

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP

Respectfully submitted by

Anne Reis, Public Lands Specialist, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Meeting Time & Place

During the 2022 virtual meeting hosted by South Dakota, working group members expressed a strong desire to return to in-person meetings after the pandemic. After three years of virtual meetings, Wisconsin hosted a joint meeting with the Public and Private Lands working groups, the Wildlife Diversity committee and the Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI) May 9-11, 2023. The joint meeting was held at the Wilderness Resort in the Wisconsin Dells.

Attendance

In attendance were Brian Hickman (IA), Mitch Hess (IL), Dan Eckstein (IN), Dustin Mengarelli (KS), Derek Beard (KY), Earl Flegler (MI), Greg Hoch (MN), Matt Bowyer (MO), Kent Luttschwager (ND), Pat Molini (NE), Mike Ervin (OH), and Ryan Wendinger (SD). Wisconsin staff included Anne Reis-Boyle (2023 chair), Nathan Holoubek, Jason Fleener, Brooke VanHandel and Timothy Lizotte. All MAFWA states were represented.

Executive Summary

The overall goal of the 2023 MAFWA joint meeting was to think big and think creatively to identify multi-state or landscape-scale projects that can be accomplished through diverse partnerships across the 13-state region that will tangibly move the needed on our shared conservation priorities. The joint meeting agenda items included presentations on the conference theme: Landscape-scale conservation and Partnerships. Cindy Becker, Project Manager for the Southern Driftless Grasslands Initiative, presented Scaling up – Partnership supported landscape conservation in SW Wisconsin. Bob Hanson, DNR Northwest Sands Wildlife Biologist, presented Collaborative Partnerships – Reconnecting Wisconsin's Northwest Sands Landscape. Richard Monette, UW-Madison Law Professor and Director of the Great Lakes Indian Law Center presented Partnering with Tribes – A Balancing Act. Staff from the Midwest Landscape Initiative (Claire Beck, Alexander Wright and Kate Parsons) facilitated multi-jurisdictional project proposal development in small groups on overarching topics, including grasslands, forests, wetlands, and aquatic habitats. Ten project proposals were generated over several hours that identified project needs and outcomes, activities, geographical extent, partners and personnel involved, related plans and potential funding sources. The Midwest Landscape Initiative staff compiled the work and a report for the MAFWA directors separate from the individual committee and working group reports.

The Public Lands Working Group met in the afternoon of May 9th to discuss topics relevant to management of state wildlife lands and consider action items for the Directors' attention. Each state provided a brief overview of the top three challenges and opportunities facing public lands managers. For the last several years as well as this year, difficulty with staffing, aging equipment, need for habitat infrastructure engineering help, and public land use conflicts continue to be common themes. Additional themes common to many states include legislative and/or gubernatorial initiatives that hinder or help conservation efforts.

Special presentations included habitat and infrastructure prioritization. Jason Fleener presented Wisconsin's framework for prioritizing work on 1100 wetland impoundments across the state. A high,

medium and low ranking was applied to all impoundments based on a number of factors including priority watersheds, ecological impacts, public use and recreation, human safety, presence of wild rice, legal obligations, deeds/covenants and stakeholders. High and medium ranking impoundments allow staff to continue operations and apply limited funds to maintain and/or improve them. Low ranking impoundments were considered for divestment. Nathan Holoubek presented standardized guidelines for conducting habitat management on grasslands, oak forest, young forest, barrens and wetlands in conjunction with prioritized locations for working on these habitats across the state. The next phase of the work is to assess habitat quality in high and medium priority locations as well as setting long-term goals for these priority habitats.

Director Action Items

Action Item 1: Maintaining and upgrading infrastructure on public lands is critical for wildlife habitat and human safety and recreation. Lack of engineering support is one of the biggest barriers to ensuring infrastructure is maintained as intended. Many states have civil engineers who can design parking lots, buildings and other public use infrastructure. Wetland and habitat infrastructure is a specialty within the engineering field that is lacking or exceeds current capacity in many states. Some states have contracted with partners like Ducks Unlimited to funnel projects and funding for more timely construction. Others are limited by state purchasing rules and spending authority. During the project development portion of the joint meeting, the wetlands group drafted a proposal to streamline wetland engineering projects across the region. The goal is to secure America the Beautiful or other infrastructure funding to secure engineering support. We seek director's support for this project proposal.

