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**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

**[Docket No. NRCS-2015-0004]**

**Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and  
Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat  
Incentive Program (VPA-HIP)**

**AGENCY:** Natural Resources Conservation Service

**ACTION:** Notice of Availability

**SUMMARY:** On April 27, 2015, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) published an NOA in the Federal Register announcing the availability of a draft EA for VPA-HIP and requesting public comment. The draft EA was available for a 30-day public comment period that ended May 27, 2015. The draft EA was prepared to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and NRCS implementing regulations. Brief comments were received from one State and those comments expressed no concerns about the analysis or the effects of the program. NRCS has determined that implementing VPA-HIP is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the context of NEPA and, therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** A copy of the final Programmatic EA and FONSI can be accessed on the Internet by clicking on the appropriate link at

[www.nrcs.usda.gov/ea](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/ea). Single copies of the FONSI and Programmatic EA or additional information may also be obtained by contacting Ms. Andrée DuVarney, National Environmental Coordinator, USDA-NRCS, Ecological Sciences Division, Room 6158-S, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, D.C., 20013-2890 or by sending a request via email to [andree.duvarney@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:andree.duvarney@wdc.usda.gov).

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

*Background:* VPA-HIP is a competitive grants program that is available to State and Tribal governments. The program is authorized under the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, as amended (2008 Farm Bill, as amended) (16 U.S.C. 3839bb-5). Regulations at 7 CFR part 1455 govern implementation of VPA-HIP. The primary objective of VPA-HIP is to support State and Tribal government programs that encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily make that land available for access by the public for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation. Grant recipients may also use VPA-HIP funds to improve habitat on enrolled public access program lands.

NRCS expects most actions carried out with VPA-HIP funds to follow NRCS conservation practice standards and fall within existing categorical exclusions. Although VPA-HIP applicants that agree to follow NRCS conservation practice standards will receive preference for acceptance and funding, there is no requirement they do so. It is also possible some actions may not fall within a categorical exclusion. Therefore, NRCS decided to prepare a Programmatic EA to review the effects of activities that are likely to occur with VPA-HIP grants.

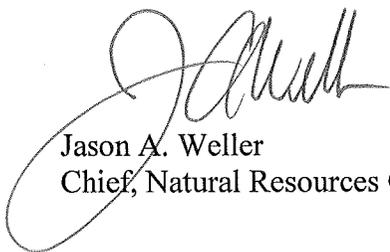
*Proposed Action:* The Proposed Action is to award VPA-HIP grants as authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill, as amended. Under this alternative, NRCS will provide an opportunity for State and Tribal governments to apply for grants to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily make that land available for access by the public for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation, and to improve and manage fish and wildlife habitat on their land under programs administered by State or Tribal governments. Grants will be awarded through a competitive process.

*Alternatives:* The Programmatic EA evaluates the environmental impacts of the Proposed Action and the no-action alternative. The Proposed Action is the agency's preferred alternative, and it meets the purpose of and need for the project with only minor, short-term adverse impacts to the environment anticipated. The no-action alternative does not meet the purpose and need for the action, and results in more adverse impacts to the environment than the preferred alternative.

*Scoping:* In developing the Programmatic EA, NRCS conducted internal scoping with various agency discipline experts, and used experience gained from previous VPA-HIP grants and associated EAs. Potential adverse impacts identified through the scoping process include localized, temporary, minor increases in soil erosion, sediment transport, and particulate matter from ground-disturbing activities and the use of agricultural equipment during the installation of conservation practices. In the longer term, there will be habitat improvements, and increased recreational and economic benefits. NRCS solicited comments from the public for 30 days on its analysis and received only one comment that expressed no concerns.

*Other Environmental Review and Coordination Requirements:* VPA-HIP grant recipients will conduct site-specific evaluations of lands where habitat improvement projects are planned to address project compliance with applicable laws and regulations, including NEPA, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act. NRCS will conduct or oversee any required consultation with the VPA-HIP grant recipients in accordance with applicable regulations.

Signed this 22 day of July 2015, in Washington, D.C.



Jason A. Weller  
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service

**United States Department of Agriculture**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program**

**May 2015**

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has prepared a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluating the environmental consequences associated with providing State and Tribal governments with Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant funds. VPA-HIP was authorized by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily open land for public access for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, and other outdoor activities. Projects receiving VPA-HIP funds are administered by the State or Tribal government that receives the grant.

NRCS proposes to provide up to \$20 million in 2015 VPA-HIP grant funds. Grants will be awarded through a competitive process. State and Tribal governments typically use VPA-HIP funds, combined with other resources to:

- 1) Pay landowners directly to allow public access, through lease payments, easement purchase, or other methods;
- 2) Pay salary costs for staff who work with private landowners to implement the program;
- 3) Pay for habitat improvements and management activities; and
- 4) Develop outreach materials, such as Web sites and brochures, to inform the public where access to private lands for wildlife-dependent recreation is allowed.

