



2022 MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Directors Report

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

Meeting Time and Place

May 3rd from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. and May 4th 8:30 to 12:00 p.m. held via Microsoft Teams hosted by SD Game, Fish and Parks

Attendance

There were twenty-four (24) participants in the meeting. All member states were represented at the private lands working group except Illinois and Minnesota. Kurt Thiede, AFWA Government Affairs Director, provided an overview of AFWA of the recently adopted AFWA 2023 Farm Bill Platform. Scott Taylor, the National Pheasant Plan Coordinator provided an update on the Plan which was revised in 2021. Claire Beck, Landscape Conservation Technical Coordinator, gave an update on the Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI). John Morgan, National Bobwhite & Grassland Initiative (NBGI) Director, also provided an update on the newly renamed NBGI. 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, CRP status reviews, CRP rental rates, CRP in the 23 Farm Bill, how states plan to use RAWA for private lands conservation, and the shortage of applicants for existing vacancies and future anticipated additional positions needed. 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

Indiana DFW added two new full-time CRP biologists through an agreement with NRCS and three new partnership farm bill biologist positions. DFW has been part of two new RCPP proposals submitted in 2022. One will focus on restoration and enhancement of grasslands and the other will focus on wetland establishment and working lands conservation. Using a VPA-

HIP grant to expand their private land hunting access program to include deer and waterfowl hunting opportunities which had 5,200 acres in the 2021-22 hunting season.

Iowa High demand remains for private lands habitat assistance as they worked with 2,776 landowners in the last year. Using a VPA-HIP grant they have opened just under 15,000 acres of private for public hunting access and created habitat on 245 sites.

Kansas VPA-HIP has been very successful at securing hunting and fishing access opportunities. They have used \$2.1 million to open public access to nearly 36,000 acres, much of which is new CRP. The iWIHA continues to grow to an anticipated 15,000 acres by the fall providing electronic check in for hunters. The Great Plains Grasslands Initiative through NRCS is very popular spending \$6 million last year for invasive woody control in grasslands.

Kentucky has hired 15 new partnership biologists in the last year working out of NRCS offices delivering private lands habitat programs. They have new projects starting on moist soil management, cedar removal, and native warm season grass management. Plan to develop new cost-share programs from KY DFWR.

Michigan recently completed the development of a private lands database to be able to track and report accomplishments. Just finished a 10-year pheasant habitat initiative that created over 80,000 acres of habitat. Working to continue this project going forward. The CREP program is now open again for new enrollments for the first time in 6 years thanks to MI legislature appropriating \$4 million to it for water quality. Received a new EPA grant to monitor and determine the best places to add pollinator habitat to the landscape.

Missouri is in year three of a reorganization that resulted 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 spend about \$1.8 million per year on private lands habitat projects and have added \$600,000 towards urban projects. Have a wildlife friendly buffer program in partnership with MO Corn and MO Soybeans with higher payments for more diverse seedings and wider buffers resulting in the creation of ecosystem credits to be sold by the landowners. They have received a VPA-HIP grant that will enable them to double their private lands hunting access program enrollment. Have projects planned to start in FY2023 to be funded with RAWA if it passes. MO would receive \$21/year from RAWA.

Nebraska just finished the Berggren Pheasant Plan 2.0. During the 1st phase over the last 5 years, they impacted over 233,000 acres of improved upland habitat and access. Had the most private land open to public access last year at over 382,000 in the Open Fields and Waters Program. The Nebraska natural Legacy program funded 69 projects on over 31,500 acres of grassland restorations, prescribed burns and forest restoration in 2021. Currently have 27 partnership field biologists with PF that worked with over 7,000 landowners on over 236,000 acres last year.

North Dakota is working on creating a few partnerships biologist positions again after a few years of not having them. All of NDGF private lands habitat programs require public access except their neonic free brood plot seed program. The Meadowlark Initiative is up and running with partial funding through an RCPP. Focuses on grassland restorations and management in priority landscapes that will result in larger grassland patches and greater grassland habitat connectivity. This initiative is ready for additional funds from RAWA once it passes.