Action Item 2: As public values toward wildlife and public recreation change, we foresee not only more opportunities for support of public lands, but also more conflicts among different user groups. The AFWA Relevancy Roadmap calls on public land managers to diversify their constituent base, while also maintaining existing recreation opportunities for the people who fund conservation through hunting and trapping licenses and firearm and ammunition purchases. More research, pilot projects and data collection are needed to engage more people in supporting conservation and public lands as well as reducing conflicts. We seek directors' support and funding for relevancy projects as well as current user focus group qualitative research.

Action Item 3: Staffing and recruitment declines have made it difficult to adequately manage public lands across the region. A number of new initiatives were discussed across working groups and committees including:

1. Building a pipeline of students/interns/new staff through a MAFWA jobs board (see joint public and private lands resolution).
2. creating adequate training curriculum that includes equipment experience for on-the-ground work (i.e., partnerships with technical colleges/universities)
3. creating conservation contractor degrees at various educational institutions

We seek director guidance in working with MAFWA region institutions for training support as well as MAFWA resources for a jobs board on the MAFWA website.

Time and Place of Next Meeting

Illinois, May 2024

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING

May 9 – 11, 2023

IL DNR

Mitch Hess, Don Kahl

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- 1) Procurement
- 2) Low Staff levels
- 3) Equipment needs for habitat work

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- 1) New Land Acquisitions
- 2) Initiative for more shooting ranges on state sites
- 3) More PR \$ for habitat work on state sites

For Report (optional categories if relevant to your agency/program)

Budget: In good shape. Some redistribution occurred, and some state sites are running on a smaller budget.

Land Acquisitions: Still acquiring, but tends to be timely

Legislation

Operations/Management

Partnerships

Personnel (retention/recruitment): Retention is good, but recruitment is bad. Takes too long to hire IF we can get positions posted.

Public Land Use: Use is now at pre-pandemic use.

Relevancy Roadmap

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023
Indiana Department of Natural Resources
Dan Eckstein

The Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife, Office of Public Lands, is responsible for the management of 16 Fish and Wildlife Areas managing 167,000 acres of public ground, over 400 public access boat launch sites, and 7 fish hatcheries.

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- Department Staffing- Although there have been salary increases in our department, some vital positions in areas of purchasing and finance have remained vacant for extended periods of time. This has caused serious delays or cancellation of habitat projects, distress in managing grants, and disrupted the ability to acquire goods and services.
- Increased operating costs- The overall cost of operating all the various work units across the office of public lands has increased substantially in the last couple of years, increasing the difficulty in setting a budget and reducing the amount of new projects and preventative maintenance we can get done.
- Competing interest for public use- On a limited amount of public land, there has been an increase in the number of nontraditional and traditional users wanting to utilize public land, creating challenges on how land should be managed.

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Salary Increase- IDFW has recently been given a salary increase which has been beneficial in retaining staff, as well as increasing the quality and quantity of applicants for the vacant positions that we have.
- Land Acquisition- We have been continuing to actively acquire new ground. The DNR has also recently been approved for an increase in state capital funds for land acquisition, as well as legislative support of for capital funds to be as part of matching funds on a 4,500-acre land acquisition project.
- Expansion of Volunteer Program- Last year we logged over 4,000 volunteer hours on our properties. Through this program we were able to leverage over \$60,000 in match towards our various grants. We also feel that the volunteer programs increase the public's trust in our programs and gives our program a closer relationship with the property users.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Brian Hickman

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

Executive Order 10:

Executive Order 10 signed on January 10, 2023 puts a moratorium on administrative rulemaking and institutes a comprehensive review of all existing administrative rules. This review must be completed by December of 2026. Over the next 3 years, the Department will be reviewing internally, obtaining public comment, and navigating the rules process for every current rule in both the Conservation and Recreation and Environmental Services Division. In 2023, Wildlife Bureau staff are reviewing all rules pertaining to resident and nonresident deer, habitat stamp, waterfowl and the IHAP program.

Nuisance Furbearer Legislation:

Legislation has passed and at the time of writing this is awaiting the Governor's signature allowing a person to shoot, trap or ensnare a furbearing animal without prior permission. This applies to the land owner or tenant of agricultural property or an associated residence location outside city limits. Cage and dog proof traps and shooting are all allowable methods of take for the purpose of destroying or disposing of, a racoon, opossum, or skunk on the property if the owner or tenant in good faith deems the animal to be a nuisance.

