



2021 MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Directors Report
Submitted by: Cody Strong, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Management

Meeting Time and Place

May 12th from 8:30 AM to 1:15 PM. Held via conference call hosted by WI DNR. An in-person meeting was again canceled due to continued concerns and restrictions associated with COVID-19.

Attendance

There were 19 participants in the meeting which was held via conference call. All member states were represented at the Private Lands Working Group (PLWG) except Minnesota. See Appendix 1 for participant names. Greg Pilchak, AFWA Ag Policy, provided updates on government affairs, the 2023 Farm Bill platform, and CRP policy changes. Scott Taylor, the National Pheasant Plan Coordinator, provided an update on the Pheasant Plan which is currently in revision.

Executive Summary

The 2021 MAFWA Private Lands Working Group met via video-conference call to discuss topics relevant to wildlife management on private lands and consider Action and Information Items for the Directors' attention. Discussions focused on the structure and capacity of states' private lands staff, innovative private lands initiatives, and federal policy with emphasis on the Farm Bill. See Appendix 2 for meeting agenda. Attendees thought the meeting was productive and worthwhile. Discussing how natural resource challenges and opportunities are handled in other states is invaluable for staff to better perform their own duties. **A common theme during this meeting was the importance of continued wildlife agency involvement on private lands to affect landscape-level outcomes for wildlife. Particularly in predominantly privately owned Midwestern states.**

Director Action Items:

Director Information Items:

The following Information Items were discussed by the Working Group:

Opportunity/Issue: Several issues related to VPA-HIP funding complicate implementation by state agencies. USDA-NRCS limits a maximum of 10% of an award being used for technical assistance. There is also a lack of funding across Farm Bill periods. Both create difficulties maintaining consistent program staffing.

Action: Members of the PLWG recommended considering addressing this in the 2023 Farm Bill platform.

Opportunity/Issue: Many states are currently or have recently reorganized private lands units. There is an opportunity for AFWA to provide guidance or training on best practices for private lands program implementation.

Action: Members identified that this opportunity would be best addressed in the AFWA Private Lands Working Group given existing parallel efforts there. Many of the attending representatives also sit on that working group.

Opportunity/Issue: VPA-HIP funding expansion is currently part of AFWA 2023 Farm Bill Platform.

Action: Member states should identify if they anticipate having opportunity to utilize expanded funding. A survey will be forthcoming from Greg Pilchak of AFWA.

State Updates – Private Lands Staff Capacity and Innovative Initiatives

States provided a verbal report during the meeting in addition to a more detailed written report. Detailed written reports can be found in Appendix 4.

Illinois: The Illinois DNR does not have a dedicated private lands team and relies on Farm Bill Biologists (FBBs) to implement private lands programs. Illinois received a \$2.1 million grant to fund the Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP). Approximately 100 sites are currently enrolled in IRAP, with preference given to first time or youth hunters. At 830,000 acres, CRP is the largest driver of putting habitat on Illinois private lands. Current research projects are examining SAFE CRP enrollment and wildlife responses.

Indiana: The Division of Fish & Wildlife was reorganized in 2019, invasive species work, environmental permitting and the lake and river enhancement program are now included under private lands. Indiana continues to grow its private lands biologist program. 96% of Indiana is privately owned, so it is important to continue growing private lands impact. There is a renewed focus on the Kankakee river basin and Indiana is working on an RCPP with private landowners to manage this area. Land easements and voluntary conservation practices are priorities of this work.

Iowa: Iowa's private lands program fits within the wildlife bureau and is robust. Includes biologists, wildlife specialists, foresters, and contract employees. EQIP cost share was increased to 90% (from 75%) for 10 priority practices including wetland enhancement, conservation cover, and brush management. Working with USDA-NRCS on Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Northern Bobwhite Quail initiative. Progress has been very slow on Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) flood plain easement implementation following catastrophic floods in 2019.

