



Stewardship Incentives Program

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Introduction

The Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP) is a federally sponsored cost-share program, authorized by the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 (United States Department of Agriculture 1995). SIP is designed to encourage non-industrial private forest owners to restore, maintain, and manage their forestlands. Congress enacted SIP in 1991 to ensure the future health of America's forestland. As nearly one-half of the wood supply of the United States comes from nonindustrial private forests, it was deemed necessary to protect private forests for future use (Ellefson 1992). Adequate supplies of timber and other forest resources are essential, and managed forestlands can increase output and the value of forest property. It was also realized that forest landowners are under increasing pressure to convert their forestland to development and other purposes. SIP also recognized that managed forestlands provide habitat for wildlife, aesthetic quality, and recreation opportunities. Soil, air, and water quality maintenance and improvement are all benefits that result from stewardship of forest resources. SIP was introduced to foster the long-term commitment of forest stewardship.

Funding for SIP first became available in 1992. SIP is a voluntary program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Forest Service and State Foresters, at the federal and state levels, respectively. As a fiscal incentive program, cash reimbursements are made by the government directly to the landowner for forest enhancement. The USDA-Consolidated Farm Service Agency accepts applications and distributes payments, while the Forest Service and State Foresters provide technical assistance. Each state is also required to establish a Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee to advise the State Forester on state SIP administration. The committee consists of representatives from state and federal agencies, environmental organizations, consulting foresters, the forest industry, and landowners.

As a cost-share program, SIP has been quite successful. Acreage covered by SIP in 1993 totaled 219,569 acres, with 4,237 total participants (Moulton 1994). Other similar cost-share programs are also available. Armed with an array of programs, State Foresters can ensure that a majority of landowner needs are met. This in turn, provides all the positive externalities of forests that are shared by all.

Objectives

SIP encourages ecosystem based management practices designed to conserve water quality, soil and other natural resources as well as control sedimentation and erosion from forestland. Forest enhancement and environmental benefits are also goals of SIP. The program supports a wide range of activities that contribute to a healthy forest ecosystem, including: plan development, reforestation, agroforestry, windbreaks, soil and water protection, riparian and wetland

protection, fisheries and wildlife habitat, and recreation. This broad range of activities encourages landowners to undertake a variety of forest enhancement activities and preference is often given to cases achieving multiple objectives.

Eligibility

SIP is available to landowners that own 1,000 acres or less of forest land. Exceptions are made up to 5,000 acres and minimum acreage cannot be below 25 acres. Payment of cost-shares is up to 75% of the cost required to implement the plan. States have the authority to set their own rate and minimum acreage. Minnesota cost-shares up to 50% (65% for hardwoods), with an acreage minimum of 20 acres (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 1997). Landowners eligible for the program consist of individuals, corporations that do not publicly trade stocks, and nonprofit organizations. Ownerships that derive more than 50% of their gross income from natural resource related activities are ineligible to participate in SIP. Maximum payments must not exceed \$10,000 per owner per fiscal year and practices must be maintained for a minimum of ten years (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 1997). Also, any practices required by laws or regulations are ineligible for SIP.

Activities in Minnesota

Priorities and practices are defined in each of the SIP supported activities. Preference is often given to those activities that achieve multiple objectives. For example, agroforestry improvements also provide habitat for wildlife. Beyond multiple objective preference, there is no priority ranking between activities. Landowners are steered to a different program if funding is not available from SIP. With adequate funding available from the broad spectrum of programs, the majority of landowner needs are met and prioritization of activities is not necessary. In the future, legislative and funding changes might necessitate prioritization. The following is a breakdown of each activity.

Landowner Forest Stewardship Plan Development

The purpose of the plan is to document landowner objectives and recommend management practices on forestland with existing tree cover or other lands suitable for conversion. Developed by a professional natural resource manager, the plan considers the long term management of: forest health, soil interpretation, timber, water, riparian and wetlands, wildlife and fish habitat, forest recreation and aesthetic quality, threatened and endangered species, and historic, cultural and archeological sites. Biological, environmental, and economic principles are emphasized in the plan. The planning and evaluation requirements result in a multi-scoped plan for the landowner (State of Minnesota 1996).

Reforestation and Afforestation

The intention of the reforestation and afforestation is to establish and maintain trees for conservation and timber production on lands suitable for growing trees. Priorities for funding in this area are given to site preparation for natural regeneration of trees and fencing for protection from grazers. Planting, seeding, and temporary cover are also given priority over wood farming

and microclimate improvements (mats, mulch, or shelters). Reimbursement funds are raised if site preparation is done on slopes or on areas of heavy slash. Using seedlings certified by the Minnesota Crop Improvement Association are encouraged with a reimbursement increase over noncertified seedlings (State of Minnesota 1996).

Forest and Agroforest Improvement

Increasing individual tree growth and quality, along with improved stand vigor and forest health are all objectives of Forest and Agroforest Improvement. This practice applies to forestland with existing tree cover. High priority is given to thinning and fencing. Medium priority is given to site preparation, planting, seeding and temporary cover. Low priority is given to microclimate improvement and pruning. Manipulation of the existing stand of trees is justified to improve species composition and timber quality, and enhance forest health (State of Minnesota 1996).

Windbreak and Hedgerow Establishment, Maintenance and Renovation

The purpose of this practice is to establish, maintain, or renovate existing windbreaks, hedgerows, living snow fences, livestock shelters, and alley cropping on lands suitable for growing trees. All components in this area are given a low priority, which include: site preparation, planting, fencing, irrigation, shelters, invasive species control, fertilizers, thinning, and pruning (State of Minnesota 1996).