Staffing: In April of 2022, we had 4 FTE vacancies in the Wildlife Bureau and had intended to be fully staffed by the end of the calendar year. One year later, we currently have 9 FTE vacancies and expect that number to slowly grow as several staff are eligible for retirement. Additionally, temporary and contract positions have been challenging to fill. We have several public land management and private land contract positions currently unfilled due to the lack of qualified candidates applying. This is significant as these positions have been our training ground for future FTE employees. Many efforts are being made to engage potential future employees in earlier stages of their academic careers in an attempt to guide them towards a career in the Wildlife field.

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

Engaging Users and Neighbors: This legislative session saw proposed legislation come forward that potentially could have limited the state's ability to acquire additional public lands as well as dictate how they are managed. We are continuing to look for new opportunities to interact with those individuals and groups. Recent efforts that have been made include our Good Neighbors meetings and hunter listening sessions. These two efforts have provided us with the interactions we were seeking but also have helped us proactively navigate the legislative session.

The Wildlife Bureau's 17 Units each host at least one good neighbor meeting and listening session annually. The good neighbor meetings are an open house format and the listening sessions are formal presentations followed by public comment. We ensure that our Biologists

(Management and Private), Law Enforcement, Fisheries and Forestry staff are present at these meetings/open houses.

Popularity of public lands: Iowa's public land managers have all noted increased hunting pressure and other recreational use. The increase in users also provides the opportunity for more voices speaking favorable of Iowa's public lands. How do we capture this enthusiasm and have those users be more vocal in support of public lands?

Prescribed Fire: Iowa launched IFIRE its prescribed/wildland fire qualification system in December of 2022. The goal was to create a system that would capture the broad experience, training and expertise of our long-term employees, place them in a proposed structure based on those experiences and lay out a training and experience pathway for all new/early career employees going forward.

The Loess Hills Cooperative Burn week has been held since 2016 and has grown to over 100 firefighters participating annually. This week has allowed for thousands of acres of prescribed fire to be applied to the landscape while being a great training ground for our Departments professionals. This event has brought firefighters from across the region to get hands on experience in multiple roles on the fire lines, fuel types and landforms. Local Volunteer Fire Departments, County Conservation Boards, NGO's and multiple government agencies participate, which continues to build fire capacity in the region.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING

May 9 – 11, 2023

Kansas Wildlife and Parks

Dustin Mengarelli

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- Nonresident waterfowl hunting pressure
- Homeless camping at State Fishing Lakes
- Timber theft and damage

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Banning Trail Cameras on WMAs
- Electronic Access continues on 28 properties. Plans to go statewide by Fall of 2024. Data collection is key to making management decisions.
- Some of the best hunting in the country

State Report Information

Budget

- FY 23 Salaries and O&M – \$4,631,844 Wildlife Fee Fund, \$1.8 million Federal Ag Funds and \$700,000 State Ag Funds
- Temp Salaries – \$443,500 Ag fund and \$302,000 Wildlife Fee Fund
- PR Grant O&M – FY23 \$8 million split 50/50, FY24 \$9 million
- Sport Fish Grant – \$750,000 split 75/25
- FY22 Ag Fund Revenues – Fed: \$3,000,000; State \$950,000

Land Acquisitions

- FY23 land acquisition budget - \$1,100,000 total.
- Three tracts purchased in 2022 totaling 561.8 acres
- Push Back for Legislature/KFB for purchasing any land.

Legislation

- Law Enforcement has been moved into Kansas Police and Fire Retirement from KPERS
- Land Acquisition obstacles
- Proposed legislation for interest groups instead of the resource
- License categories and deer permits are typically brought up and used against agency

Operations/Management

- Agricultural Production – approximately 195 permits are issued to farm more than 44955 acres. In addition, 8653 acres are planted by Public Lands staff.

- Grazing – 26,850 acres are under grazing management plans in 37 contracts.
- Haying – 1788 acres were hayed on 29 contracts.
- All agricultural/grazing/haying income exceeds \$2.78 million. Current Ag fund balances exceeds \$6.5 million.
- Noxious Weed Control – 50,000 acres
- Prescribed burns –27,000 acres
- Food plots – 5,000 acres
- Invasive species control - > 12,800 acres
- Water level (pumped) – 15,639 acre feet
- Managed Dove Fields – 1343 acres most require non-toxic shot.
- Bison Management – Three herds comprising 288 head on 8058 acres
- Law enforcement – 38 certified PL LEO's completed 8,000 license checks
- Cabin program- Public Land Section operates three cabins on State Fishing Lakes and Wildlife areas. Reduced from seven a couple years ago.

