Summary of public comments received about department proposal to open the Wisconsin Habitat Partnership Fund Request for Proposal

A. Overview. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) proposed to solicit proposals for a new habitat partnership program, the Wisconsin Habitat Partnership Fund. To help the Department better understand if this program is structured to support the full spectrum of entities eligible and potentially interested in this opportunity, the 21-day Program Guidance process was initiated. The deadline for public comments was February 1, 2018.

B. Summary of Comments and Changes. During the 21-day comment period, the DNR received one public comment about the Program Guidance document.

1. Two modifications were made to the Program Guidance resulting from comments made by the Wisconsin County Forest Association:
   - “On page five of the proposed guidance – Under the heading Respondent Commitments we suggest the text “To ensure public access, for projects not occurring on lands owned and managed by the DNR, a Public Access Easement must be signed and recorded with the appropriate county Register of Deeds Office….” should be amended to include other public entities besides DNR (i.e. counties, towns, villages). We do not think it should be necessary for county forests and other public entities to provide a signed Public Access Agreement as stated. In addition, please consider changing the word “DNR” to “state” as there may be non-DNR state lands that would qualify for work under this program.
   - On page six of the proposed guidance – We suggest adding a Habitat Regeneration code under either “1. Habitat Restoration Projects”, or “3. Habitat Maintenance Projects” or preferably under both categories. This activity would apply to many types of forest regeneration (i.e. aspen, oak, and birch) and also to shrub habitats (i.e. upland shrubs and lowland alder)
   - On page 18 of the proposed guidance – We suggest Appendix A should also include heavy equipment (i.e. bulldozers, backhoes, mulcher units) rates.
   - In Appendix B – Habitat Priorities of the proposed guidance – We suggest young forests should be a priority in all DNR areas and should be expanded to include species other than aspen (i.e. oak). Young oak stands are decreasing across the state and oak/hickory regeneration is becoming a critical habitat component in southern and west central regions.
   - In Appendix B – Habitat Priorities of the proposed guidance – We suggest “Young forest (primarily aspen)” be listed as a #1 priority in the Northeast District. There are nearly 270,000 acres of county forest in Marinette and Oconto Counties (269,956 acres). Young forest habitat in this part of the state is important to several species and there has been a significant investment by counties and other partner agencies to create and maintain this critical habitat component in the district.”

DNR Reply

- In response to this suggestion, language was added to provide the Department flexibility in determining if a Public Access Easement is not necessary to guarantee public hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing for the period specified in the Program Guidance. Language was also modified, removing “DNR” and replacing it with “department of the State of Wisconsin” to clarify the spectrum of state-owned lands being referenced.
• Under the restoration category, “regeneration” was added to the “reforestation” category. The intent of listed categories is to be broad in applicability. Therefore, language was not added to the maintenance category, as “timber stand improvement” captures regenerative habitat work. Shrub community habitat work was added to the maintenance project choices. Any habitat work that doesn’t appear to fit an existing category can be captured using the “other habitat projects” choice.
• We recognize that certain equipment rental rates are not listed, particularly concerning heavy equipment. The department will consider providing a more inclusive list in the future. In the meantime, for instances where equipment is not listed, the respondent should use a rate determined through a competitive bidding process or using their own established rates.
• Throughout the state, young forests are listed as either priority one or two. Ranking reflects the Department taking a district approach to prioritization rather than an ecological landscape approach, resulting in some habitat types ecologically connected to priority one habitat being listed as a priority two. In the future, the department may decide to transition to an ecological landscape prioritization system.
• Young forests in the Northeast district rank as priority two because of the overall lack of forest land in the district. It is recognized that in the northern portion of the Northeast district, young forests are a high priority. In the future, the department may decide to prioritize based on an ecological landscape model, as opposed to a district model.

C. Other Comments. None

D. Communication Efforts. The final Wisconsin Habitat Partnership Fund Program Guidance will be posted on the Wisconsin Habitat Partnership Fund webpage, which is being finalized. A link to the webpage will be publicized when the program is announced February 6, 2016.

Prepared by:
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Phone: 608-261-0775
Date: February 1, 2018
February 1, 2018

Eddie Shea
Assistant Wetland Habitat Specialist
WDNR Bureau of Wildlife Management

Regarding: WHPF Program Guidance

Dear Eddie,

Please accept these comments from Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) regarding proposed program guidance for Wisconsin Habitat Partnership Fund (WHPF). WCFA represents the forestry interests of 29 county forests established under state statutes §28.10 and §28.11. Collectively our member counties manage nearly 2.4 million acres of forests, the largest public ownership in the state.

- On page five of the proposed guidance – Under the heading Respondent Commitments we suggest the text “To ensure public access, for projects not occurring on lands owned and managed by the DNR, a Public Access Easement must be signed and recorded with the appropriate county Register of Deeds Office…” should be amended to include other public entities besides DNR (i.e. counties, towns, villages). We do not think it should be necessary for county forests and other public entities to provide a signed Public Access Agreement as stated. In addition, please consider changing the word “DNR” to “state” as there may be non-DNR state lands that would qualify for work under this program.

- On page six of the proposed guidance – We suggest adding a Habitat Regeneration code under either “1. Habitat Restoration Projects”, or “3. Habitat Maintenance Projects” or preferably under both categories. This activity would apply to many types of forest regeneration (i.e. aspen, oak, and birch) and also to shrub habitats (i.e. upland shrubs and lowland alder)

- On page 18 of the proposed guidance – We suggest Appendix A should also include heavy equipment (i.e. bulldozers, backhoes, mulcher units) rates.

- In Appendix B – Habitat Priorities of the proposed guidance – We suggest young forests should be a priority in all DNR areas and should be expanded to include species other than aspen (i.e. oak). Young oak stands are decreasing across the state and oak/hickory regeneration is becoming a critical habitat component in southern and west central regions.
In Appendix B – Habitat Priorities of the proposed guidance – We suggest “Young forest (primarily aspen)” be listed as a #1 priority in the Northeast District. There are nearly 270,000 acres of county forest in Marinette and Oconto Counties (269,956 acres). Young forest habitat in this part of the state is important to several species and there has been a significant investment by counties and other partner agencies to create and maintain this critical habitat component in the district.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments on the proposed guidance. If we can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Sincerely,

Norman K. Bickford, President
Wisconsin County Forests Association

Jane F. Severt, Executive Director
Wisconsin County Forests Association

Cc Doug Brown, WDNR County Forest Specialist