

**2020 MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Directors Report**

**Submitted by: Mark Norton, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks**

**Meeting Time and Place**

May 12th from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. and May 13th 8:30 to 11:00 a.m. held via conference call hosted by SD Game, Fish and Parks

**Attendance**

There were fourteen (14) participants in the meeting which was held via conference call. All member states were represented at the private lands working group except Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Scott Taylor, the National Pheasant Plan Coordinator provided an update on the Pheasant Plan which is in the middle of being revised. Greg Pilchak, AFWA Ag Policy provided an overview of AFWA comment letters submitted over the past year on Farm Bill Conservation Program Rules and provided guidance for discussion about CRP. See Appendix 1 for participant names.

**Executive Summary**

This year’s private lands working group discussions focused on the sharing of new and successful projects in each state, modifications to CRP SAFE projects, developing recommended changes for the General CRP Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) and the possible new version of the Soil Health & Income Protection Program in the HEROES Act. See Appendix 2 for meeting agenda. The group felt this was a productive meeting with relevant discussions. There is value in meeting counterparts from different states, comparing successful projects, issues and challenges and working together toward solutions. **The group encourages the Directors to continue their support for this Working Group and to prioritize attendance by their staff.**

**Director Action Items:** None

**Director Information Items:**

***State Updates – New or Successful Projects***

**Illinois** received a Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant from USDA to increase public hunting access on private land. They also are starting a new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project that will provide cost-share to tenants on IL DNR lands to transition 25% of the cropland to no-till, add cover crops, and use multi-crop rotations.

**Indiana** received a VPA-HIP grant to expand their private land hunting access program to include deer and waterfowl hunting opportunities. They are also working on an agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Indiana to help NRCS with CRP technical assistance, planning, and status reviews.

**Iowa** was successful in signing up lands into perpetual wetland conservation easements through USDA easement programs and planning the restorations on 8,000 acres. High demand remains and they are hopeful for additional funding to enroll more land in 2020. They were also successful at developing wildlife habitat through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), especially with practices like brush management which they were able to provide 75% cost-share on. Received a VPA-HIP grant which will enable them to double the amount of land in their private land habitat and access program.

**Michigan** completed a new strategic plan that refocuses their private lands hunting access program on three priorities of limited access areas near population centers, access to areas to prevent limit wildlife and livestock disease transmission, and areas that will provide unique hunting opportunities like sharp-tailed grouse hunting. Their private lands habitat program also has added a commitment to monitoring results of grassland habitat management to guide program delivery.

**Missouri** Department of Conservation will be reorganizing as of July 1, 2020 which will create a new private lands branch. This will result in an increased focus on private lands habitat work with over 150 staff in this branch working on forestry, fisheries, wildlife, and urban habitat. They have received a VPA-HIP grant that will enable them to double their private lands hunting access program enrollment.

**Nebraska** also had a busy year with enrollment of perpetual USDA wetland conservation easements due to increased funding available from the extreme flooding in 2019. They are updating the Bergen Pheasant Plan which to date has impacted over 115,000 acres of habitat. Their private lands public access program grew to its largest enrollment of 347,000 acres and 44.5 miles of streams.

**North Dakota** started offering only neonic free food plot seed this year. They are working on a new RCPP proposal to native grassland restoration and management. Recenly completed a survey of hunters and landowners about their views of energy development on private lands leased for public hunting access. Results should be available later this year. Started marketing their CREP with on-line ads through Facebook and Google and are receiving a lot of interest from landowners from these efforts.

**Ohio** is updating its private lands tactical plan and possibly adding 6 new positions that would work on both public and private land habitat. Received a new VPA-HIP grant for controlled public hunting access. Water quality has been a priority and they have spent approximately $30 million over the last year on wetland restoration projects primarily in the Lake Erie watershed. They also continue to partner with the Ohio Pollinator Habitat Initiative and successfully implement pollinator habitat by providing free pollinator seed and milkweed plugs for restoration projects. Looking forward to being part of the CRP CLEAR 30 pilot area to reenroll CRP contracts for 30 years.

