



Renewable Natural Resources Timely Tips

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Landowners

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Cost-Effective Habitat Management with Income Potential

Are you trying to enhance wildlife habitat and improve the overall health of your land? There are many land management practices that can accomplish these goals. Tennessee has over a dozen conservation programs available that provide technical assistance and cost-sharing support for conservation land management. If you qualify, these programs can help you implement land improvements. Some can give you added income through annual payments. Some of these programs have specific requirements and guidelines for implementation, while others are determined on a case-by-case basis.

Many conservation objectives can be accomplished using the same management practices. For example, leaving a 50-foot field strip of land around the edges of a field fallow can increase the cost-effectiveness of your operation as well as promote conservation ideals. Plants on the edges of fields can be “shaded-out” by adjacent trees, reducing crop yield. Not only can leaving buffers increase your profits/acre; they can maintain your acreage over time. The buffers can serve as a filter strip to catch sediment from storm runoff, thereby keeping your productive soil on your land.

Another productive conservation practice for fields is controlled flooding for waterfowl habitat. In addition to the obvious wildlife viewing and hunting benefits, this practice can actually benefit your operation because it reduces the weed pressure (and spraying costs) and sedimentation. If you are interested in leasing land to hunters, flooded fields are nice to have. This is a practice that can be 100 percent cost-shared as wetland protection..

Multiple agencies/organizations offer conservation programs to make implementing these management practices and others on your property more affordable. Depending on the practice, you can be reimbursed 50

to 100 percent of the total cost. In addition, a few of the programs will actually pay you annually to maintain these practices. The following is a review of some of the programs available in Tennessee.

The **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)** has several agencies that offer conservation programs. The **Farm Service Agency (FSA)** oversees the **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)** with technical support from the **Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)**. CRP takes highly erodible and other environmentally sensitive crop lands out of production and establishes a soil conserving vegetative cover. The program, which requires a 10-year contract, has periodically accepted whole-field applications. It allows for an annual payment and 50 percent cost-share. The **Conservation Reserve Program Continuous Sign-Up (CCRP)** is a very similar program, but is available for sign-up any time and operates on small acreages or field borders. The annual payment and cost-share are the same, except select practices have additional benefits. Some have 20 percent higher annual payments, an additional up-front Signing Incentive Payment (SIP) of \$100 to \$150/acre, and additional Payment Incentive Practice (PIP) of 40 percent of the cost.

NRCS offers several conservation programs that promote wildlife habitat and healthy land. The **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program’s (WHIP)** objective is to help landowners interested in developing, enhancing, and maintaining quality wildlife habitat. Applications are accepted periodically for a 75 percent cost-share under a five to 10 year contract. The **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** is generally intended to improve water quality. All private and forested land is eligible. However, mostly livestock and hay producers utilize this program. It requires a one to 10 year contract for 50 to 75 percent cost-share. The **Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)** is focused on wetland restoration through conservation easements or agreements. There are three options

for contracts: 1) a 10-year restoration agreement = 75 percent cost-share, 2) a 30-year easement = 75 percent fair market agricultural value or 75 percent of amount offered by landowner and 75 percent cost-share, 3) Permanent easement = 100 percent fair market agricultural value or 100 percent amount offered by landowner and 100 percent cost-share. The **Conservation Security Program (CSP)** has less stringent guidelines and is fairly open to interpretation. In general, the objective is to promote conservation and improvement of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life, and other conservation purposes on private lands.

NRCS works with the **United States Forest Service (USFS)** to implement the **Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP)**. This program helps to keep private lands and natural resources healthy. It requires either existing cover of trees or land suitable for growing them. Only privately owned and non-industrial properties of less than 1,000 acres in size can be signed up.

The **Tennessee Division of Forestry (TDF)** is involved in two conservation programs. The **Forest Stewardship Program (FSP)** is often a first step in forestry management because it helps landowners develop a detailed plan for private forestland management. It requires only that more than 10 acres be owned. They oversee the **Forest Lands Enhancement Program (FLEP)**, which is used to manage a healthy and productive forest. It requires a 10-year contract for a 50 to 75 percent cost-share.

Another state agency, The **Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA)**, offers two conservation programs as well. The **Farm Wildlife Habitat Program (FWHP)** is very similar to WHIP. Its overall objective is to improve wildlife habitat on private lands by offering 75 percent cost-share (up to \$1,000/year) under a five-year contract. This program is conveniently used when landowners either miss the WHIP sign-up or need additional funding. TWRA also offers the **Tennessee Landowner Incentives Program (TNLIP)** to landowners interested in protecting, enhancing, or restoring rare species habitats (like the bobwhite quail) on private lands in Tennessee. The Duck and Hatchie River watersheds are priority areas at present. It provides 75 percent cost-share and some cash incentives.

The **United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** has a conservation program that is fairly open and is intended to benefit fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. The **Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW)** program determines specifics on a case-by-case basis.

There are a couple of interagency and multi-organization cooperative conservation programs available to Tennessee landowners. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Foundation (TWRFF), NRCS, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), and TDA created the **Tennessee Stream Mitigation Program (TSMP)** to offset the adverse physical impacts associated with state/federal water quality permits. Its focus is to improve water quality and riparian habitats with 100 percent cost share. Ducks Unlimited, TWRA, TDA, NRCS, and the University of Tennessee Extension offer the **Tennessee Partners Project (TPP)** to provide water and food sources for wintering waterfowl and associated wetland species. The program requires a minimum of five acres of surface water and adjacent habitats to qualify. The time commitment is 10 years and limits hunting to prior to noon on improved areas.