NRCS published a Notice of Availability of the Draft Programmatic EA and requested comments for a 30-day period. Two supportive comments were received that did not result in changes to the EA. The Final Programmatic EA attached to this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) provides the analysis needed to assess the impacts of the proposed action. The Programmatic EA analyzes the impacts of implementing VPA-HIP from a national perspective, and was informed by previous analyses of the impacts of individual VPA-HIP proposals implemented at statewide or regional scales, each of which resulted in a FONSI.

In consideration of the analysis documented in the Programmatic EA and the reasons outlined in this FONSI, the proposed action does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The determination is based on the following:

- 1) Potential beneficial and adverse impacts of implementing the proposed action have been fully considered within the Programmatic EA. The actions to be carried out with VPA-HIP funds are primarily for the purposes of facilitating public access and improving ecosystem health and wildlife habitat, and will usually occur on land that already has

been disturbed to produce food, fiber, forage, and forest products. As a result, habitat improvement and management activities conducted through the program are expected to improve the condition of affected resources and avoid adverse effects on protected resources. Minor, localized, short-term increases in soil erosion, sediment delivery to water bodies, particulate matter, greenhouse gases, and ozone precursors are possible where habitat improvements are installed. In the long-term, increased recreational opportunities, vegetation and wildlife diversity, and conservation of threatened and endangered species, species of concern, and their habitats are expected. (See Table 1 on pages 5 and 6 of the Programmatic EA.)

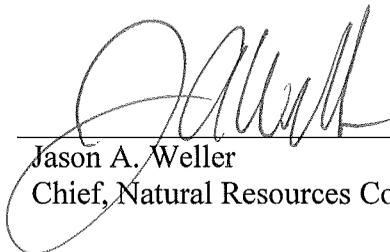
- 2) The proposed action does not significantly affect public health or safety. Neither the analysis in the Programmatic EA, nor public comments indicated the proposed action would result in significant adverse impacts to public health and safety. Outdoor recreation is generally thought to benefit human health. Hunting-associated safety is addressed by State and Tribal hunter education programs.
- 3) The proposed action will not result in significant adverse effects to unique characteristics of the geographic area. Site-specific environmental evaluations conducted and management plans developed by qualified State or Tribal agency personnel or by other qualified individuals will ensure grant activities are carried out in a manner that avoids adverse effects to natural, cultural, and historic resources. (See page 10 of the Programmatic EA.)
- 4) The proposed action does not involve effects to the quality of the human environment that are likely to be highly controversial, highly uncertain, or involve unique or unknown risks. Habitat improvement and management practices described in the Programmatic EA have been used successfully by NRCS, and State and Tribal wildlife agencies for decades. (See pages 8 through 10 of the Programmatic EA.)
- 5) The proposed action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant adverse effects and does not represent a decision, in principle, about a future consideration. VPA-HIP proposals funded so far have provided additional financial resources for State and Tribal governments to continue and expand existing public access programs they administer. VPA-HIP proposals funded in the future are expected to do the same, resulting in little or no change to the human environment.
- 6) The proposed action does not result in significantly adverse cumulative impacts when considered with other actions that also individually have insignificant impacts. The long-term beneficial and short-term minor adverse cumulative impacts of continuing and expanding existing public access programs are expected to be the same as those described in the Programmatic EA and will be dispersed nationwide. (See Table 1 on pages 5 and 6 of the Programmatic EA.) Neither the analysis nor public comments indicated the proposed action would result in significant adverse cumulative impacts.
- 7) The proposed action will not significantly adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. NRCS will conduct site-specific reviews of habitat improvement projects with the potential to affect properties that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officers, concerned federally recognized American Indian Tribes, Tribal Historic Preservation

Officers, and Native Hawaiian Organizations, and will work with grant recipients to ensure that any potential adverse effects to these resources are avoided, minimized, or mitigated. (See pages 9 and 10, and Appendix D of the Programmatic EA.)

- 8) The proposed action will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat. State or Tribal biologists or other qualified representatives will screen all habitat improvement projects for potential effects on State, Tribal, and federally listed threatened and endangered species. In the event an action may affect an Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species or designated critical habitat and consultation has not already been completed, NRCS will designate the State or Tribal fish and wildlife agency as its non-Federal representative to conduct informal ESA consultation and the agency will incorporate into its plans any conservation measures that may result from that process. If NRCS has already conducted consultation for the activity to be conducted, grantees will be required to follow identified mitigation measures. In all cases, grantees must agree they will not fund actions adversely affecting ESA-protected species or designated critical habitat. (See page 10 of the Programmatic EA.)
- 9) The proposed action does not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. Habitat improvement and management activities funded with VPA-HIP will have site-specific environmental evaluations conducted and management plans developed by qualified State or Tribal agency personnel or by other qualified individuals. This process ensures all projects are carried out in compliance with Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental requirements. (See pages 10 and 11 of the Programmatic EA.)

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing NEPA, and NRCS NEPA regulations at 7 CFR part 650, I find the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

Approved:

  
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Jason A. Weller  
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service

7/02/15  
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Date