



July 6, 2026

Mr. J'Que C. Jones
USDA, NRCS, National Agricultural Engineer
Conservation Engineering Division
1400 Independence Ave., South Building, Room 4949
Washington, DC 20250

Re: **Docket No. NRCS-2026-0034-0001**

Submitted electronically via <http://www.regulations.gov>

Dear Mr. Jones,

On behalf of The Wildlife Society (TWS) and our Private Lands Working Group, we appreciate the opportunity to provide this response to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) request in the Federal Register (Docket No NRCS-2026-0034-0001) for comments regarding the proposed revisions to the National Handbook of Conservation Practices for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. TWS is an international society of over 10,000 qualified wildlife professionals which seeks to empower wildlife professionals to advance conservation through science, community and professional excellence. We provide information and recommendations that conserve fish and wildlife resources to local, state, and federal agencies that make decisions, deliver programmatic financial assistance and technical guidance, or make rules for practice implementation that may affect those resources.

NRCS Technical Assistance and Financial Assistance programs are important tools for the conservation of air, soil, water, and wildlife habitat, which are equally important natural resource priorities in the Farm Bill. National Conservation Practice Standards (CPS) are put forth as notices in the National Handbook of Conservation Practices (NHCP) and distributed to agencies, planning staff, states, and the public through access to the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG). The establishment of minimum standards guide the use of conservation practices across NRCS programs and are often referenced for many conservation delivery programs developed by other federal, state, and non-government organizations across the nation.

NRCS conservation practices potentially benefit both production agriculture and wildlife habitat provided that CPS sets appropriate minimum requirements. These standards must avoid limiting opportunities to enhance wildlife habitat or favoring practices that could degrade it. TWS will participate in the USDA rulemaking process, as appropriate, to advocate for outcomes that best serve people and the wildlife resources we are entrusted to manage. The comments provided reflect our intent to support and defend beneficial rules while offering



constructive feedback to improve program effectiveness. TWS has organized its comments as general recommendations on CPS language, grouped by Practice Name and corresponding numeric Practice Code.

General Comments

- **Inclusion of Wildlife Habitat as a Resource Concern:**
TWS recommends clearly identifying wildlife habitat as a resource concern in the *Definition* and *Purpose* sections of CPS notices reinforces its legitimacy as a conservation priority for NRCS programs. This language should be standardized across all practices that meaningfully establish, restore, improve, or manage natural resources in ways that benefit wildlife populations.
- **Consultation with State Wildlife Agencies:**
State fish and wildlife agencies are the appropriate authorities for determining whether CPS outcomes are beneficial to wildlife habitat and TWS recommends consultation with state agencies early and often during project planning and implementation.
- **Use of Native, Site-Appropriate Plant Materials:**
The use of non-native species has contributed to the decline of native plant communities and the wildlife species that rely on them. TWS recommends that CPS language prioritize and, where feasible, require the use of native, site-appropriate plant materials across all practices involving non-crop plantings and their management to fulfill the purposes of the practice. TWS encourages NRCS to rely on Ecological Site Description models to prioritize the selection of appropriate native plant species and varieties, and to incorporate this approach consistently into practice standards and through program implementation at the federal, state, and local levels.

Annual Forages for Grazing Systems (Code 513)

- **Purpose:**
It is appropriate to NOT consider this proposed practice as having a wildlife benefit.
- **Criteria:**
Many plant species selected for annual forage plantings are also noxious, invasive, competitive, or otherwise degrading for adjacent native plant communities that are the foundation of critical wildlife habitat. We suggest **adding criteria to limit the use of species that can cause wildlife habitat resource concerns or challenges for management**. Problematic species should be identified in consultation with the State Wildlife Agency.
- **Conditions:**
NRCS should consider adding an additional *Condition Where Practice Applies*, to **prevent the use of this practice to convert previously un-disturbed or converted**



native plant communities to annual forage production. Conservation practices should not be used in ways that create or exacerbate resource concerns while addressing production limitations.

Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315)

- Conditions:

It is inappropriate to use any Conservation Practice to convert native plant communities into exotic or non-native conditions, which would create new resource concerns. The proposed language “Do not use this practice to convert from non-cropland to cropland.”, is supported. While it may be appropriate to use this practice as a site preparation activity for planting practices that lead to improved wildlife habitat conditions, we recommend that NRCS prohibit the use of this CPS to convert native rangeland to pasture.

- Criteria:

Requirements to use the appropriate Ecological Site Description state and transition models are appropriate. When used to restore or manage plant communities to approximate their historic climax condition, they produce appropriate native wildlife habitat and other ecosystem services. Proposed language stating “...or other suitable information to develop implementation requirements.”, may create unnecessary risk of misinterpretation or use of inappropriate and antithetical resources that could lead to creation of new or exacerbation of existing resource concerns. If the intent is to provide planning flexibility, it is suggested to also add descriptive criteria for the types of resources that are suitable.

