

NEWS RELEASE

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USDA-NRCS and US Fish & Wildlife Service Partner to Promote Habitat Conservation in the Guánica/ Rio Loco Watershed and Maricao Commonwealth Forest Buffer

October 5, 2011 – San Juan, PR –NRCS Caribbean Area Director, Edwin Almodovar, announces the agency has entered into an agreement with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) to provide conservation technical assistance and outreach to protect, restore, develop or enhance important native fish and wildlife habitat. NRCS and FWS will help farmers in Puerto Rico's Guánica Bay/Rio Loco watershed implement conservation practices to convert coffee plantations from sun coffee to shade coffee in order to establish a wildlife corridor between Maricao and Guilarte Forests.



Shade coffee provides wildlife habitat in Utuado.

NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) funds will provide financial and technical support to clients in these priority areas who have active Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and/or Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) contracts. CTAP activities will demonstrate how local and federal agencies can work together to assist land owners in reducing threats to federal trust resources including migratory birds; threatened, endangered and candidate species; and coral reefs.

"Outreach is a critical component of our Conservation Program delivery," said NRCS Caribbean Area Director, Edwin Almodovar. "With this agreement, private landowners will have an opportunity to learn more about the programs available in their areas, while we work together in partnership to establish critical corridors between forests in Southwest Puerto Rico as habitat for endangered species."

"This agreement confirms the strong commitment of our agencies to leverage resources to promote landscape conservation practices in the Caribbean for the benefit of migratory birds, listed and candidate species, as well as many aquatic species," said Cindy Dohner, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast Regional Director.

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NRCS will conduct outreach activities with private land users to promote protection and/or enhancement of upland and other types of wildlife habitat, thus providing more opportunities to increase participation in Farm Bill programs. Staff will evaluate whether the quantity, quality, or connectivity of food, cover, shelter and/or water is adequate to meet identified fish, wildlife and invertebrate species requirements and assist farmers in developing conservation plans to protect, restore, develop or enhance wildlife habitat.

FWS will provide technical assistance including identifying fish and wildlife resource concerns and endangered and threatened species impacted on farms within the priority areas; providing tree seedlings (such as *Inga vera*, *Andira inermis*, *Cordia alliodora*, and *Inga fagifolia*) to the farmers in the priority areas to help them convert from sun coffee operations to shade coffee; certifying wildlife conservation practices on these farms; and identifying potential new participants for USDA programs.

"Some of the activities will include the restoration of important habitats within the Rio Loco and Guánica Bay watershed, as well as the Maricao Commonwealth Forest buffer area – the proposed site to establish a third population of Puerto Rican parrots and home of the Elfin Woods Warbler, a candidate for federal Endangered Species Act protection," said Leopoldo Miranda, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services in the Southeast Region. *"These actions will also enhance water quality of these watersheds, improving the conditions of near-shore coral reefs in the south coast of Puerto Rico."*

Habitats targeted for restoration activities include those for: *Amazona vittata*, Puerto Rican Parrot (Cotorra de Puerto Rico); *Accipiter striatus*, Puerto Rican Sharp-shinned Hawk (Halcón o Gavilán de Sierra); *Caprimulgus noctitherus*, Puerto Rico Nightjar (Guabairo Pequeño de Puerto Rico); *Dendroica angelae*, Elfin Woods Warbler (Reinita del Bosque Enano); *Epicrates inornatus*, Puerto Rican boa (Boa puerorriqueña); and Neotropical migratory birds. Resource concerns include inadequate cover and shelter, inadequate food supply, habitat fragmentation, and threatened and endangered fish and wildlife species. Habitat needs for this area are: forest enhancement, agro forestation, riparian forest buffers and wildlife corridors.

For more information on this joint NRCS/FWS wildlife habitat CTAP outreach project, please contact Mr. Jaime Valentin, NRCS State Resource Conservationist, at Jaime.Valentin@pr.usda.gov or 787-766-5206 x229, or Ms. Marelisa Rivera, FWS Assistant Field Supervisor, at Marelisa_Rivera@fws.gov or 787-851-7297 x206.