Soil and Water Protection and Improvement

Controlling erosion, improving water quality, fostering soil development, and preventing pollution during forestry activities are goals of this activity. All components of this activity are given a high priority. This practice applies to forestland with existing tree cover, abandoned roads, trails, firebreaks, landings, and eroded and gullied land. Authorized components consist of: site preparation, planting, invasive species control, shelters, weed barriers, animal repellants, and fertilizers. State approved best management practices are to be utilized for stream crossings, cross drainage on roads, and stream side management areas. Road or trail construction is discouraged by its ineligibility for reimbursement (State of Minnesota 1996).

Riparian and Wetland Protection and Improvement

The purpose of this practice is to protect, restore, and improve forest wetlands and riparian areas, reduce sedimentation and streambank degradation, improve water quality, and restore productivity on existing tree covered or potentially forested wetlands and riparian areas. All of the components of this practice are given equally high priority. Practices that would directly or indirectly result in the loss of wetlands or impair wetland or riparian functions are not authorized. Authorized components include: site preparation, planting, invasive species control, shelters, weed barriers, animal repellants, fertilizer, fencing, restoration of natural hydrology, and streambank stabilization (State of Minnesota 1996).

Fisheries Habitat Enhancement

Enhancement of in-stream habitat for native fisheries (including endangered species) and improvement of water quality are both components of Fisheries Habitat Enhancement. This practice is applied to all bodies of water associated with forests (lakes, ponds, wetlands, streams, and rivers). Components of this activity given highest priority are fencing (stiles for access), grass establishment, and riparian woody cover establishment. Corridor containment is given the lowest priority (State of Minnesota 1996).

Wildlife Habitat Enhancement

The goals of this practice are to restore, improve, or establish permanent upland and wetland forest habitat for game and nongame wildlife species. Also, included are restoration, protection, enhancement, and maintenance of threatened or endangered species and their communities. Priorities in this category are given to: establishments of vegetative cover (native grasses), prescribed burning, wetland creation/restoration, and fencing. The second order of priorities consists of: site preparation, tree/shrub planting, establishment of vegetative cover (introduced grasses) and vegetation management. Lowest priority is given to wildlife watering facilities, microclimate improvement, structures for wildlife, creation of wildlife openings, and wetland management (State of Minnesota 1996).

Forest Recreation Enhancement

Establishment and enhancement of forest recreation on forestland with existing tree cover is the purpose of this practice. All components of this practice are given the lowest priority. Steps needed for improving an area for recreation or protecting, enhancing or restoring aesthetic quality to an area are all authorized. Road construction, surfacing material, outbuildings, gates, bridges and signs are not authorized for cost-sharing (State of Minnesota 1996).

Evaluation

The State Forester performs a before and after examination during the initial implementation of the plan. SIP practices should be installed or completed within 18 months of approval. Follow-up checks are done periodically during the ten year agreement, with more checks done at the beginning and less checks done at the end. If plan implementation is unsuccessful due to factors beyond the landowners control, cost-sharing will be approved for reimplemention. Success is achieved when the plan is implemented and the landowner complies for a minimum of ten years. There is a continuing obligation on the land for the ten years, even if the original landowner sells. Also, it is still the original landowners responsibility to ensure the full ten year obligation is fulfilled, or the landowner is liable for all costs (State of Minnesota 1996).

Conclusion

As a fiscal incentive program, SIP promotes forest enhancement by nonindustrial private forest landowners. SIP is a catalyst in managing and restoring forests throughout the United States. Compensation to landowners in this voluntary program gives landowners the incentive to invest

in public goods. Public goods through SIP range from windbreak establishment to watershed protection. SIP also encourages landowners to make long term investments in maintaining the natural resource base. Finally, SIP is a tool used by professional resource managers to effectively manage private lands based on an ecosystem management approach.

Critique

SIP is an effective program for enhancing forestland. The voluntary approach ensures that administration and enforcement costs are kept at a minimum. Citizen involvement at this voluntary level tends to be those who are interested not only in the cost-share program, but also the results. The program's success can partly be attributed to the willing and interested participants of the program for their stewardship of the land. The wide ranges of restoration practices also contribute to the program's popularity.

Minnesota has chosen to reduce the cost-share rate to 50% for all practices (except hardwood plantings) in order to spread out the benefits to more landowners. Even at this reduced rate of reimbursement, the program utilizes all its available funds. Though record keeping for both landowner and government agency is simplified at 50%, the problem is that all practices are construed as being equally beneficial, unless prioritized. Native plantings are definitely beneficial to many ecosystems for wildlife habitat and even a small incentive over non-native plants (50% to 45%, respectively) would increase native plantings. As it stands, priorities for native plants are only listed in Wildlife Habitat Enhancement practices. A small incentive for native plants in all the areas would greatly increase native plant use, while still maintaining overall costs at about the same level.

Another improvement could be in the following area. The ten year requirement is a minute amount of time, especially in the case of forest regeneration. As the ten years are nearing their end, the professional managers could be a source of information for future uses of the land for the landowner. Contacts with organizations for land easements, especially for marginal, riparian, wetlands, and sensitive species habitat lands, could be extremely beneficial for both landowner and public. With our ever increasing need for wood products, the resource professionals could also be helpful in connecting the forestry industry with potential timber sellers. Just informing the landowner of all possible options would enhance the program and allow for further management opportunities of the land.

SIP is a valuable program. Since funding for the program comes directly from the government, it is essential that the citizens of the U.S. support those in favor of forest cost-share programs. SIP ensures that forestland is available for utilization in the future, along with protecting America's health, heritage, and beauty.

Works Cited

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