During restoration or management activities for native wildlife habitat, mixed or multiple applications of mechanical or chemical Herbaceous Weed Treatment are often necessary. The proposed language clarifies this as an acceptable approach.

- Purpose/Criteria:

Many American lands exist within ecosystems exemplified by fire-adapted or dependent plant communities. Use of weed control methodologies available under this CPS may be inappropriate if applied to stable native plant communities. Proposed Criteria to *Reduce Biomass Accumulation and the Risk of Wildfire Hazard* are only appropriate for this purpose if part of an adaptive and integrated management plan that considers outcomes that are compatible with the Ecological Site Description. It is appropriate and supported to use this CPS to manage or reduce fuels when the land is impacted by an invasive species or otherwise incompatible plant density or composition.

- Criteria/Considerations:



Additional *Criteria/Considerations* specific to Wildlife Habitat improvement will serve to assure planners that use of this popular CPS is appropriate for addressing habitat resource concerns.

Land Clearing (460)

- Purpose:

When restoring native climax plant community conditions in woody plant encroached areas according to the Ecological Site Description, it is often necessary to clear trees to install core conservation practices, like 550 Range Planting, 327 Conservation Cover, or 420 Wildlife Habitat Planting. We suggest adding language to clarify 460 as an appropriate support practice for this Purpose.

- Criteria:

Land Clearing has great potential to degrade or destroy native wildlife habitat. NRCS should consider adding to the proposed language “Implement the practice in a manner that will prevent...”, Destruction or degradation of ecological function according to the Ecological Site Description.

- Conditions:

The proposed language suggesting the use of “strip clearing, windrowing debris, and preserving den and food trees to minimize wildlife impacts”, are appreciated for their intent to prevent negative wildlife habitat outcomes. However, better outcomes may be achieved by considering species, structure, and distribution of preserved plants when conducted to approximate the ESD native climax plant community condition. The linear structure of strips can be detrimental by creating a higher amount of predator habitat and possibly concentrating predation pressure on wildlife and accumulating unnaturally high concentrations of debris that increase fuel loads and potential fire risk..

Livestock Pipeline (516)

- Purpose:

Conservation of water resources, including the prevention of conveyance losses when transporting water for any purpose, are important for livestock as well as preventing fish and wildlife habitat resource concerns. Including this purpose is appropriate.

- Definition/Purpose/Criteria:

The inclusion of wildlife as part of the definition, purpose, and criteria may result in the inappropriate justification for the use of this practice when non-wildlife purposes are otherwise inadequate to make the recommendation. Over-prescription of this practice for wildlife purposes can lead to negative impacts by point source attraction that promotes elevated predation risk at the water source. Other than in the most arid



environments, positive impacts to wildlife are likely incidental. Use of this grazing management support practice, in conjunction with Prescribed Grazing (528) and whole-farm comprehensive conservation plans that include wildlife management, would be supported as a wildlife practice if it were deemed appropriate by a qualified wildlife biologist.

Prescribed Burning (338)

- General:

The appropriate use of prescribed fire to restore or manage native wildlife habitat and working lands in fire-dependent ecosystems across North America. This CPS notice guides the use of prescribed fire to ensure conservation outcomes, safety, and stakeholder awareness leading to increased adoption of this critical practice.

- Criteria:

We appreciated the revisions to the CPS to integrate regulatory compliance requirements by shifting from a flexible checklist to a structured, accountable, and integrated framework with broader ecological and regulatory alignment. However, much of the content change in the Criteria section does not meet the purpose of the section as described in the NHCP Part 620 Subpart A – Exhibit 1, and for clarity, may be more appropriately included under other sections of the CPS. Practice Criteria are intended to establish requirements for practice planning to accomplish an appropriate Purpose stated in that section of the CPS. We recommend that an appropriate General Criteria simplification would be: *Follow a written site-specific burn plan for each prescribed burn that is developed by qualified individuals to support the objectives of the overall conservation plan and meet the requirements identified in the Plans and Specifications section of this standard.* The other content included in the proposed Criteria section is valuable and should be included in the appropriate sections of the CPS or in a supplemental document or appendix that details the requirements of a prescribed burn plan.

- Considerations:

If interpreted as regulatory prohibition on prescribed burning that releases carbon, the proposed language to “Plan the timing and intensity of the prescribed burn to minimize the release of carbon and particulate matter.”, may undermine several of the appropriately stated Purposes of this CPS.