Kansas: Reorganization in Kansas occurred in 2016, where several sections including private lands became their own division. The private lands division has 32 employees. Kansas has

implemented an iSportsman program that helps them track and manage hunting pressure on Walk-In Hunting Access (WIHA) and other public access properties. Kansas limits use on properties to 2 hunters at a time to satisfy landowner and user concerns. Since September 2020 there have been 6,000 check-ins on iSportsman; 22% of all check ins are on WIHA properties.

Kentucky: Kentucky is starting to restructure its program but has had private lands biologists for years. Currently 16 state staff with an additional 17 Farm Bill Biologist (FBB) partner positions. The private lands coordinator position is brand new to Kentucky and is looking for ways to improve implementation. The program partners with county conservation districts for outreach to landowners. Kentucky currently has 2 WLFW initiatives: a waterfowl and now a Northern Bobwhite Quail project. Approximately \$1.5 million has been allocated to improve waterfowl habitat in western Kentucky.

Michigan: There is only 1 private lands biologist in the state. Although there has typically also been a hunter access coordinator that position is currently vacant due to COVID hiring restrictions. The Michigan DNR primarily relies on partners to deliver private lands programs, although a budget pause resulted in the layoff of all FBBs. Currently working to refill these positions. Michigan is working on a wildlife partnership database, given its reliance on partner positions. The State Technical Committee and subcommittees are active again – this is important in order to have input on USDA-NRCS program implementation. State legislature recently authorized \$5 million for Michigan’s CREP.

Minnesota: No representative from Minnesota was present to give a report.

Missouri: Reorganization began in July, previously private lands services division was supervised out of MDC headquarters. These staff are now locally supervised out of 8 regions. Some regions have tried to use private lands staff for public land work. There has been some difficulty maintaining this separation, but it’s important otherwise private lands work becomes deprioritized. Added 20 new positions. MDC has had recent success promoting native warm season forage for grazing. Likely due to increased agricultural partner buy in and promotion. 2 new RCPP initiatives in Missouri: USDA easements for sand prairie habitat and another for precision agriculture implementation.

Nebraska: Nebraska has a dedicated private lands section. The Partners section has 26 full time staff but also heavily relies on external partnership positions. Nebraska has increased its capacity significantly through these partnerships. The Nebraska FBB partnership has 25 positions and has impacted 215,000 acres. The first iteration of the Berggren pheasant plan is now complete, with a total impact of 216,000 acres between 2016-2020. The Open Fields & Waters (OFW) public access program now has 372,000 acres enrolled and is funded in part by VPA-HIP grant award. A new USDA great plains grassland initiative will enhance Greater Prairie-chicken habitat and grow core areas with less impact by encroaching eastern red cedar. Nebraska has also had difficulty with slow pace of EWP flood plain project implementation.

North Dakota: Game & Fish has a dedicated private lands section with 12 staff. North Dakota unfortunately has fewer partnership positions however due to lack of popularity amongst agricultural groups. Private Land Open to Sportsmen (PLOTS) works with landowner to enhance habitat and requires access for hunting. Differing rates are available depending on landowner's interest in habitat work. State programs seem successful as many landowners prefer them over federal programs. New Meadowlark RCPP will use \$7 million in USDA and \$12 million in partner funding to establish, connect, and restore native grasslands. This program is short term and will help landowners transition native grasslands to grazing. North Dakota is also developing a one-stop shop website to consolidate information on available funding and programs for landowners.

Ohio: Ohio DNR private lands biologists are supervised by region and currently there are 6 positions. The DNR is hoping to expand to 12. These positions would take on some public lands responsibilities like writing management plans and supervising contractor work on public areas. Currently there are also 32 partnership positions (21 with conservation districts and 11 with PF/QF) in the state. Ohio legislature passed a \$148 million initiative that will increase emphasis on wetland restoration and CREP buffers to reduce phosphorous loading in Lake Erie. Ohio received its first VPA-HIP award to start the Ohio Landowner/Hunter Access Program, and the state plans to have the program ready for this fall's hunting season. Ohio DNR is entering into a new RCPP involving wetland restoration for carbon/water quality credits and ecosystem services that will also incorporate wildlife habitat.

