for habitat evaluation. Hayland in rotation is Cropland. (Do not use these worksheets for CRP/CREP fields.)
- Fields managed primarily as permanent hayland should be evaluated on a separate Pasture and Permanent Hayland worksheet from fields managed primarily for pasture. Fields managed primarily for pasture but occasionally hayed can be evaluated on the same worksheet with other pasture fields. (Do not use these worksheets for CRP/CREP fields.)

2. Evaluate the existing condition and the planned condition (if applicable).

- For the existing condition 'E', check the option that most closely fits for criteria and record the appropriate score. For the **planned condition** (if applicable), **circle and record** the appropriate score for the option that most closely fits each criteria. Do not select options with higher scores unless <u>all</u> the elements are met for that option. If the field(s)/area(s) being evaluated do not meet <u>all</u> the elements for a given scoring option, then a lower scoring option must be selected.*
- Sum the points for the existing condition and the planned condition (if applicable).
- Divide by the maximum possible score to get the overall score for the existing index and planned index (if applicable).

Additional Criteria for Crop Residues/Cover Crops:

- Winter cover crops must attain six inches of height by the end of the Fall growing season.
- No more than fifty percent of the Cropland acreage may have liquid manure surface applied before March 15th, unless liquid manure is applied early (late Summer/early Fall) and followed by a winter cover crop which meets the above criteria.

Additional Criteria for Field Border and other habitats such as dense shrubby cover, hedgerow, and <u>un-grazed</u> woodland:

- Must be less than or equal to ten percent noxious, invasive, or problem introduced species.

Examples of Desirable Forb/Legume:

- Asters and daisies, buttercups, common ragweed, daisy fleabane, goldenrod, ironweeds, milkweeds, Queen Anne's lace (wild carrot), birdsfoot trefoil, various clovers, alfalfa, black medic, and partridge pea.

*Interpolation is possible, but should only be done after consulting the State Biologist (not all relationships are strictly linear.)

NOTE: Similar management/conditions may have different values (scores) under the various criteria. The same management/condition factor is not assigned a fixed score for all criteria.