Ohio recently hired a wetland program administrator that has helped implement the water quality incentive program. This program has been successful by completing 174 projects in 2021 containing 3,038 acres of wetland projects. Also working on transitioning from 5 to 15 biologists that will have partial private lands habitat work share. Their new hunting access program has almost 15,000 acres enrolled and uses a hunter check-in system. Have increased promotion of wildlife habitat practices through EQIP and have seen a large increase in applications.

South Dakota added 8 new private lands habitat biologist positions in 2021. A new project funded by state wildlife grants to remove invasive cedars from native prairie has been popular. Enrolled over 6,500 new acres into the James River Watershed CREP in the last year all open to public hunting and fishing access. Re-enrolled over 75% of expiring CREP acres in 2021. Currently working towards adding a second CREP in the Big Sioux River Watershed to enroll 25,000 acres. \$700,000 VPA-HIP grant funding secured over 100,000 acres of public hunting and fishing access on private land in 2021 for multiple years.

Wisconsin just reorganized to improve habitat management, partnerships, & collaborations that will allow for them to do more private lands work. About \$3.4 million in revenue was generated from species specific stamps was used to expand partnerships to do additional habitat work in 2021. The Deer Management Assistance Program worked with over 1900 landowners on more than 400,000 acres to improve deer habitat through deer habitat management plans. The Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership works with landowners to promote healthy young forest habitat in appropriate locations identified in species conservation plans and had 379 contracts on over 25,000 acres in 2021.

Other Information Items

2023 Farm Bill Update – The Senate Ag committee held a field hearing on April 29th where we learned that budget for the 23 FB will likely be flat with no addition funding added. This means any growth in a certain program will require funding reductions in other programs. **The working group recommends that a subcommittee of the AFWA CRP committee be formed to develop ways to refine grassland CRP and maximize the wildlife habitat benefits of the overall CRP program.** AFWA is contracting with Southwick to quantify the benefits of VPA-HIP by early 2023 to help advocate for more funding for this program in the 23 FB. The AFWA 23 Farm Bill Platform was shared with an emphasis that it is working document that could be changed as we learn more about what will be in the 23 Farm Bill over the next year.

CRP Rental Rates by Tract – This is a proposal to improve CRP contract rental payments by using an average rate for the three predominant cropland soils in a Tract instead of just the three predominant soils in the part of the Tract that would be enrolled in CRP. Usually, the area being enrolled in CRP is the least productive soils and it gets a lower rental rate, but landowners would still get the whole field average payment if they leased it out for crop production putting CRP at a disadvantage. There was some concern that using this method would decrease the CRP payment on some critical areas like filter strips that can occur in the most productive soils. Other questions were raised about how this would impact the overall cost of CRP and efforts to increase the national CRP acreage cap. **The working group recommends that a subcommittee of the AFWA CRP committee be put together to further consider this proposal and how it would impact CRP in multiple parts of the country and further consider some of the questions raised.**

State assistance to NRCS to complete CRP status reviews – Most state agencies were either directly assisting NRCS in completing CRP status reviews or indirectly by providing funding to partnership biologists that were completing them. In some states NRCS had hired numerous staff with the understanding that they would be needed to complete CRP contract status reviews.

National Pheasant Plan – The 2nd edition was adopted in the summer of 2021. The main objective was to determine how much nesting habitat was needed to meet 24 contributing state's need in the primary pheasant range of the county. A lot of science, calculations, and discussions went into determining that this number was 45 million acres. The next effort is to develop a GIS-based solution to help prioritize where nesting habitat acres should be placed to maximize pheasant production.

Midwest Landscape Initiative – An effort to build collaboration of the many species-specific regional plans to maximize effectiveness of on the ground habitat efforts for species of greatest conservation need. Will provide guidance for conservation funding through greater collaboration and better outcomes.

