

Conservation Incentives

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ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE

finding the ways that work

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Colorado
program
works with
landowners 2



EQIP 101:
Program
overview 4



Improving
EQIP ranking
systems 5



Montana
EQIP success
stories 6



New program
will aid forest
owners 8

Related resources 7

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Private Stewardship Grants Program offers \$7.1 million to landowners to help rare species

On a small, fifth-generation family farm outside Columbus, Ohio, Bethany Larue and her parents, Gale and Vicky Larue, decided to make a difference in rare plant conservation. The Larues asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Private Stewardship Grants Program (PSGP) for a small grant to fence a nine-acre wetland on their property to protect a state-threatened plant, the raven's foot sedge (*Carex crus-corvi*). The Fish and Wildlife Service awarded this funding in 2003 and the Larues will use it this spring, along with their own time and resources, to help a rare Ohio plant by protecting a beautiful wetland.

PSGP awarded over \$9 million in grants to landowners and their partner organizations in 2003. More than 110 projects received funding, including efforts to restore 3,000 acres of marsh and riparian habitat in Oregon to benefit endangered fish, enhance habitat for the best private land population of a rare Washington state plant and improve habitat for the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger cinereus*) on private Maryland forestland.

This year the Fish and Wildlife Service has announced the availability of

\$7.1 million in new PSGP funding for voluntary conservation efforts to benefit rare species on private lands. (Previously, Congress cut more than \$2 million from PSGP funding in the budget appropriations process.) The deadline for receipt of proposals is March 8, 2004.

Although many landowners share the Larue family's strong sense of stewardship for the land where they live, relatively few landowners have the time and opportunity to find funding and implement restoration work on their own. In recognition of that difficulty, PSGP funding is available both to individual landowners and to groups and organizations that partner with landowners to submit proposals and implement projects. Indeed, lands owned or leased by organizations may be eligible for funding to the extent that proposed conservation actions go beyond measures and plans

Continued on page 7



Bethany Larue and Ohio EPA wetland botanist John Mack work to preserve the state-threatened raven's foot sedge.

Courtesy Bethany Larue

Colorado Species Conservation Partnership focuses on landowner and species needs

Many declining species in Colorado depend largely upon private land for their habitat. With almost two-thirds of Colorado's lands privately owned and in agricultural production, active and willing participation by agricultural producers is essential to preserve such species as Preble's meadow jumping mouse (*Zapus hudsonius preblei*), mountain plover (*Charadrius montanus*), black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) and Gunnison's sage grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*). Recognizing how contentious endangered species issues on private land can be, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (Division) created a tool in 2002 to recover these species by building long-term, working relationships with landowners.

The new Colorado Species Conservation Partnership (CSCP) provides a framework for building essential state-landowner partnerships. The key

components, the Division found, are providing a consistent funding source; incorporating landowner needs and preferences throughout the process; offering a variety of voluntary, non-regulatory, flexible incentives; and balancing the ecological needs of the species and the economic needs of the agricultural producer.

The statewide program focuses on fish and wildlife species that are state or federally listed as threatened or endangered, designated by the state as species of special concern or in decline. In its initial year, CSCP will focus upon a few terrestrial species and landscapes that the Division determined as the highest priority: the Gunnison's sage grouse in the Gunnison Valley; the Preble's meadow jumping

mouse along the Front Range; and native grassland species such as the black-tailed prairie dog, mountain plover, ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*), burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) and others inhabiting the shortgrass prairie of the eastern plains.

Although the first-year agreements are not yet final, the Division anticipates completing seven projects that will conserve more than 25,000 acres of habitat.

CSCP had its start eight years earlier when the Division recognized the need for a more targeted approach to habitat protection. In the early 1990s, Colorado voters approved using state lottery funds for wildlife, parks and open

space, and the state created Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO). Despite this consistent funding source, species continued to decline. At the same time, the state's agricultural industry experi-

enced economic downturns, endangering another vital element of the landscape: traditional farming and ranching ways of life. The ultimate conservation challenge was to merge the protection of landscapes and species with the preservation of rural traditions. Rich Larson, the Division's GOCO liaison, explained, "Working with landowners became as critical as preventing the decline of species. You can't do one without the other."

