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Question1:

Question2:

Question3:

Question4:

1) We recommend that the USDA offices of each state enter into data licensing agreements with the Natural Heritage Programs found in their respective states. This would provide the State Conservation Officer and the NRCS offices with access to the best available information on rare, endangered and threatened species to guide conservation programs funded under the Farm Bill. Natural Heritage programs are found in every state and are operated in cooperation with the national parent organization, NatureServe. Nearly every program has converted to the new BIOTICS system, which has rare species information available in a GIS compatible software program called BIOTICS. Species are ranked based on their levels of global and state rarity and include federal US Fish and Wildlife Service listings. The heritage databases can provide maps of species and habitat locations that should be considered as priority protection areas. BIOTICS can also help identify corridors between the primary conservation areas. The primary conservation areas are often at risk of becoming biological ?islands?. The best available linkages are typically agricultural areas and stream corridors. These areas would also be targets for utilization of Farm Bill conservation funds.

NatureServe has recently begun seeking direct federal funding from Congress. This past year efforts were made to gain funding via the Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The US Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee in their report on the FY06 Interior Appropriations Bill included the following language:

"The Committee understands that the Fish and Wildlife Service relies extensively on information compiled by NatureServe, particularly biological information which it gathers through the State Heritage Network. This has proven to be an effective means to collect data that furthers the mission of the Service as well as other Departmental agencies. In order to maintain the quality of this information, the Committee expects that the Service will work cooperatively with NatureServe and make additional funds available if necessary from programs such as the CCI initiative to ensure that sufficient funds are available to maintain adequately the integrity of this important inventory information."

The url for the full Senate interior appropriations report is:

<http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/useftp.cgi?IPaddress=162.140.64.21&filename=sr080.pdf&directory>

Whether or not NatureServe?s efforts to gain direct federal funding will be successful remains to be seen. But in the interim the USDA would be able to gain access to the Natural Heritage program information as soon

as it wishes via data licenses with individual state programs. As can be seen from the committee comments above the Heritage data is also being relied upon very heavily by most of the state fish and wildlife agencies in their adoption of the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies, funded under the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants programs. This program mandates the adoption of the prescribed wildlife conservation plans by October 2005 for any participating state or tribe. The Natural Heritage program information would be just as critical, and effective, in guiding conservation efforts funded under the Farm Bill, and would bring greater consistency to these two strongly related programs.

As an alternative to entering a licensing agreement with each state (and a few states have more than one heritage program), USDA could enter into a single Multi Jurisdictional Data license agreement with NatureServe. NatureServe has master data licensing agreements with most of the heritage programs in the U.S. These agreements set forth a schedule for a data-licensing fee with other entities, including the federal government and identifying the appropriate fees, which vary by state.

Contact information for NatureServe which has its offices in Arlington, VA can be found via their website at www.natureserve.org.

2) Invasive exotics are an increasingly expensive and environmentally devastating problem affecting every state in the nation. Greater effort should be made to educate landowners about this problem. Funding should also be made available for eradication.

Many plant species that are considered to be invasive are still being promoted by various USDA agencies. A review of practices and materials to remove any promotion of these species would reconcile the discrepancies between programs that promote growing invasive species and those that advocate eradication of the same species.

3) Support more conservation funds for long term CRP and CREP programs. These programs are vital to protecting land and water resources. There is much more land that could be enrolled into these programs, if funding was available.

4) Forests are an important part of many family farms. They provide clean air and water, valuable natural resources, and recreational opportunities. Too many are degraded, fragmented, or lost. Keeping these forests intact and healthy should be a priority of the Farm Bill.

5) Use farm bill funds to support sustainable agriculture practices that are energy efficient, water efficient, reduce pollution and the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Question5:

Question6: