

# **State Coordinator Perspectives: What to Claim for Habitat Accomplishments Inventory**

## **NBCI State Agency Quail Program Inventory for 2012**

**January 2013**

This is a summary of state quail coordinator approaches for identifying, gathering and compiling quail habitat management activity during 2010--2012. Thanks to these states/coordinators for their input: VA (Puckett), TN (Gudlin), NC (Jones), GA (Thackston), KS (Pitman), SC (Dukes), LA (Stafford), KY (Morgan), IA (Bogenschutz), MD (Long), MO (Alleger) and TX (Perez).

### **AGENCY PUBLIC LAND (Direct Wildlife Agency-Based Quail Habitat Management)**

- **Summary: states reporting confidence in their acres of habitat management have a high degree of documentation of habitat suitability by experienced, trained biologists, and passes quail hunter litmus test (today or in near future these areas have high probability of producing quail)**
- Good example of these lands are focus/demo/'quail' management areas. State quail focus areas were reported in 2011 SOTB in state reports and pages 25-26.
- Example comments on approaches to these data:
  - GA: we captured direct Agency quail-friendly habitat management activity on public lands where quail management/hunting is an objective by querying respective Game Management Region offices for WMA quail habitat enhancement data. We are somewhat confident in this dataset. Confidence is challenged by our not always knowing the landscape context of the practices relative to actually affecting a bobwhite response.
  - MD: good data on acres impacted on state WMAs based on federal aid reports that tabulate acreage by management practice.
- For the 2011 data (2012 SOTB, page 39), several states split agency public lands into different confidence categories, e.g., MO High Confidence--87,456 acres, MO Somewhat Confident--14,065 acres; IN High Confidence--2,516 acres, IN Somewhat Confident--24,709 acres; DE High Confidence--379 acres, Somewhat Uncertain--210 acres.

### **AGENCY PRIVATE LAND (Direct Wildlife Agency-Based Quail Habitat Management)**

- **Summary: high degree of documentation of habitat suitability by experienced, trained biologists, maybe higher than for public land because contract/accountability are involved, and passes quail hunter litmus test.**
- Good example of these lands are focus/demo/'quail' management areas. State quail focus areas were reported in 2011 SOTB in state reports and pages 25-26.
- Example comments on approaches to these data:

- GA: habitat reporting mainly focuses on acres restored/maintained through the BQI program, which provides incentives and/or cost-share to implement quail-friendly practices and are checked annually by BQI biologist.
    - High confidence in acreage reported as suitable for quail due to multiple site visits, compliance evaluations conducted prior to dispersing annual incentive payments to cooperators for habitat enhancements and maintenance, and generating annual BQI reports.
  - VA: Counted habitat that private lands wildlife biologists enrolled (based on tracking database), or counted acres reported as “implemented” by NRCS, or by FSA depending on program. Our PLWBs are a jointly hired group through a contract and grants. Verification of program enrolled acres – we do at least a 5% spot check on the project quality annually, though most of our PLWBs do much more than that. And we try to go back and do fall covey counts on a subset of properties – in all honesty where we expect to see results. I think I was conservative in what I counted.
  - MD: Because the question only asked for reporting of “direct” accomplishments, our estimate only includes 1) prescribed burning that our agency conducts on private lands and 2) acres that were enrolled in the landowner incentive program’s “fallow field” practice. Estimates of prescribed burning acreages were reported by regional staff that conducted the burns and are not exact acreages. We did not include any private lands habitat work that was recommended by DNR but actually conducted by other entities (farm bill programs, contractors, etc.).
  - TN: acreage included is under our Farm Wildlife Habitat Program, designed specifically for quail and small game.
  - KS: We tabulate implemented acres of bobwhite-friendly KDWPT private land cost-share contracts.
  - MO: For private lands, total acres implemented as a result of staff contact, whether a ‘program’ was used to pay for a portion of the work or not, are tracked.
  - TX: For private lands managed with technical assistance from state biologists we plan to survey staff in regard to implanted/active management acres only that are directly beneficial to quail.
- For the 2011 data (2012 SOTB, page 39), several states split agency private lands into different confidence categories, e.g., KS High Confidence--5,511 acres, KS Moderate Confidence-12,855 acres; TX High Confidence-5,600 acres, TX Somewhat Confident-58,000 acres.

## **FARM BILL**

- **Summary for Farm Bill Programs: quail habitat suitability somewhat based on assumptions that may or may not be true. Because accountability for compliance is between USDA and landowner, the quail value of USDA acres is highly variable. The probability of habitat being suitable (high confidence level) seems to increase with degree of state involvement in USDA program (e. g., field biologist partnerships with NRCS, substantial input in development of USDA program). Some of the examples below might appropriately be classified as having high potential suitability for quail based on state involvement in the program, but lacking measures of quail or habitat,**

**degree of suitability is still assumed, not known, and this should be specified so as to control expectations.**

**State agency access to USDA data is highly variable, with occasional limitations at state and national levels, and severe lag time in some cases. NBCI Ag Policy coordinator(s) can assist with this process.**

- Example comments on approaches to these data:
  - VA: Counted only private lands wildlife biologists enrolled (based on tracking database), or counted acres reported as “implemented” by NRCS, or by FSA depending on program. Our PLWBs are a jointly hired group through a contract and grants. Verification of program enrolled acres – we do at least a 5% spot check on the project quality annually, though most of our PLWBs do much more than that. And we try to go back and do fall covey counts on a subset of properties – in all honesty where we expect to see results. I think I was conservative in what I counted.
  - TN: I have identified NRCS practice standards that potentially benefit quail. Some are assumed to benefit bobwhites (NWSG plantings, Rx burning); some I have to apply a fudge factor to (e.g. CP21 – estimated percentage planted to native grasses as opposed to introduced grasses. Also take acreage in relevant CRP practices – change from one FY to next as gleaned out of FSA monthly CRP reports.
  - NC: We use a combination of techniques involving direct observation or work by our Private Lands Biologists and inclusion of what data we can access from NRCS programs. Our methods incorporate most of the same techniques used by both Virginia and Tennessee. We are very conservative in what we count as habitat for quail and are missing many acres.
  - GA: We don’t include private land acres restored/maintained through Farm Bill programs because although we do have the acreage data we don’t have an assessment of the quality of those acres and what is actually benefiting bobwhites; we are working toward this.
  - KS: We tabulate implemented acres of bobwhite-friendly NRCS practices, CRP practices, KDWPT private land cost-share contracts, and USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife contracts. We have a lot of input in designing the USDA wildlife practices and our biologists even deliver WHIP for NRCS in Kansas. All of those agencies have good habitat tracking mechanisms (including us) and we can fairly easily access the figures.
  - SC: acres enrolled in SAFE and CP-33.
  - IA: We tabulate all wildlife habitat recommendations that individuals in the Iowa Private Lands Program staff have a hand in developing, mostly USDA programs, CRP, WRP, WHIP, GRP. Through an agreement with Pheasants Forever the Farm Bill Biologists report their habitat improvement recommendations in the same manner.
- For the 2011 data (2012 SOTB, page 40), several states split farm bill lands into different confidence categories, e.g., KS CCRP Moderate Confidence-37,958 acres, KS CRP MCM & EQIP Very/Somewhat Uncertain- 384,033 acres.

## Some Key Issues

### Issue: Acres can be counted multiple times when >1 practice is used during the reporting year

- **Summary: States are divided on this so Inventory asks for details on base acres (i.e., each acre only counted once).**
- Example comments on this issue:
  - VA: when we are reporting “work done” on an annual basis – we often will be reporting on the same acres where other types of management have occurred before.
  - TN: Would be too hard to glean out otherwise. Biggest overlap is likely on introduced field conversion to native grass, e.g. 20 acres fescue killed with herbicide followed by 20 acres nwsg planting.
  - KS: We’ll end up counting a lot of our acreages multiple times if we just sum the practice totals. We have a fair amount of those native grass conversions where chemical treatment and NWSG seeding occur during the same FY. We also have a lot of prescribed burning in CRP followed by interseeding of forbs in the same FY. Additionally, almost all of our contracts in native rangelands include multiple bobwhite-friendly practices in the same FY. It is really common for someone to shear trees in the winter, conduct a prescribed burn in the spring, and implement a grazing plan during the summer months all in the same FY. I’m not sure how easy we can identify individual acres but if we just sum the practice totals we’ll be greatly overestimating our accomplishments in Kansas.
  - SC: Agree with all. As a group, we have wrestled with the issue of habitat creation vs. habitat maintenance, and how to count those acres, for a long time. In my mind, all management counts, whether for creation or maintenance. If we are making progress we should still see steady increases in acres managed on an annual basis. But only count acreage once in a year even if multiple practices are applied.
  - LA: Agree with TN.
  - KY: Disagree with some of the comments above and with double counting in general. I think it’s really important to not double and triple count acres. It’s misleading and doesn’t represent reality. We struggled with this issue for years, but just accepting that it’s too difficult to tease out shouldn’t be acceptable in the long run. Otherwise, we risk losing our credibility. Our new database will eliminate this problem for KDFWR accomplishments, but not partners. If we ever get the double counting issue fixed across the board, then the result will be a decrease in reported accomplishments when it takes affect and generate the perception of inactivity. Ultimately, it is best to be conservative and under-report then over-report. As a side issue, I’ve noticed a similar problem on the NBCI quail map on the website. Some quail icons represent a single field or farm. Those minimize the significance of the conservation effort and could hurt credibility. At a minimum, quail icons should be color coded to represent significance.
  - IA: Similar to KS there would be the opportunity to double count with multiple practices applied to the same ground in a year. However, we track all our private lands work spatially on a GIS so we have individual tracts, but we can also tally practices

implemented on those tracts. I don't think our public lands are to this point yet, but working toward it.

- MD: we potentially may double count if 2 treatments applied in same year, but in reality I don't think that occurs very often.
- MO: Our agency database does not allow multiple treatments on the same acre(s) to be counted w/in a year; no double-counting.
- TX agree, count only once
- Habitat affected by natural phenomena such as flood, wild fire, wind, etc., unless Agency management occurred on top of that natural event during the reporting year, is not eligible.

### **Issue: Occurrence of wild quail as a criterion for claiming acreage**

- Responses to this statement: “Acreage claimed must be in areas where quail exist, as measured by NABBS, state survey, etc. Exception is where wild quail translocation is planned.”
- **Summary of responses: States are divided on this so Inventory only specifies that “Existence of wild quail, either measured or reasonably assumed, is minimum criteria for lands claimed. Exception for areas where translocation of wild quail is occurring.”**
- Example comments on this issue:
  - VA: We count every acre developed in Virginia – because quail have not been extirpated in Virginia – we feel there are a few – a very few in nearly all areas. Again it is our goal to count work done, if we get into talking about an inventory of what quail habitat we have at any given time in Virginia – that is a different question – the NBCI 2.0 rating at least partly addressed that.
  - TN: Impossible to glean out – no accurate map of state that identifies verified bobwhite voids on landscape in TN.
  - NC: We know there are quail everywhere we are working intensively on quail. I do feel we have some areas where they are extirpated, but we are not working there.
  - GA: We are focusing our efforts in areas where we feel we have the best potential for success guided by the NBCI revision. Areas outside of high and medium priority areas as designated thru the BRI process would be claimed only if they are a translocation site or a GA-NBCI focal site. Either case entails a quail objective with a large acreage ( $\geq 1,500$  acres), extensive habitat work, and accompanied by a monitoring program to document population response. We feel habitat work in landscapes rated as poor for bobwhites should be counted only when acres impacted exceed a minimum threshold considered to be adequate to sustain population viability (we have chosen 1,500 acres but this needs additional verification).
  - KS: We have quail throughout our entire state; albeit at low densities in a few far NW and WC counties. Thus, we count all habitat improvements throughout the state.
  - SC: Same as Virginia.
  - LA: Except for coastal marshes, cypress tupelo swamps where quail never existed, we would count improvements.

- KY: Still believe that quail can respond statewide with good habitat. Therefore, we would include all habitat accomplishments.
- IA: Quail are limited to ~ the southern third of Iowa, so I can provide numbers just for the quail range. Habitat accomplishments are tracked statewide.
- MD: quail are absent in much of the state. We only count accomplishments in counties with known breeding populations based on BBS data.
- MO: Agree with counting all acres for the very sound reasons shared above.
- TX: all acres could potentially have quail

**Issue: Can acreage identified in a management plan be claimed in the NBCI Inventory?**

Responses to: “For landowners not participating (no money or contract) in agency-based program, but receiving guidance from Agency biologist in form of written plan:

- If above does not include some verification of management activity, does it count?
  - If above does not count (i.e., verification *is* required), does it count if biologist follows up with **informal (not following some protocol)** communication with landowner, in field or not, one month or 11 months later, count?
  - Is a formal reporting system (biologist regularly records acres managed by either field visit or formal inquiry of landowner) the minimum for verifying habitat activity?”
- **Summary of responses: need verification of habitat work accomplished, not just planned.**
  - Example comments on this issue:
    - VA: We are primarily tracking program related acres – the program acres are all I think we can really be at least a little bit sure of. Now for success stories – we may have landowners who have done nearly all the work on their own, minus perhaps some technical advice and input from us – but these are still quail management success stories – which according to the NBCI MB - NBCI can count as NBCI successes – even though NBCI in many cases had absolutely nothing to do with them. I think the directors on the MB clearly want to count what is going on – no matter who is credited – they clearly said –we need to track the gross accomplishments / work being done for quail. I truly do not think they were wanting micro-numbers. A director wants to go to their respective board – or in most cases have the quail coordinator go before the board, or whomever and be able to give an overview of what is being done in a state and what effect it is having – in 10 to 15 minutes – a generally broad overview.
    - TN: Not counting these acres, as not known if plan is implemented or not.
    - NC: We don’t count the acres unless we can verify them in some manner. We have some folks implementing work like Texas that we need to quantify but have been unable due to position vacancies (short-staffed).
    - GA: Whether on private or public lands we feel acres directly managed needs to be verified in order to be claimed. As you said Tom, “as professionals, can you defend what you’re claiming as an agency in front of a group of quail hunters”? We try to document and report acres restored/maintained thru success stories and landowners that implement technical assistance given outside of the financial incentives segment of the BQI program thru follow-up site visits. Only report acres implemented, not planned.

- KS: This doesn't occur often in our state and when it does the work isn't tracked or verified. Thus, we don't count these acres because we have no way of knowing how much acreage was affected or if the desired outcome was achieved.
- SC: We have a significant number of properties which are practicing intensive quail management with no form of assistance, including a management plan, from our agency. Many are easily identifiable and verifiable, but were not counted since there is no direct agency involvement with their management. Tall Timbers is providing a significant amount of technical assistance on many of these properties in SC. IMO, there should be a way to count these acres IF owners are willing to say they are managing properties *in support of* NBCI and range wide quail restoration goals.
- LA: Agree with GA.
- KY: We write thousands of acres of mgt plans annually, but only report known accomplishments. Our new system is designed to capture past recommendations that are actually implemented. We are also considering to randomly return to landowners that we have not heard back from to determine what rate and what types of practices are completed. With that data available, we could extrapolate, but not saying that we would report on it. We would use it to help justify our program, however.
- IA: We track our PL efforts spatially. So we can track landowners where we wrote a plan. Our tracking system included an implemented status that staff are required to update at a minimum of once a year. All habitat improvement suggestions are tracked regardless of funding source and staff review all habitat improvement suggestions annually to determine if the work has been completed.
- MD: only report on known acreages affected, not planned.
- MO: Report only acres implemented; do not report planned acres.
- TX: agree with GA, we intend to report verified acres affected

**Issue: Can “minimal” assistance by agency biologist to landowner be counted as acreage in the NBCI Inventory?**

Responses to: “Does biologist assisting landowner with seed drill set-up count?”

- **Summary: Appears most would only count acres of land seeded by this landowner, who was assisted by state biologist, *if* land was enrolled in a program, but as KY pointed out, double-counting could occur.**
- Example comments on this issue:
  - VA: In most cases, if a biologist is assisting someone with a seed drill set-up – the land is likely in a program where the acres are being counted.
  - TN: This should be captured in reports on cost-shared acres, or could be reported by states if they have a system of keeping up with CTA-only acres.
  - NC: In most cases this is part of a program and would be counted when the habitat was in place.
  - GA: Only work that is completed that results in habitat maintained or established for bobwhites should be claimed.
  - KS: We only count practices that have been implemented and paid through one of the government agency contracts.

- SC: Same as GA.
- LA: no information provided
- KY: If that assistance resulted in known habitat on-the-ground, then absolutely. However, this presents another opportunity for double counting if it is an USDA implemented practice.
- IA: Only if our biologist draft a plan and implemented practices.
- MD: This was not counted unless the staff actually planted it.
- MO: This would count as one landowner/cooperator contact; acres drilled would be captured elsewhere by our system.
- TX: Suggest known acres planted outside of USDA program be counted.