Proposed language to “Use prescribed burning to consume fuels during periods of low fire activity to reduce wildfire risk or lessen the impacts of burning on air quality.”, may be interpreted to proactively limit allowable burn days based on air quality or other measurements. We recommend that **“low-risk days”** warrant clearer definition.



- Plans and Specifications:

The scheduling of a prescribed burn is most appropriately recorded in a burn plan as a range of dates and conditions for when the plan can be executed. It may not be possible to determine the burn boss and other crew members during the conservation planning process, well in advance of the day of the burn. As such, the proposed requirement to “Assign a burn boss...” as part of the Specifications may result in an increased workload for NRCS by requiring conservation plan and contract modifications. Such inflexibility may result in delayed or uncompleted contracts. Additionally, many prescribed burn managers employ experienced and certified crews that conduct a variety of jobs during a prescribed burn. It may be infeasible, inappropriate, or against agency/company policies to specifically identify individuals other than the landowner and possibly the burn boss. We suggest that it seems adequate to simply describe a qualifying burn boss and require that the landowner-participant follow an approved site-specific burn plan executed by a qualified burn boss.

Requirements to identify, plan, and map key safety and logistical locations is a supported best management practice. Additionally, care should be taken to provide this information in ways that cover all acceptable potential burn execution conditions, such as having designated and mapped escape routes for a north-wind burn and a south-wind burn if both are circumstances that are appropriate to address the conditions of the conservation plan. However, this activity will demand additional planning time and site visits and therefore the responsibility for documenting this information must be appropriately accounted for in the planning and contracting process for financial assistance programs, using CPS 160 Prescribed Burning Design or other CPS as is appropriate.

Silvopasture (381)

- Purpose/Criteria:

We believe the proposed removal of Wildlife Enhancement as a valid purpose for this CPS will limit appropriate options for planning certain management activities when the goal of improving wildlife management and forage production occurs concurrently on land where a wooded canopy exists. Practices that manage canopy density and species composition to ensure sunlight exposure conditions compatible with productive growth of perennial herbaceous forage, are important to both livestock grazers and wildlife habitat quality. If the intent is to use alternate CPS to accomplish these goals, then it will be critical to ensure that appropriate payment scenarios which adequately describe these applications are made available, see 2026 Payment Scenario 381 – 1 Native Perennial Grass, Non-Commercial.

- Conditions:



We appreciate the proposed addition of language to prevent the degradation of habitat for wildlife species of concern. Establishment of non-native plant materials in this context would degrade habitat and it may be necessary to restrict the use of these inappropriate plant materials in this CPS to prevent causing habitat related resource concerns.

- Criteria:

We suggest adding clarification or language to require consultation with the native climax plant community described in the ESD when planning this practice to ensure appropriate species selection, distribution, and structure of trees and shrubs established. It is important that habitat resource concerns are not created or intensified by both: adding woody plants where they do not belong, or by removing them to an inappropriate condition.

Stream Habitat Improvement and Management (395)

- Definition:

The renaming clarification to remove “management” is helpful and appropriate.

- Criteria:

We appreciate and support the requirement to use native plant materials.

Vegetative Site Preparation (490)

- Definition:

The renaming and consolidation of Vegetative Site Preparation practices under a single code is a positive step. It clarifies and simplifies the conservation planning process, as long as nuanced payment scenarios are put in place to support the broadened purpose. We suggest clarifying when 490 is appropriate rather than similar practices like 460 Land Clearing or 314 Brush Management.

- Criteria:

Believe it is inappropriate to use any Conservation Practice to convert native plant communities to exotic or non-native conditions, which would create a new resource concern. This practice has great potential to degrade or destroy native wildlife habitat. We recommend adding the following Criteria language: *“Implement the practice in a manner that will prevent destruction or degradation of ecological function according to the Ecological Site Description.”*

Water Well (642)

- Purpose:

Inclusion of wildlife as part of the definition, purpose, and criteria may result in the inappropriate justification of this practice when non-wildlife purposes alone are



inadequate to make the recommendation. Over-prescription of this practice for wildlife purposes may lead to negative impacts by point source attraction that elevates predation risk at the water source. Other than in the most arid environments, positive impacts to wildlife are often incidental. We support use of this grazing management support practice, in conjunction with Prescribed Grazing (528) and whole-farm comprehensive conservation plans that include wildlife management if planned by a biologist.

TWS and the Private Lands Working Group of TWS appreciate the opportunity to review and comment on the proposed revisions to the National Handbook of Conservation Practices on behalf of the wildlife and natural resources. We look forward to providing further assistance as needed. Please contact Kelly O'Connor, TWS Conservation Policy Manager, by phone at (301) 897-9770 x332, or by email at koconnor@wildlife.org if you have any questions or wish to discuss these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Dr. Edward B. Arnett, CWB®
CEO, The Wildlife Society