

## Working Lands for Wildlife

The nation's rural landowners, its farmers, ranchers, and forest owners, provide not only food and fiber for the world, but also a host of environmental benefits, including habitat for wildlife. Nearly two thirds of all species federally listed as threatened or endangered exist on private lands. Conservation efforts on these lands generate outdoor recreation and economic activity that result in sustained growth for local communities and landowners.

Working Lands for Wildlife is a new partnership between NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to use agency technical expertise combined with \$33 million in financial assistance from the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program to combat the decline of seven specific wildlife species whose decline can be reversed and will benefit other species with similar habitat needs.

Through Working Lands for Wildlife landowners can voluntarily participate in an incentive-based efforts to:

- Restore populations of declining wildlife species
- Provide farmers, ranchers, and forest managers with regulatory certainty that conservation investments they make today help sustain their operations over the long term.
- Strengthen and sustain rural economies by restoring and protecting the productive capacity of working lands.

The Working Lands for Wildlife project will target species whose decline can be reversed and will benefit other species with similar habitat needs.

Seven species were identified during a collaborative process with partners for inclusion in the project:

**Lesser Prairie Chicken** - The Lesser Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) is an upland bird found in mixed grass, sand-sage and shinnery oak prairies of western Kansas, southeast Colorado, northwest Oklahoma, the Texas panhandle, and eastern New Mexico. Once widely distributed, the bird has experienced dramatic reductions in population and is now a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist ranchers voluntarily restore or enhance 500,000 acres of rangeland over five years, combating lesser prairie chicken habitat loss, increasing habitat connectivity, and helping to ensure the viability of western ranching.

**New England Cottontail** - In 2006, the New England Cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) was listed as a candidate species under the Federal Endangered Species Act due to an 86 percent decline in its historic range. The primary threat to the New England cottontail is loss of habitat through succession. As forests mature, understory thins to such an extent that the habitat is no longer suitable for New England cottontail.

Over the next five years, Working Lands for Wildlife will assist private land owners to create and enhance approximately 2,500 acres of shrub thicket and early successional forest. The habitat improvements will support New England Cottontail recovery and reduce the need to federally list the species.

**Southwestern Willow Flycatcher** - The southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) is a small Neotropical migratory bird that breeds in the arid southwestern United States. It has been federally listed as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The flycatcher's current range is similar to its historic range; however, the amount of suitable habitat within the range is greatly reduced from historic levels.

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist private landowners to protect and restore breeding habitat and combat habitat losses due to surface water diversion, groundwater pumping, changes in flood and fire regimes, and establishment of non-native and invasive plants.

**Greater Sage-Grouse** - The greater sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), an iconic ground-dwelling bird native to the arid sagebrush plains of the American West, has experienced significant population declines over the last fifty years, making it a candidate for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The population declines have resulted from habitat loss and fragmentation associated with land conversion, energy development, urbanization, wildfire, conifer encroachment, and invasive species.

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist ranchers voluntarily restore or enhance 400,000 acres of rangeland over five years, combating sage grouse habitat loss and helping to ensure the continued viability of western ranching.

**Gopher Tortoise** - Historically, more than 90 million acres of what is now the southeastern United States were covered by longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) savanna; today, only 3.4 million acres remain and most are fragmented and in poor condition. Longleaf pine forests are some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems, and provide critical habitat for 29 threatened and endangered species, including the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist landowners voluntarily create, restore or enhance gopher tortoise habitat, increasing habitat connectivity, and support potential down-listing of the species.

**Bog Turtle** - The bog turtle (*Glyptemys muhlenbergii*), America's smallest turtle, is federally listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Bog turtles depend upon a habitat mosaic of open, sunny, spring fed wetlands and scattered dry areas. Bog turtles can be an indicator of water quality and wetland function; the wetland habitats that they require provide important ecosystem services, including purifying water, recharging underground aquifers and absorbing floodwaters.

Through Working Lands for Wildlife, NRCS will assist private landowners combat habitat fragmentation and degradation to restore bog turtle populations in seven states, and increase landowner confidence that the conservation practices they volunteer to implement will not harm the species or its habitat.

**Golden-Winged Warbler** - The vast forested lands, grasslands and forb-rich landscape of the Appalachian Mountains was once considered a population stronghold for the golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*). Today, however, the population is at-risk for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Working Lands for Wildlife will enable private landowners to create and enhance approximately 10,000 acres of early successional forest habitat over five years, precluding the need to federally list the golden-winged warbler.