By implementing these practices you can promote conservation and wildlife habitat and be a good steward of the land. None of the agencies/organizations that offer conservation programs take control/ownership of contracted lands. In many cases, they want to help you afford more cost-effective management practices for your current operation. Remember, each program has its own specific objectives, but you can accomplish more than one goal with the same management practice. So, multiple programs may pay for the management practices you desire.

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Hardwood Analysis and Trends (HAT) – June 2007

Market conditions for most of the more commonly processed hardwood species have been stable this spring. No price change has occurred for red and white oaks, poplar and walnut. Not so for black cherry and sugar maple, where demand from secondary processors (furniture, flooring, molding, etc.) is more restricted. Prices for these favored interior woods have suffered, with #1 common 4/4 lumber dropping 5.6 percent (black cherry) and 9.6 percent (sugar maple) since April 1.

More positively, starts for new homes have increased steadily for three months. This bodes well for later in 2007. Typically new home construction requires six months and hardwood products are needed toward the end of construction. Housing starts were low in January of this year and are reflected in the dampened spring demand. Six months further into 2007 should reveal improvement.

White oak and black walnut continue to shine as species with strong appeal. European customers favor white oak; this coupled with continued use of white oak for truck trailer flooring is keeping supplies thin and prices firm. Though “green” black walnut lumber has not changed in value since April, kiln dried prices are sharply higher, evidence of strong orders for “dry” wood ready for processing.

Red oak could be poised for a much needed recovery, though it’s not likely to be at the same pace as the falling prices of 2005 and 2006. After experiencing a nearly 15 percent decline in a 12 month period beginning April 2005, the price for #1 common 4/4 lumber has gone unchanged in the 12 months since. Many mills have lowered production, holding lumber in storage in anticipation of improved markets. This excess supply will need to move through the system before much of a price rebound occurs. New housing starts should increase demand for red oak, somewhat.

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Impacts of the Easter Freeze on Oak Mast Production

The below-freezing temperatures in early April have impacted the flowering and thus the fruit and seed production of many of our hard mast species, but in particular oaks, hickories and walnut. The seeds from these species provide a great amount of food for wildlife during the winter months. The scarcity of seed will also hinder current year regeneration potential of these trees.

The stage of leaf emergence at the time of the freeze made a difference as to which trees were damaged. The combination of the above-average temperatures in March, which allowed bud break and flowering to proceed earlier than normal, and the severe cold temperatures that followed affected the tissues of leaves and fruiting structures that were just emerging. Those older tissues that had already been growing for a few weeks as well as those trees that tend to leaf out later were not as affected. Walnut and hickories were not as damaged because they are among the last tree species to leaf out in the spring. However, the oaks were heavily impacted across the state.

There are two families of oaks: red oaks and white oaks. It takes those species in the white oak family (white, chestnut, chinkapin, bur, swamp chestnut, post) one growing season to produce acorns from flowering. Most of these trees will have limited acorn production this year because the freeze killed most of the flowers. Alternatively, it takes two growing seasons from pol-

ination for red oak (northern red, southern red, cherrybark, Shumard, willow, water, pin, black, scarlet) to produce acorns. Flowers are pollinated in the first year; however, fertilization and maturation of the acorn does not occur until the second year. Thus, there will be little red oak acorn production in 2008 because of the 2007 freeze. The fate of the red oak acorns pollinated in 2006 (to mature in 2007) is unknown. It takes about 12 months (May and June of the second growing season) for the tube containing the pollen to connect with the ovary for fertilization to take place. We do not know at present what impact the freeze had on the fertilization process of red oaks in 2007. Red oak acorns should be visible and growing by the beginning of July if fertilization was successful.

Even if fertilization took place, the stress caused by the spring freeze and the additional stress of current moisture deficits will cause many acorns to abort. Most areas of Tennessee are in drought conditions with rainfall being 10 or more inches below normal at present. Insects and birds will also consume many acorns. Considering the flowering of most oaks (red and white) was inhibited by the freeze, the uncertainty of red oak acorns pollinated in 2006, the current drought conditions and that larger proportion of acorns are consumed by insects when acorn production is limited, it is safe to assume that mast (acorn) production will be limited in 2007 and somewhat limited in 2008. Wildlife populations will probably decrease because of the scarcity of hard mast. Many animals will be searching for food outside their usual habitats in urban and urban-rural interface areas.

Hopefully, variation in the degree of leaf and flower emergence across Tennessee before the freeze will allow some hard mast production. However, it is much too early to predict the fall of 2007 or 2008 mast crop. Indications are that it will be limited. The best way for a manager to determine the mast crop for a given year is to conduct a mast survey in late summer and early fall after acorn maturation but before acorn drop.

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Tax Bills

Your property tax is calculated by taking the appraised value of your property, multiplying it by an “assessment” ratio (25% for residential and rural land in Tennessee), and then multiplying the assessed value by the local tax rate (usually some amount per \$100 of assessed value). The trick is in understanding the difference between appraised value and assessed value.

Consider an acre of land appraised at \$1000. The assessed value would be \$250 ($\1000×0.25). If the local tax rate is \$3.00 per \$100 of assessed value, divide the assessed value by \$100 ($\$250 \div \$100 = 2.5$). Multiply the \$3.00 rate by the number of \$100 units (2.5). Your tax bill is \$7.00 ($\3.00×2.5).

It is important for forest owners in Tennessee to investigate their options for reducing their property taxes by applying for Greenbelt status with their local tax assessor. Most forest land would qualify to be appraised at current use (as a forest) rather than at a highest and best-use appraisal.

Contact your local tax office and ask about Greenbelt. Several studies indicate that many eligible people are not taking advantage of this conservation incentive.

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