

Conservation Reserve Program State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) for Tennessee Practice 38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration

Overview

Owners and operators of certain cropland in a designated 20-county Bobwhite Restoration Area in west and middle Tennessee may enroll eligible land in a new Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) conservation practice titled State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration Practice.

USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) will conduct sign-up for SAFE on a continuous (on-going) basis. Through continuous CRP sign-up, USDA accepts offers by producers, providing the land and producer meet certain eligibility requirements. Producers can offer land for enrollment in SAFE and other CRP programs at their local FSA service center.

USDA has approved this SAFE practice to address high-priority wildlife objectives to assist in the recovery of populations of native bobwhite quail and several other wildlife species dependent upon native grassland and shrub habitats. This SAFE practice provides the flexibility to meet the specific needs of declining grassland-shrub birds and address the management intensity desires of the participant. USDA's current goal is to restore up to 6,000 acres of the CP38E Bobwhite Grassland Habitat Restoration practice within the target counties.

Producers within the SAFE area can submit offers to voluntarily enroll acres in CRP contracts for 10 years. In exchange, producers receive annual CRP rental payments, incentives and cost-share assistance to establish habitat-enhancing covers on eligible land. Producers enrolling in CRP enter into contracts with USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). FSA administers CRP on behalf of CCC.

Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible under SAFE continuous sign-up practices, land must be in a SAFE project area and meet basic CRP eligibility requirements. The Tennessee SAFE 38E Bobwhite Restoration Area includes the following counties: Carroll, Coffee, Crockett, Dyer, Fayette, Franklin, Gibson, Giles, Haywood, Henry, Lauderdale, Lincoln, Madison, Maury, Montgomery, Obion, Robertson, Sumner, Tipton and Weakley. Producers with land within this SAFE geographic area may enroll in CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration Practice provided they meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Eligible land is cropland only that was planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity during four of the six years from 1996 to 2001

- The land must be physically and legally capable of being planted in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity.
- The site is located within a SAFE area and is appropriate for the practices associated with SAFE; and
- Acres enrolled in SAFE cannot exceed the number of acres allocated to SAFE in Tennessee.

Required Cover Types

Acreage entered into the Tennessee SAFE 38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration will be established to one of several native grass and forb mixtures, plus the establishment of native shrub thickets and/or hedgerows on a minimum of 2.5% of the total enrolled acreage to a maximum of 30% of the total enrolled acreage, in a pattern beneficial to wildlife. Thickets (“covey headquarters”) shall be a minimum of 50’ x 50’ (2500 sq. feet) up to a maximum of one-quarter acre in size. Strips or hedgerows shall be between 30’ to 50’ in width. Food plots are optional, and can be established on up to 10% of the contract acreage. Individual food plots may be no more than 1 acre in size. A wildlife conservation plan must be developed for acreage under CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration by a NRCS, TSP, or TWRA wildlife biologist. Food plot acreage does qualify for the SIP payment, but is not eligible for standard cost-share or PIP payments. A typical scenario for an offer of 40 acres of CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration with the minimum amount of shrubs might consist of about 37 acres of native grasses and forbs, 6 to 12 native shrub covey headquarters (minimum total 1 acre) strategically located to provide escape and protective cover, and 2 one-acre food plots.

Required Management Practices

Through SAFE, producers create habitat that is beneficial to the target high-priority wildlife species. This may involve planting trees, grasses, forbs or other species that help restore or improve wildlife habitat.

CCC requires that practices under SAFE be managed during the life of the contract in a manner that maintains the quality of the habitat for target wildlife species. In CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration, each acre of native grass-forbs will need to be disturbed at least once through the contract term during years 4 through 8, by either strip-disking, prescribed burning, or strip-herbicide (as chosen by the participant) with legume interseeding as an optional practice to be used in conjunction. These required mid-contract management practices are cost-shared by USDA. Shrub areas will be protected from disturbance, and no mid-contract management is required. Food plot areas can be replanted or maintained as needed at the producer’s discretion.

Annual mowing of contract acreage is not allowed.