National Bobwhite and Grassland Initiative – Formerly the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, NBGI provides services of partner coordination/policy, coordinated implantation plan (CIP), and habitat management service center. The CIP is a standardized monitoring of birds, habitat, harvest, and management actions in 20 focus areas. Manpower, seed, & herbicide are the main services provided through the habitat management service center. NBGI is hosted by Clemson University and offers unlimited match up to 25% through administrative discounts over the next 5 years for federal grants.

Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative - Funding for managed grazing lands that provide time, rest, and recovery as part of the management plan. GLCI formerly funded through NRCS to hire grazing specialists and use EQIP cost-share funding to help install infrastructure for grazing management. There is currently an effort to restore funding of \$50 million through GLCI for FFY2022. It would result in grants for workshops, webinars for grassland management.

How states plan to use RAWA for private land conservation work – States planned to use RAWA for grassland restorations, wildlife passages, additional staff both agency and partnership positions for both grant administration and project implementation, private lands habitat projects, and CREP. Many states were concerned that there will not be enough qualified people available to hire to fill the need to deliver the additional funding from RAWA.

NABCI Private Lands Staff Forum – This inaugural forum originally scheduled for March of 2020 in Kansas City, MO was postponed due to covid and is scheduled now be held this July. 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 field staff to effectively deliver Farm Bill and other conservation programs. They are looking to have up to 150 people attend. All states are encouraged to send staff.

The working group also discussed the lack of wildlife college students graduating with the skills needed to work with private landowners to create wildlife habitat. Just about every state in attendance has had difficulty filling open positions in the past year. This difficulty extends further than just entry level biologist positions as many states are struggling to find qualified candidates to fill vacancies and all levels within the agency. There are a couple of good programs at Iowa State and Mississippi State that are focused on private lands work and programs.

Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held during May of 2022 in Wisconsin.

Appendix 1. Attendance List

Participant Name	Organization
Patrick Mayer	Indiana DNR
Sam Whiteleather	Indiana DNR
Josh Griffin	Indiana DNR
Zach Voyles	Indiana DNR
Nick Baumgarten	Iowa DNR
Todd Bogenschutz	Iowa DNR
Wes Sowards	Kansas KPWD
Jacob Stewart	Kentucky DFWR
Mike Parker	Michigan DNR
Lisa Potter	Missouri DOC
Kevin Kading	North Dakota GF
Curt Francis	North Dakota GF
Nate Harling	North Dakota GF
Erich Zach	Nebraska GPC
TJ Walker	Nebraska GPC
John Kaiser	Ohio DOW
Mark Norton	South Dakota GFP
Eric Magedanz	South Dakota GFP
Mary C Anderson	Wisconsin DNR
Kelly Martinson	Wisconsin DNR
Kurt Thiede	AFWA
Claire Beck	MLI
Scott Taylor	Pheasants Forever
John Morgan	NBGI

Appendix 2. Meeting Agenda



MAFWA Private Lands Working Group Meeting Agenda May 3rd & 4th, 2022

Microsoft Teams Meeting

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

Central Time

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

Tuesday, May 3rd

- 1:00 – 1:15 Welcome (Mark Norton) and Review of 2021 Meeting hosted by Wisconsin (Cody Strong)
- 1:15 – 2:45 State Updates
- 2:45 – 3:00 Break
- 3:00 – 4:00 Updates to AFWA 2023 Farm Bill Platform - Kurt Thiede

Wednesday, May 4th

- 8:30 – 9:00 National Pheasant Plan Update – Scott Taylor
- 9:00 – 10:00 CRP
- 10:00 – 10:15 Break
- 10:15 – 10:30 Midwest Landscap Initiative – Claire Beck
- 10:30 – 10:40 Northern Bobwhite & Grassland Initiative update – John Morgan
- 10:40 – 10:50 Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative – Mary Anderson (WI DNR)
- 10:50 – 11:30 Continued Discussion on any topics covered earlier
- 11:30 – 12:00 Meeting summary, action items, resolutions, letters for Directors