First, the Division identified the state's most critical habitats with the help of The Nature Conservancy, Colorado Natural Heritage Program and Colorado land trusts. Species information was compiled in a centralized database, The Natural Diversity Information Source (<http://ndis.nrel.colostate.edu/>). These data guided the choice of focus areas for the new program. Meanwhile, Larson and others established a consistent funding source for the program. GOCO benefits habitat protection in Colorado by leveraging dollars from two federal programs: the State Wildlife Grants Program and Landowner Incentive Program. These three sources provide the bulk of the \$25 million that will fund CSCP's first three years, and land trusts, other non-profit organiza-

“Working with landowners became as critical as preventing the decline of species. You can't do one without the other.”



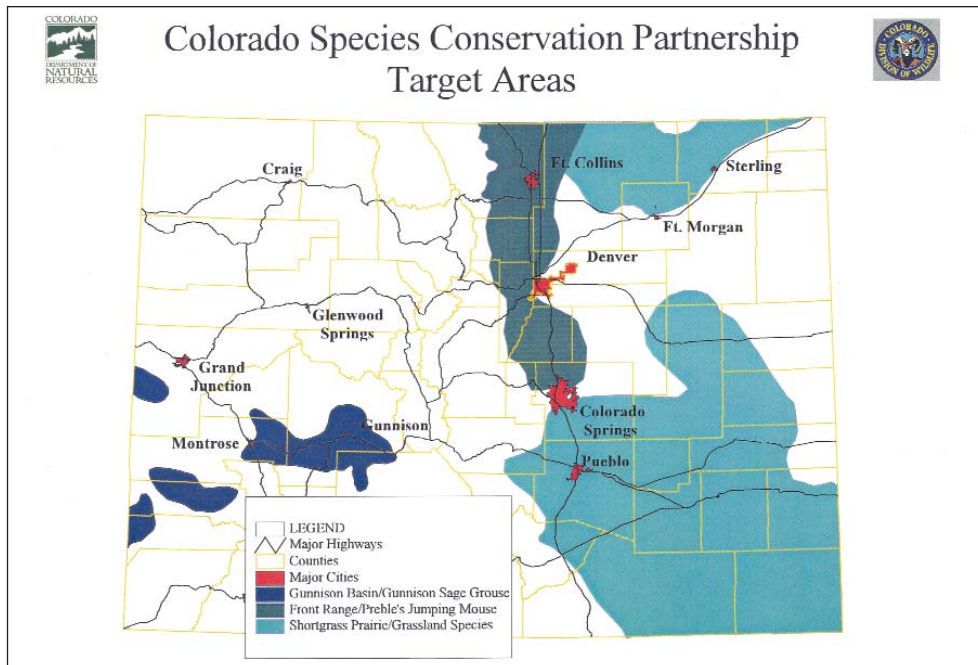
The state-listed burrowing owl and other declining grassland species are a CSCP priority.

© Bill Horn

tions and participating landowners contribute the rest.

With the biological strategy in place and funding to back it up, the Division began building a comprehensive program for a gamut of landowner needs, agricultural uses and ecological conditions. Landowners control their involvement in the program, determining their management and financial requirements at the start, and then bidding into the program. The Division offers landowners a wide variety of agreements to suit individual needs. Landowners can choose perpetual or term easements with accompanying management agreements, or can simply opt for management agreements or leases of any term length. Although perpetual easements offer the highest level of protection, term easements give the Division an opportunity to build a relationship with the landowner, and often open the door to longer term commitments. The key to all agreements is flexibility. The open framework encourages creative agreements that address specific landowner and wildlife needs. Likely, no two agreements will be the same.

After discussing a potential CSCP project with the Division, the landowner completes a simple form, and the project is ranked against other similar proposals. The ranking process uses biological criteria to ensure real, on-the-ground benefits to the habitat. Landowner willingness is also an important ranking com-



In its initial year, the Colorado Species Conservation Partnership is focusing on three target areas.

ponent, with preference given to landowners who are most prepared to work closely with the Division for the long term. A committee of representatives from the GOCO board and the Colorado Wildlife Commission decides which projects will be funded. The entire process takes approximately six months.

Landowners have responded very positively to this approach in the program's first year. Approximately 34 landowners applied in the first round of the application process. The Division continues to work with additional landowners, and many are ready to apply for the

second round. It even appears that some initially skeptical landowners have become more accepting of the program.

More information about CSCP is available from Ken Morgan, Colorado Division of Wildlife, 6060 Broadway, Denver, CO 80216, 303-297-1192, or at the Division's website at <http://wildlife.state.co.us/habitat/cscp/>.