Fishing and hunting are allowed on CRP-enrolled land, including SAFE. As with other conservation practices and programs under CRP, certain restrictions apply.

Rental and Incentive Payments

CCC bases rental rates on the average value of dryland cash rent or the cash rent equivalent for the past three years and adjusts rates to reflect the relative productivity of soils within each county. CCC calculates the maximum CRP rental rate in advance of enrollment. The individual soil rentals are available at the local FSA service center. While acceptance is not determined by a competitive offer process, producers may elect to receive an amount less than the maximum payment rate.

In addition to the payments described above, CCC will pay up to 50 percent of the eligible cost of establishing a permanent cover.

USDA may also provide the following benefits to participants in the SAFE practice:

- an up-front, one-time CRP Signing Incentive Payment (CRP-SIP) of \$100 per acre, which is made after the contract is approved; and
- a Practice Incentive Payment (PIP) equal to 40 percent of the eligible installation costs for SAFE practices. CCC issues this one-time payment after the practice is installed, eligible costs are verified and other payment eligibility criteria are met

While permissible acreage in this practice elected by the producer to be established to a wildlife food plot is eligible for CRP-SIP, that acreage is ineligible for the 50% cost share and 40% PIP payments.

Contracts

The effective date of the CRP contract is the first day of the month following the month of approval. In certain circumstances, producers may defer the effective date for up to six months.

High-Priority Species

FSA created SAFE to benefit high-priority state wildlife conservation objectives through the restoration of vital habitat. The goal of the Tennessee CP38E Bobwhite Grassland Habitat Restoration practice is to enroll 6,000 acres in CRP to develop critical habitats that will provide high-quality nesting, brood-rearing and winter cover necessary for bobwhite quail and other declining wildlife species that depend on native “early successional” type habitats and travel corridors between habitat blocks. Habitat gained through these SAFE options will help Tennessee meet habitat goals identified in the Northern Bobwhite Habitat Initiative, Partners In Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan, Tennessee’s State Wildlife Action Plan, and Mississippi Alluvial Valley, East Gulf Coastal Plain, and Central Hardwood joint ventures. Key grassland bird species anticipated to benefit from this practice include the bobwhite quail, field sparrow, eastern meadowlark, loggerhead shrike, and dickcissel.

Wildlife Monitoring

A minimum of 10 of randomly-chosen CP38E Bobwhite Habitat Restoration contracts will be periodically monitored to assess the response of target wildlife species to the addition of the contract acreage habitat on the landscape. If a contract is selected, the CRP participant will need to allow the NRCS, TSP, or TWRA wildlife biologist access for periodic surveys, which would be no more than twice per year on the contract acreage. Contact will be made by the biologist with the CRP participant or designee prior to accessing the contract acreage for wildlife monitoring.

How SAFE Proposals Were Developed

Wildlife needs and conservation priorities vary across geographic and ecological regions. Local and regional conservation groups, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, biologists, farmers, ranchers and others have the first-hand knowledge and experience to help address the needs of these high-priority species.

FSA's development of SAFE encourages producers, wildlife experts in state and federal agencies, the public, nonprofit organizations and others to work together. The goal was to design proposals to help farmers and ranchers to develop and maintain high-value wildlife habitats.

USDA accepted SAFE proposals developed by these organizations. All SAFE proposals were reviewed at the state level by an interdisciplinary team (State Technical Committee). The team reviewed the technical merits and benefits of each proposal and ranked each of the proposals on the potential to achieve the objectives of the program. FSA judged SAFE proposals to determine whether the selected practices would create the desired habitat. To be accepted by FSA, SAFE proposals had to be approved by qualified wildlife professionals and include a wildlife monitoring and evaluation plan. The proposals had to be based in science, using accepted techniques.

FSA hopes this flexible, results-oriented, locally led practice encourages proposals that benefit more than a single species and that it will address species that require a regional approach in portions of several states. SAFE builds on CRP's success of protecting and conserving the nation's natural resources such as habitat for wildlife species that are threatened, endangered or possess unique values.