

Directed Research Program Objective 6**Assess federal, state, and local policies in Mississippi and surrounding states that influence the capability of landowners or individuals to develop fee-access wildlife and fisheries enterprises**

Investigators: W. Daryl Jones, Wildlife and Fisheries; Changyou Sun, Forestry

Project Goal:

Assess federal, state, and local policies in Mississippi and surrounding states that influence the capability of landowners or individuals to develop fee access wildlife and fisheries enterprises.

Project Objectives:

1. Inventory and examine existing and planned state and federal governmental and non-governmental organization (NGO) programs and policies that promote or potentially affect fee access wildlife and fisheries recreation enterprise development in Mississippi and other Southeastern states.
2. Assess relevant legal issues and governmental cost-share assistance programs and/or other assistance programs found to be useful to fee access enterprises (e.g., fee access landowners, outfitters) in Mississippi and other Southeastern states.

Synopsis of research activities per objective:

A review of state and federal landowner assistance cost-share programs has been completed. This includes the Farm Bill programs that offer financial incentives to agricultural producers and forest landowners to promote wildlife habitats on private lands. These enrolled properties will be suitable

for enrollment in wildlife enterprises and landowner outreach through workshops and web site information is being developed to encourage this activity. Two survey studies are underway to ascertain landowner satisfaction with their participation in government cost-share programs and the implementation of these programs by state and federal agencies in Alabama and Mississippi. In the first study, Mississippi landowners were queried on enrollment of properties in cost-share programs and satisfaction levels with participation and recommendations on program improvements. The second study will query county District Conservationists in Alabama and Mississippi to ascertain implementation of cost-share programs to private landowners and evaluate agency monitoring efforts on enrolled properties to measure wildlife habitat improvements as prescribed by these programs. This information will be used to make policy recommendation to implementing governmental agencies to improve landowner participation in programs and overall performance of these programs to improve wildlife habitats and stewardship on private lands.

Significant findings/results per objective to date:

This research study focused on motivations, satisfaction levels, and problems encountered with cost-share assistance programs offered through natural resource agencies. Three programs



were chosen as the focus of this study: Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). The study was conducted through two surveys. The first survey consisted of a mail out questionnaire sent to private landowners throughout the state of Mississippi. The second survey was sent via e-mail to natural resource agency personnel. The two groups were asked identical questions for the purpose of comparing responses. An individual analysis was also conducted for both surveys. The survey to private landowners consisted of an 11 page, self-administered mail questionnaire. The questionnaire mostly dealt with questions concerning: (1) reasons landowners chose to enroll property in a cost-share assistance program, (2) landowners' overall satisfaction with their program arrangement, (3) problems landowners faced either during the enrollment process or while implementing program practices on their land, and (4) demographics of respondents.

A random sample of 2,000 private landowners within Mississippi was selected to receive a questionnaire. Landowners were selected from a county land tax record database maintained by Forestry Extension at Mississippi State University. From this database, only those counties that reported high levels of enrollment in CRP and WRP were selected, for a total of 43. Once these counties were selected, only those landowners who owned 250 or more acres in cultivated land within each county were included in the final sampling frame. It was from this list that the random sample was taken.

Of the 2,000 individuals sampled, 802 (45.2%) landowners responded to the questionnaire. Of the total respondents, 667 returned usable questionnaires. Additionally, 354 individuals were non-eligible because they were deceased ($n = 52$), refused to participate in the survey ($n = 83$), or were non-deliverable ($n = 219$). Thus, the overall effective mailing response rate was 40.5%.

Directed Research Program Objective 6**Assess federal, state, and local policies in Mississippi and surrounding states that influence the capability of landowners or individuals to develop fee-access wildlife and fisheries enterprises (continued)**

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Several major findings were taken from the landowner survey. Overall, private landowners reported high levels of satisfaction with their cost-share program arrangement. Most landowners indicated that agency staff had inspected management practices on enrolled lands. The major motivations behind the decision to enroll in a program included: the desire to be a good land steward, to increase wildlife on property, to control erosion, to establish additional income, and to increase hunting opportunities for self/family while landowners did not appear interested in fee access wildlife recreation. Most landowners also indicated that no problems had been encountered on their land because of enrolling. Strict eligibility requirements was the most cited problem related to the enrollment process, however, this rating was not very strong.

The survey to natural resource professionals consisted of a 7-page, self-administered internet questionnaire. The questionnaire mostly dealt with questions concerning: (1) reasons that resource professionals believe are important to landowners in their decision to enroll property in a cost-share program, (2) problems that resource professionals believe program participants encounter either on their land or during the process of enrolling in a cost-share program, (3) how program success is measured, and (4) problems that

resource professionals face with the delivery of cost-share program aspects. The sampling frame consisted of 46 district conservationists employed through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and 27 county executive directors employed through the Farm Service Agency (FSA). After a review time, FSA opted out of participating while 36 NRCS personnel responded to the survey.

Several major findings were also taken from this survey. Only a small portion of natural resource professionals indicated that they would rate their training concerning program practices as inadequate. When questioned about problems occurring with the implementation of conservation management practices on program enrolled lands, the top ranking items concerned a lack of staff or personnel available to work, insufficient funding available to landowners and a lack of knowledge held by landowners concerning program objectives.

Significant conclusions were also noted when responses to identical questions from the two surveys were compared. Landowners and natural resource professionals indicated the same top five motivations (importance items) for landowner participation in a cost-share program (though not in the same ranking order). Regarding problems encountered by landowners

on their land as a result of participation, a higher percentage of natural resource professionals indicated financially related problems to be the overriding issue while a higher percentage of landowners reported problems related to the land itself.

The final major statistical comparison between the two groups centered on problems encountered by landowners during the enrollment process. Although the responses to four of the six items in this question were significantly different between the two groups, the differences for three of those items resulted from professionals overestimating the amount of difficulty associated with the enrollment process.

Applications or broader impacts of significant findings, including economic impacts or projected impacts:

Findings will be communicated with NRCS staff in Mississippi to better inform biologists of landowner motivations and concerns in enrolling their lands into farm bill programs. Additionally, this information is being made available to other resource agency staffs and landowners as participants of NRE-sponsored enterprise workshops.

Project success relative to original objectives:

The project is proceeding as planned.

List post docs and graduate students with title of thesis or dissertation, if completed, and estimated graduation date:

Ring, J.K. Estimated graduation date of 2009. Dissertation, Mississippi State University.

Wiggington, C. Estimated graduation date of 2008. Thesis, Mississippi State University.

Fund Leveraging	
Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality	\$155,000
US Environmental Protection Agency Wetlands Division	\$327,000