*-Theodore Toombs
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Two beneficiaries of CSCP funding will be the black-tailed prairie dog and Preble's meadow jumping mouse.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program: Leveraging Bill dollars for private land stewardship

Editor's note: The following three articles give an overview of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, including recommendations for ranking processes and success stories. All three stories were written by Suzy Friedman, scientist and agricultural policy analyst at Environmental Defense.

Program overview



The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was created by the 1996

Farm Bill to offer agricultural producers financial, educational and technical assistance for conservation practices, such as better managing livestock waste or reducing fertilizer and pesticide use. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), EQIP pays up to 75% of project costs (90% for limited resource and beginner farmers). It designates 60% of program funds to help farmers address natural resource issues related to animal agriculture. EQIP activities, carried out according to a locally developed conservation plan, are site-specific for each farm or ranch.

The 2002 Farm Bill significantly increased EQIP funding from a previous average of \$275 million per year to \$1 billion for Fiscal Year 2004, \$1.2 billion for Fiscal Year 2005 and Fiscal Year 2006 and \$1.3 billion for Fiscal Year 2007. Throughout EQIP's existence, demand from agricultural producers has far outstripped the program's limited funds. Before the 2002 Farm Bill became law, about 70% of the farmers and ranchers who sought EQIP funding for conservation practices were turned away. Only 20,000 of the 75,000 farmers requesting technical assistance received it.

The 2002 Farm Bill also specified four national priorities for EQIP: water quality, air quality, soil health and at-risk wildlife habitat.

How EQIP projects are funded

The annual EQIP funding process starts at the national level when NRCS headquarters divides the year's funding among all the states and territories. Each

state or district-level NRCS office then develops a ranking system to prioritize applications within its jurisdiction. In each state, the State Technical Committee, an advisory group representing state and federal government agencies, agricultural organizations, producers, conservation groups and others, participates in the development of these EQIP ranking systems. Because state ranking systems determine which projects are funded, the choices state and district offices make are crucial in ensuring that EQIP dollars advance a state's conservation goals and that a state gets the most bang for the buck out of the limited funds available.

A farmer, rancher or other landowner seeking funds for a conservation project submits an application to a state or district NRCS office. The highest ranking projects are funded until all EQIP funds are committed. Applications can be filed at any time, and NRCS evaluates, ranks and funds them on a periodic basis.

After being selected for funding, each EQIP participant, in cooperation with the local NRCS office, develops a conservation plan for the participating farm or ranch. This plan is the basis for the EQIP contract.

In general, lands enrolled in EQIP must be cropland, rangeland, pasture, forestland or other land on which crops or livestock are produced or grazed. Also eligible are agricultural lands where NRCS has identified serious threats to soil or water quality, or natural resources problems related to soil type, ter-

rain, climate, flood vulnerability, salinity or other environmental concerns.

A new EQIP subprogram created by the 2002 Farm Bill - the Conservation Innovation Grants Program (CI) - offers funding not only to individuals but also to government and non-government organizations. This program's goal is to encourage innovative approaches and technologies that can address pressing conservation challenges on agricultural lands. CI funding can cover up to 50% of project costs, which the recipient must match with funds from non-federal sources. The Secretary of Agriculture may direct up to \$100 million per year of EQIP funding to CI grants. The CI grant program will likely be launched in early 2004.

EQIP can fund a broad range of conservation practices and projects. In many states EQIP dollars help livestock and poultry producers address water and air quality concerns by installing storage systems to better contain manure, diverting clean water away from barnyards, fencing animals out of streams, developing alternative watering sources to protect water quality, planting tree

Continued on page 6



EQIP projects such as this Maryland wildlife pond are site-specific for each farm or ranch.

Improved EQIP ranking systems can benefit both landowners and conservation efforts

With the 2002 Farm Bill funding increases, EQIP is the nation's second largest agricultural program and a critical component of local, state and national efforts to achieve conservation goals on agricultural lands. The program funds a wide range of practices that address not only soil, air and water quality, but also habitat enhancement for at-risk species. Yet landowner demand for EQIP dollars still far exceeds the supply - by nearly \$1.49 billion in Fiscal Year 2002 - underscoring the need to spend available dollars as efficiently and effectively as possible. Improving the ranking processes that state and local NRCS offices use to rate landowner applications and allocate funds is essential for getting the most "bang for the buck."

In a January 2003 report, Environmental Defense analyzed the ranking systems states used to allocate EQIP Fiscal Year 2002 funds and recommended improvements. Some of the recommendations in that report, *Getting More Bang for the Buck*, include:

- States or districts can better accomplish their conservation goals by creating resource-specific ranking sheets to avoid complicated "apples and oranges" comparisons, unless a state or district gives overwhelming priority to whole farm plans that address all resource concerns for the entire contract area. For example, it is very difficult to compare the value of a wildlife project to that of a pest management project, or a wetland wildlife habitat project to a sediment control project.
- Higher levels of performance and improvement should be recognized and rewarded instead of simply offering more points for more practices. This approach would not only encourage better conservation but also be more equitable to farmers and ranchers already using good practices.
- States and districts should focus on the level of improvement achieved by a practice or project to prioritize projects

that deliver the greatest results. Targeting the biggest problems may not offer the most benefits.

- It is important to link location-based points to practices or projects that address location-specific conservation priorities. For example, a project located in a watershed impaired by sediments should only receive location bonus points if the project reduces sediment delivery to the stream or river of concern.
- Multi-producer cooperative projects, innovative approaches and demonstration projects should be encouraged as they will benefit EQIP overall.
- Wildlife dollars can be used more effectively by awarding wildlife points only for appropriate and beneficial wildlife practices, and not for inappropriate practices added to a project in order to get additional points.
- It is important that key consideration be given to a project's cost-effectiveness.

In a follow-up report, *Getting a Bigger Bang for the Buck*, Environmental Defense looked at how states and districts ranked applications in Fiscal Year 2003. This second report:

- Gives an overview of the ranking systems developed and used by states and districts, highlighting those approaches considered noteworthy in light of the recommendations in the first report, *Getting More Bang for the Buck*;
- Analyzes how effectively states and districts complied with the allocation and ranking requirements of the final EQIP rule, released in May 2003; and
- Provides a list of "best management practices" for developing ranking systems and a series of model ranking templates based on these best management practices.



The value of a practice often depends on the degree to which it is implemented, such as integrated pest management.

The goals of the model ranking templates are to enable states and districts to comply fully with the requirements of the final EQIP rule; to treat farms and ranches equally, regardless of size or type; and to use EQIP dollars cost-effectively. The focus is on ranking mechanics, rather than identification of priority resource concerns. While ranking mechanics - such as how to award points, how to reward higher levels of performance and how to incorporate cost-effectiveness - can be applied in any state, resource concerns can only be identified and prioritized at the state or district level. The ranking templates are blueprints that can be adapted at the state or district level to achieve those locally-identified conservation goals. Experience demonstrates that getting the mechanics of ranking right is time-consuming and challenging. To avoid reinventing the wheel across the country, NRCS and State Technical Committees can use the templates to comply with the many elements of the EQIP final rule and spend their already over-taxed time identifying and prioritizing resource concerns and leveraging EQIP to address challenging conservation goals.

Both *Getting More Bang for the Buck* and *Getting a Bigger Bang for the Buck* are

Continued on page 6

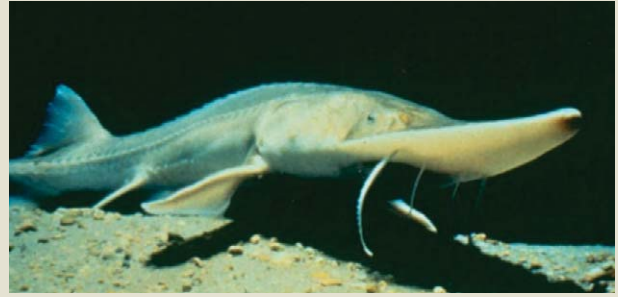
Montana landowners use EQIP to advance conservation of rare wildlife

Protecting and restoring habitat for at-risk wildlife habitat is one of EQIP's four national priorities. In Montana, NRCS is leveraging the program to advance the conservation of a number of rare species while supporting farming and ranching. Brief profiles of two EQIP projects follow.

Rescuing pallid sturgeon and landowners

Saving the endangered pallid sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus albus*) concerns several agencies, including NRCS's Montana state office. The issue became pressing for NRCS when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers planned periodic releases of large quantities of water from the Fort Peck Reservoir to help save the sturgeon. The rising water levels - which are intended to mimic historic natural Missouri River flooding - will occur each spring for three years, increasing to a higher level each year. The goal of the "spring rise" is to trigger the pallid sturgeon's spawning mechanism.