## **SUMMARY**

VA: With regards to public lands – we are still primarily reporting what DGIF staff do on our 3 designated Quail Demo areas. A year seems like a long time, and I have a list here from last year of agencies and NGOs I need to try to get data from. This year I will try to develop a subset of the questions you ask us to send directly to those on that list in an effort to capture public lands information from other agencies – e.g – I know the USFS is burning at least 20,000 annually in Virginia – which may have some potential for quail – but I have no idea what DOF, DCR, USFWS, etc. is burning, or managing in any way.

VA: With regards to private lands I feel we are being pretty conservative – we count acres reported as being implemented and paid, but we do not have any measure of quality – no annual measure of quail density, etc. So essentially most of what we report under the “straw man” system would be 1 star work.

NC: We have a real good handle on what is happening on our state-managed public lands (Game Lands). We do not have a good handle on what other public land management is happening though I expect there is very little.

NC: We are very conservative in what we include on Private Lands by only including work we have done directly, observed, or counted from NRCS data.

GA: Our acreage reporting consists mainly of BQI program related acres restored/maintained along with habitat management on select WMAs that either have a quail objective or due to their landscape context and the management practices implemented benefit bobwhites. These areas have associated monitoring programs and we’re currently looking to identify other WMAs where opportunity exists and get buy-in from those with management responsibility. The same approach is used on public lands managed by other agencies and conservation partners that are members of the Georgia Bobwhite Technical Team. Finalizing GA’s NBCI step-down plan will hopefully provide some impetus for these agencies to identify opportunities they have as well. Whether public or private we error on the side of caution and try to be as accurate yet conservative in reporting acres managed for bobwhites. We do not support counting acres accomplished unless quail value added management practices have been implemented and verified at least to some degree; and are in landscapes where these practices can be reasonably expected to result in sustaining or increasing the bobwhite population.



KS: We probably overestimate the private land acres that are directly affected through government programs because we frequently count the same acres multiple times. However, there are many people in the central and western part of our state that are managing their properties in a quail-friendly way without any guidance or financial assistance from the government agencies. There is a very strong fire culture throughout much of Kansas and much of our occupied quail habitat is native rangeland managed for the benefit of livestock production. These acreages represent the vast majority of our occupied quail range and we are not reporting any of those totals. We also have no way of quantifying any of the habitat work that occurs on any of our publicly owned properties because none of the agencies track those accomplishments right now.

SC: Our estimates for the first survey were pretty crude due to short time frame for reporting and unfamiliarity with type of data being collected. We have a long way to go in terms of accurate reporting in SC, but will continue to make our data as accurate as it can be. We have no state cost-share program, limited technical assistance staff, and difficulty obtaining useable information from USDA partners. As a result, most of our acres counted are from management on WMAs with some limited information on private lands from USDA programs. I'm looking forward to additional guidance on reporting.

KY: Our approach to the inventory reporting is to be conservative until we can better represent the reality of habitat accomplishments. We are dramatically underestimating accomplishments right now, especially via our partners. The NBCI could dramatically assist states by getting federal conservation partners and national NGO's on-board with annual reporting. States could then focus their efforts on state agencies and other state-based partners. It's critically important to start conservative on reporting, because when our reporting improves, we don't want show a reduction in accomplishments. Holding a high ethical standard, maintaining credibility, and showing true growth should be core principles for the annual inventory.

IA: We have very good spatial data on private lands, and can report on all acres our staff is involved with. On public lands our bios do annual reports for federal aid, usually total acres impacted, likely some double counting, they do not tract practices by species. They are moving toward a spatial system so hopefully this will improve in the future. PF reports their habitat improvement suggestions on private land through the DNR's GIS tracking system so by looking at just the DNR's report would capture both the DNR and the PF accomplishments. Other partners like NRCS, FWS, PF may report acres, but many of these acres would likely be some of the same acres our jointly funded staff have worked on. Our PL staff is a lot of partnerships NRCS and PF primarily. So to take their reports and combine it with ours – a lot of double counting would occur.

MD: We have good accounting of what is being done on our few WMAs that are managed for quail. Work is limited on other state lands but generally we are involved in the project and can easily count those acres. We have limited capacity to do direct private lands work from our DNR staff and those biologists seem to be able to accurately estimate acres affected. What we lack is good data on acres impacted by NRCS programs that will benefit quail. Many CRP

plantings established without DNR assistance will not provide suitable quail habitat. But some are – we just cannot quantify them.