**South Dakota** added a private lands habitat biologist position in 2019 as part of a reorganization of the private lands staff. They started implementing a new short term (5 year) working lands habitat program that establishes a diverse mix of perennial grasses and forbs on cropland and allow for haying and grazing as part of the Governor’s Second Century Initiative. A new habitat stamp was created that goes into effect July 1, 2020 that will raise funding for public land habitat work and for private land access which will be used to fully enroll 100,000 acres of CREP. They are currently reenrolling the 1st expiring CREP contracts.

***Other Information Items***

**NABCI Private Lands Staff Forum** – This inaugural forum originally scheduled for March 24-25, 2020 in Kansas City, MO was postponed until the same time next year. It had over 100 registrations from federal, state, and NGO partner private land habitat professionals from across the country. The goal of this forum is to provide a high-quality environment for training and mentoring, exchange of ideas, and developing a community of practice that enhances the ability of private lands staff to effectively deliver Farm Bill and other conservation programs.

**CRP SAFE Project Modifications -** All states on the call were in the middle of modifying CRP SAFE Projects as required by the Farm Service Agency CRP Notice-897. States had many questions and were getting different answers from various state FSA offices. Greg Pilchak had submitted seven questions to the National FSA office prior to this meeting and had received no answers. The group supports AFWA sending a letter to FSA requesting an extension of the deadline to have the SAFE modifications submitted to the National FSA office to June 30th.

**CRP Environmental Benefits Index –** Beverly Preston with the National FSA office had requested at the North American Conference in March that AFWA provide suggested changes to the EBI. We discussed ideas on how to adjust the EBI to improve the competitiveness of SAFE general CRP offers. The group supported adding points for SAFE in the enduring benefits and air quality benefits portions of the index. We also supported any adjustments be added to previously approved AFWA EBI change recommendations and all changes be submitted together to the FSA. The AFWA CRP Committee will be further discussing these changes and finalizing their recommendations.

**Soil Health Income and Protection Program (SHIPP) in the HEROES Act –** A new bill in Congress included a provision to increase SHIPP to 5 million acres, expand it to nationwide, and streamline the requirements and payments into a 3-year program. The working group came up with few benefits to wildlife if this became law and had many concerns about the negative impacts this could have including:

* A single rental rate nationwide would overpay or underpay in most of the country and only be fair in a small section.
* It would diminish interest in CRP, which could have serious negative impacts to the budget for CRP in the next Farm Bill, negative impacts on the reenrollment of existing CRP habitat, and negative impacts on CRPs ability to add habitat to the landscape.
* 3-year contracts with cheap cover provides and promotes minimal wildlife habitat

The group would prefer any stimulus funding for conservation be used to increase CRP rental rates, practice incentive payments, and cost-share for mid contract management.

**Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held during May of 2021 in Wisconsin.

Appendix 1. Attendance List

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| **Participant Name** | **Organization** |
| Bob Caveny | Illinois DNR |
| Sam Whiteweather | Indiana DNR |
| Josh Griffin | Indiana DNR |
| Brian Hickman | Iowa DNR |
| Todd Bogenschutz | Iowa DNR |
| Mike Parker | Michigan DNR |
| Lisa Potter | Missouri DOC |
| Erich Zach | Nebraska GPC |
| TJ Walker | Nebraska GPC |
| Kevin Kading | North Dakota GF |
| John Kaiser | Ohio DOW |
| Mark Norton | South Dakota GFP |
| Gregory Pilchak | AFWA |
| Scott Taylor | MAFWA/Pheasants Forever |

Appendix 2. Meeting Agenda

 

**MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Meeting Agenda**

**May 12-13th, 2020**

**Conference Call**

Central Time

Member States: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin

**Tuesday, May 12**

1:00 – 1:15 Welcome (Mark Norton) and Review of 2019 Meeting in Ohio (John Kaiser)

1:15 – 2:45 State Updates

2:45 – 3:00 Break

3:00 – 3:30 AFWA Farm Bill Rule Comment Summary – Greg Pilchak

3:30 – 4:00 National Pheasant Plan Update – Scott Taylor

**Wednesday, May 13**

8:30 – 10:00 CRP SAFE Project Review, CRP EBI recommended chages, Soil Health Income and Protection Progam

10:00 – 10:15 Break

10:30 – 11:00 Meeting summary, action Items, resolutions, letters for Directors