Over 100 farms downstream from the spring rise will be flooded, threatening the livelihood of those farmers. Last year Montana NRCS launched a special EQIP initiative to help agricultural producers retrofit and relocate their irrigation systems, reduce or eliminate the potential for negative water quality impacts (mostly from fuel tanks) and create wildlife habitat along the Missouri River. The state NRCS directed \$328,000 of its 2003 EQIP funds to 11 agricultural producers and set aside an additional \$300,000 in 2004 and 2005 to aid affected producers. The Montana NRCS allocation was designed, through the use of ranking criteria, to help producers who first need assistance at each flood stage level over the project's three-year course. Pump sites at lower elevations on the riverbank received the highest points to ensure that the most susceptible sites were given higher priority during the landowner application ranking process.



Pallid sturgeon

Improving grizzly and trout habitat

NRCS in Conrad, Montana has partnered with landowners Robert and Ali Newkirk and state and federal wildlife agencies to restore habitat for threatened grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) and wild trout habitat along a three-quarter mile reach of Dupuyer Creek, an area that was cleared of riparian vegetation for farming and severely damaged during a 1964 flood. Subsequent uncontrolled grazing further contributed to serious streambank erosion. EQIP, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Future Fisheries Program funded in-stream trout habitat and streambank cover restoration and riparian area fencing. Some of the specific conservation practices implemented include bank shaping, tree revetment, root wad installation and willow transplanting. The project created a secure travel corridor for area grizzly bears, lessening the potential for conflict with people. Reduced sedimentation and streambank erosion is improving water quality for wild rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) and other species.

Thanks to Dave White, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana, and his staff for supplying the details of these success stories.

EQIP 101

Continued from page 4

breaks to reduce odors, building composting facilities to treat and stabilize manure and developing nutrient management or grazing management plans. Other practices frequently funded in EQIP projects include conservation tillage, pest management, grassed waterways, wetland habitat restoration, brush management, prescribed burning, contour buffer strips, forest stand improvement, stream habitat improvement and management and windbreaks. To see the

full list of practices eligible for EQIP funding, visit the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide at www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/. To see project examples, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/2001summarries/.

For more information about EQIP, visit www.privatelandstewardship.org and click on the Farm Conservation Toolkit, or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/.

Ranking systems

Continued from page 5

available online at www.privatelandstewardship.org or from Suzy Friedman at sfriedman@environmentaldefense.org or 202-387-3500. Many states have already expressed an interest in the model ranking templates, and Environmental Defense staff members have visited a number of NRCS state offices to share and explain these ideas. Interested persons can obtain more information from Suzy Friedman.

RELATED RESOURCES

Conservation Security Program. Natural Resources Conservation Service. *Federal Register*, January 2, 2004, pp. 194-224. NRCS has issued a proposed rule for this new 2002 Farm Bill program that will offer financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers who conserve or improve the quality of soil, water, air, energy or plant and animal habitat, or who support other conservation activities. The proposed rule is posted at <http://a257.g.akamai.net/7/257/2422/14mar20010800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2004/pdf/03-31916.pdf>. Comments on the rule, due March 2, 2004, or information requests should be sent to david.mckay@usda.gov, with a subject line reading "Attention: Conservation Security Program."

"The role of incentive programs in conserving the snow leopard." Charudutt Mishra, Priscilla Allen, Tom McCarthy, M.D. Madhusudan, Agvaantserengiin Bayarjargal and Herbert H.T. Prins. *Conservation Biology*, December 2003, pp. 1512-1520. The authors designed two incentive programs for snow leopard conservation in Asia. In India's Spiti Valley, they implemented a livestock insurance program to compensate for losses



Snow leopard

to wild carnivore, paid villagers to set aside a portion of their grazing land for declining snow leopard prey populations and helped villagers establish new income

sources. The Mongolian program assists herders who protect snow leopards by helping locate markets for wool and crafts. As with similar programs elsewhere, both expanding isolated programs to increase their impact and internalizing their heavily-subsidized costs are ongoing challenges.

"Landowners' responses to an Endangered Species Act listing and implications for encouraging conservation." Amara Brook, Michaela Zint and Raymond de Young. *Conservation Biology*, December 2003, pp. 1638-1649. In a survey of Colorado landowners to determine whether they managed their land to encourage or discourage its use by the threatened Preble's meadow jumping mouse, a slightly higher percentage of landowners reported acting to hinder the mice from occupying their land. The authors conclude that a regulatory approach is insufficient for conserving endangered species on private lands and suggest other initiatives, such as better informing affected landowners, providing regulatory assurances and relieving economic concerns.

