

## WILDLIFE HABITAT EVALUATION TOOL (WHET) FOR WILDLIFE PLANNING CRITERIA

### BACKGROUND:

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) requires that conservation planners consider wildlife species and their habitats when planning and installing conservation practices. While many conservation alternatives generally are considered beneficial for wildlife, conservation effects on wildlife largely depend on practice selection, design, and plant species.

The NRCS participant shall determine to what extent wildlife needs will be considered and which, if any, wildlife species to manage. NRCS shall inventory all natural resources defined as SWAPA +H, E (soil, water, air, plant, animal, human, and energy resources). NRCS personnel shall determine, to the extent possible, and explain to the decision-maker conservation practice effects on wildlife resources. NRCS must evaluate planning alternatives based on decision-maker wildlife objectives in addition to species identified as endangered, threatened, and/or at risk.

Conservation planning certification by NRCS planners requires a basic understanding of wildlife habitat requirements and the ability to employ a basic wildlife habitat evaluation using the Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Tool (WHET). National planning criteria for the wildlife resource have been set at 50 percent of potential to meet the resource management system requirement, regardless of land use. Virginia NRCS will evaluate planning criteria for the wildlife resource on the VA WHET.

The VA WHET is based primarily on diversity to provide a general rating applicable to many wildlife species based on inferred benefits as a result of agricultural conservation practice implementation. When intensive management for a particular wildlife species is desired, planners shall contact the Private Lands Biologist (PLB) or NRCS State Biologist for guidance, comment, and review of species-specific wildlife habitat management plans.

The VA WHET shall not replace program-specific evaluations such as the Wetland Reserve Easement program (WRE) or existing species-specific habitat evaluation guides such as the Golden-winged Warbler (GWWA) evaluation guide.

### INTRODUCTION:

Planners shall use the following VA WHET on fields "tagged" with the wildlife modifier. The VA WHET is a simplified wildlife habitat evaluation tool to limit data collection and completion time to assist conservation planners and NRCS participants in understanding and documenting various conservation practice effects on wildlife.

### PROCEDURE:

- 1) Start by entering the appropriate information on the "Info Sheet" tab of the WHET. This information will automatically be entered elsewhere in the WHET where necessary, so that it does

not have to be manually entered multiple times.

2) Organize the wildlife work to be done into logical "management units." For instance, if similar work is to be done in multiple fields that are similar in their existing conditions, treat these as one management unit. Conversely, if areas will be treated differently (even within the same field), if existing conditions vary, and/or if land uses vary, treat as different management units.

3) Evaluate each management unit based on its planned land use or habitat type (For example: If converting fescue to native meadow, evaluate as Open Land. If planting a former crop field into hardwood trees, evaluate as Hardwood Forest-Creation). The benchmark score is based on the current condition of the habitat type. The planned score is the expected future condition after all conservation practices have been implemented and the desired habitat condition is met. Continue scoring until all planned management units have been evaluated.

4) Determine the Priority Management Unit. The Priority Management Unit is defined as the management unit that is either A) the highest scoring unit >10 acres, or B) the largest management unit if all units are <10 acres. Check the box next to the Priority Management Unit in the score sheet.

7) The Planned Score and the Final Score (difference between Planned and Benchmark) of the Priority Management Unit are used to answer Wildlife Ranking Question 1 in Protracts.

#### **PLANNING CRITERIA:**

To meet the FOTG planning criteria for the wildlife resource, the final WHET score must be greater than or equal to 0.5. Generally, a habitat index below 0.3 indicates poor habitat, between 0.3 and 0.5 indicates fair habitat, and 0.75 or greater indicates excellent habitat. For projects where wildlife is the primary resource concern (i.e., application is in a wildlife fund pool), the planned habitat index value MUST be  $\geq 0.75$ .