South Dakota: Game & Fish recently reorganized its habitat section; these positions are now supervised regionally. There are 4 Game & Fish staff and 20 NGO partnership positions delivering private lands programs in the state. The state plans to add additional internal private lands staff and partner positions. Legislature increased license fees through the creation of a habitat stamp to increase CREP acreage and improve habitat on public lands. Currently 76,000 acres enrolled in CREP, looking to increase to 100,000. These acres are available for public hunting and fishing access. Game & Fish also received a VPA grant and is targeting big game hunting opportunities along riparian areas as well as land enrolled in conservation programs. Across all programs there are 1.4 million acres of private lands open to public access in South Dakota.

Wisconsin: Wisconsin's Wildlife Management Bureau has no dedicated private lands unit and relies heavily on partnership positions to implement programs. The DNR received \$1.9 million in 2020 to implement VPA-HIP and Turkey Hunting Access Program (THAP). At present there are approximately 39,000 acres enrolled in these 2 programs. Wisconsin's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) provides assistance on private lands to improve habitat and manage deer abundance. 400,000 acres are enrolled in DMAP with recent increases in interest posing a challenge given a lack of private lands staff. The Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership provides a collaborative model for forest management that pools resources and expertise.

Other Information Items

AFWA Government Affairs Update – Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA) was reintroduced in the House with bipartisan support on Earth Day. This legislation would provide \$1.4 billion in dedicated annual funding to state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies. This funding would go toward the conservation and monitoring of at-risk species, known in states as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), in order to work toward reversing population declines.

In response to USDA’s Request for Comments on the Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad AFWA provided input on the importance of of grassland, wetland, and forest conservation, restoration, and avoided conversion. The AFWA Energy and Wildlife Resources Committee also provided comments on renewable energy siting.

2023 Farm Bill Platform – Current Farm Bill platform based largely off the 2018 platform, with new sections being added to reflect the Administration and Congress’s focus on climate change and to address issues that have arisen since the 2018 Farm Bill’s passage.. This platform will be finalized later this summer to be submitted to Directors for their approval at AFWA’s September annual meeting. Directors should be briefed by their state’s private lands coordinator prior to this meeting. AFWA is still soliciting feedback from Congressional staff, USDA, and partners on this document. The group discussed several recommendations on which there is not yet consensus, including proposals by Congress to move CRP from an acre-based program cap to a dollar-based cap. An acre-based program may be more difficult to administer for FSA but also may be more relatable to landowners.

CRP Policy Changes and Issues – Currently CRP is at its lowest enrollment since 1986. Recent policy changes are largely positive, but increased crop prices may reduce any potential program enrollment gains from these measures. There is concern that as written a few of these changes may negatively impact wildlife benefit, however:

- CRP contracts not approved by April 22 must be rewritten. With a shortened timeline it’s expected this will put significant strain on partner and USDA staff. Interim plans being used during initial implementation may be one way to address this.
- Grassland Signup \$15/ac minimum may shift overall acreage enrollment increasingly to Grassland CRP and away from more beneficial practices that establish grassland on cropland.
- Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI) allows enrollment of tracts dominated by invasive non-native grass species that are not beneficial to wildlife.
- New Climate Smart Practice Incentives place greater value on certain low quality, introduced grasses compared to native grasses and other wildlife-friendly practices.

AFWA will continue to seek resolutions to several other ongoing CRP policy issues, including:

- Current lack of uniformity on how USDA communicates regarding CREP agreements is problematic.

- Emergency haying and grazing policy which allows for 100% of acres to be used in D2 drought scenarios, up from the previous levels 50 and 75%, respectively.