"Emphasis shifts in U.S. agri-environmental policy." Roger Claassen. *Amber Waves*, published by the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 2003, pp. 39-44. As well as increasing conservation funding, the 2002 Farm Bill shifts program emphasis from removing land from production to implementing conservation practices on working lands used for crop production and grazing. However, the role of benefit-cost targeting will be reduced, potentially lowering the cost-effectiveness of these programs. A modest increase in retirement programs is largely for wetland restoration. Available at www.ers.usda.gov/amberwaves/november03/Features/emphasis_shifts.htm

PSGP helps rare species

Continued from page 1

already in place or otherwise required.

Applying for funding is relatively simple. A proposal need only describe the conservation efforts to be undertaken, provide a plan for how and by whom the work will be implemented, describe the land where the work will be done and explain the benefits for the targeted rare species. The cost share contributed by landowners or organizations is lower than for most federal grant programs - only \$1 of non-federal support is needed to match

\$9 of federal support - and can come from many different in-kind services (e.g., labor, equipment, time, materials). More information on this program can be found on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website at http://endangered.fws.gov/grants/private_stewardship/index.html.

-Tim Male
senior ecologist
Environmental Defense



Courtesy Bethany Larue

Bethany Larue and her parents are taking advantage of PSGP to protect a wetland on their property.

New federal incentive program will aid private forest owners and rare species

When President Bush signed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act last year, there was significant controversy over the legislation's impact on publicly-owned National Forests. Less controversial is a little noticed provision in that law, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program, that may provide needed financial assistance to private forest landowners with endangered, threatened or other rare species on their lands.

The program could be a welcome benefit for those landowners, who have fewer incentives available to them because most U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs target farmers and ranchers. Moreover, few existing programs specifically target rare species conservation on private lands, where most federally-listed species are found. Just a few of the species that could benefit from the new program are red-cockaded woodpeckers (*Picoides borealis*) in southeastern longleaf forests, imperiled salmon in northwestern forests and threatened Delmarva fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger cinereus*) in mid-Atlantic forests.

Although no money is yet appropriated for the program, the law authorizes up to \$25 million dollars in Fiscal Year 2004 and "necessary" funds in Fiscal Years 2005-

2008 for private landowners to restore habitat for rare plants and animals on their property. USDA can enter into ten-year agreements, 30-year easements or 99-year easements with private landowners who develop a restoration plan that benefits rare species. The government then provides them with cost-share assistance in implementing the restoration plan and, in the case of easements, for the reduction in property value due to the easement.

When enrolling landowners, USDA will seek to maximize the environmental benefits of each agreement and give priority to lands that provide the greatest conservation benefit to rare species. Program enrollment is capped at 2 million acres.

The legislation instructs USDA to make Safe Harbor assurances available to landowners, who may be concerned that protecting habitat for endangered and threatened species could subject them to increased regulatory responsibilities. Safe Harbor allows landowners to restore habitat for rare species without fear of increased regulation.

Before the Healthy Forest Reserve Program aids wildlife conservation on a single acre of private forestland, USDA must develop rules and guidance for the program's implementation. As with all



Delmarva fox squirrel

W.H. Julian/USFWS

rulemakings, that process will include a public comment period after a proposed rule is published in the *Federal Register*. And, most important, Congress has to authorize money for the program.

Persons interested in the program should write their U.S. Senators and Representative asking that the program be fully funded. For more information, contact Robert Bonnie at rbonnie@environmentaldefense.org or (202) 387-3500. The provision creating the Healthy Forests Reserve Program is Section 504 of Title V of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act available online at <http://agriculture.senate.gov/forest/forhconf.pdf>.

*-Robert Bonnie
managing director*

Center for Conservation Incentives

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ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE

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The Environmental Defense Center for Conservation Incentives

The Environmental Defense Center for Conservation Incentives was launched in 2003 with major support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to further the conservation of biodiversity on U.S. private lands through the use of incentives. The Center works with landowners, conservation organizations and government agencies to develop place-based projects that demonstrate the utility of incentives in conserving habitats on private lands. The Center also works to influence the development and implementation of national and state incentive programs and policies. Headquartered in the Washington, DC office of Environmental Defense, the Center also has staff in all of the regional offices. We thank the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Robert Wilson for their generosity in funding this work.

www.environmentaldefense.org/go/conservationincentives

Conservation Incentives

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