National Pheasant Plan Revision – The original National Pheasant Plan was passed in 2013 and is currently under revision. Of high importance to this plan is the question of, “How much CRP is needed to accomplish state pheasant management objectives?” Currently plan writers are looking at changes in nesting habitat acreage, changes in pheasant abundance, and the relative importance of different nesting habitat types to pheasant production. The intent is to calculate the CRP Acre Equivalent (CAEs) for different habitat types and determine how many CAEs are needed to accomplish state objectives. It’s anticipated that the final estimate will be 40-50 million acres of CAEs nationally, but this work is still in progress.

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. This forum was again postponed in 2021. Funding for this opportunity may expire in 2021 and communication is needed regarding contingency planning. 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.

Science Needs Questionnaire – In order to make best use of available meeting time, participants utilized the exhaustively listed MLI Technical Committee Brainstorming Results. Where participants identified additional recommendations beyond those established by the MLI Technical Committee they were added to this preexisting list. See Appendix 3 for additional recommendations from the Private Lands Working Group.

Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held during May of 2022 in South Dakota

Appendix 1. Attendance List

Organization	Participant
AFWA	Greg Pilchak
Illinois Department of Natural Resources	Wade Louis
Indiana Department of Natural Resources	Sam Whiteleather
Iowa Department of Natural Resources	Nick Baumgarten
Iowa Department of Natural Resources	Todd Bogenschultz
Kansas Dept of Wildlife, Parks, & Tourism	Wes Sowards
Kentucky Dept of Fish & Wildlife Resources	Jacob Stewart
Michigan Department of Natural Resources	Mike Parker
Missouri Department of Conservation	Lisa Potter
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission	Eric Zach
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission	TJ Walker
North Dakota Game & Fish	Kevin Kading
Ohio Department of Natural Resources	John Kaiser
Pheasants Forever	Scott Taylor
Pheasants Forever	Marty Moses
Ruffed Grouse Society	Jon Steigerwaldt
South Dakota Game, Fish, & Parks	Mark Norton
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Alaina Gerrits
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Cody Strong

Appendix 2. Meeting Agenda



MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Meeting Agenda
May 12th, 2021
Conference Call
 Central Time

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

Time	Agenda Item	
8:30-8:45	Welcome	Kent Van Horn, WI DNR
8:45-10:20	State Updates	All state representatives
10:20-10:30	Break	
10:30-11:00	AFWA Update & 2023 Farm Bill Platform	Gregory Pilchak, AFWA
11:00-11:30	FSA CRP Announcement	Gregory Pilchak, AFWA
11:30-11:35	Revised National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan	Scott Taylor, PF
11:35-12:00	30x30 Executive Order & Private Lands	Cody Strong, WI DNR
12:00-12:30	Action Items, Opportunities/Issues	Cody Strong, WI DNR
12:30-12:45	Break Grab your lunch	
12:45-1:15	Science Needs Questionnaire Discussion	Cody Strong, WI DNR

Appendix 3. PLWG Brainstorming Additions to Science Needs Questions

What fish and wildlife diseases are most important/challenging in the Midwest region? Why?

- Eyeworm disease (quail)
- Bovine TB
- Lymphoproliferative disease virus (LPDV) in Turkey

What changes in weather and/or precipitation regimes are impacting fish, wildlife, and habitat management at the present time?

- There is a need to look at prioritizing messaging to acknowledge negative impacts to priority species. It's important that the public understand that these impacts are real, observable, and relevant to their states' natural resources.

What are your concerns about changing regimes in the future?

- There is concern over the potential reallocation of funds to deal with invasive species and how this may reduce funding for other work.

Which aquatic and terrestrial invasive species are, at present, of greatest concern? Why?

The below species are particularly aggressive and/or deleterious invasive species in represented Midwestern states:

- Eastern redcedar
- Garlic mustard
- Honeysuckle
- Russian olive
- Cheatgrass
- Smooth brome
- Crested wheat
- Fescue
- Kentucky bluegrass

What are the greatest needs for alignment between multiple agencies in the region for the management of fish and wildlife? What management concerns would be better addressed through interagency science-based approaches?

- Social sciences research on best practices for outreach and inclusion of historically underserved landowners. Changing land ownership trends may necessitate different approaches.