Partnerships

- North American Wetlands Conservation grants (NAWCA) working in cooperation with Ducks Unlimited continues to add new projects.
- Pheasants Forever – Agreement renewed in 2023 for habitat specialist positions on public lands. Currently all 13 positions are full. Agreement expires June 30th, 2025.
- Missouri River mitigation work continues in northeast Kansas, including land acquisition, restoration, and public access in 5 properties totaling 6094 acres.
- SSWA partnered with Friends of Sandsage Bison Range and Wildlife Area to provide 111 bison tours to 949 guests.
- Special Hunts (Public & Private Land): Spring 2021 = 88 Turkey Hunts available this spring with 154 permits. There were 538 Applications - all choices. Applications came from 15 different states. Fall '20-'21 Special Hunts = There were 742 Total Permits, 5122 Applications (all choices).

Personnel (retention/recruitment)

- 1 – Public Lands Division Director
- 1 – Public Lands Assistant Director
- 4 – Regional Supervisors
- 33 – Area Managers
- 1 – NRDA Coordinator
- 13 – Assistant Managers
- 13 – Pheasants Forever Habitat Specialists
- 2 – Equipment Operators
- ~150 – Temporary/seasonal laborers
- *38 – LE certified LEOs*
- 7500 acres per State FTE
- Loss of 5 FTE's as a result of Voluntary Retirement Incentive, still lingers.

Public Land Use

- Electronic Access continues on 28 properties. Proposal to go statewide by Fall of 2024. Brandt is our new license and electronic access company. Quite a few bugs in the system but basic function is working.

Relevancy Roadmap

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023
Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
Derek Beard

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- Replacing aging infrastructure and equipment typically only occurs on a limited basis due to available funds. Wildlife Division's FY24 proposed budget only includes \$443,200 for machinery and implements for use on WMAs. KDFWR owns, leases, or manages more than 85 WMAs for public use. Although the department owns only 165,000 acres, lease agreements and cooperative partnerships and other state and federal public lands afford the public with more than 1 million acres for recreational access.
- Staffing—the division continues to lose highly qualified and knowledgeable employees due to retirement as well as resignation presumably to accept positions with other agencies and private companies that provide higher wages and better benefits. We are seeing a low level of interest in our posted vacancies with applicants that do not meet minimum qualifications and/or experience. Currently we have 130 full time Wildlife Division Staff.
- Kentucky continues to rank among the lowest paid wildlife staff and is one of the top two underfunded pension systems in the nation. During the 2023 legislative session, members voted to approve HB 444 to provide a 6% raise for employees on July 1, 2023. During the 2022 Regular Session, the General Assembly approved an 8% across the board raise for state employees. The financial impact to the agency will change the landscape of our agency in the very near future if alternative forms of income is not identified soon. At the current rate approximately 72% of our Wildlife division budget is consumed by personnel salaries and benefits (\$15,044,200 total personnel costs and \$20,641,100 total FY24 operating budget)

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Passed legislation Senate Bill 217 (2022 session) and Senate Bill 241 (2023 session) which affirmed KDFWR's authority to acquire a perpetual public conservation easement on approximately 54,000-acre WMA in southeast KY. Funds for purchasing the easement will come from state general fund which will provide the 25% federal match for the federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration grant program. The property is in Knox, Bell, and Leslie counties and is owned by CF Ataya LLC and managed by the KY Chapter of The Nature Conservancy in partnership with KDFWR and with support from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was instrumental in securing a grant for the project through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Acres for America conservation program.
- Both a challenge and opportunity the legislature passed Senate Bill 217 during the 2022 session and SB 241 during the recent 2023 session. The historic legislation gives the Agency a level of independence. The Governor vetoed it followed by the Senate and House taking action to override the veto. Due to the emergency clause the legislation takes effect immediately. The Agency is working diligently to establish new operational protocols to allow the agency to conduct all procurements necessary, make all contracts and agreements subject to Governmental Contract Review, and conduct its own bidding. The Agency is now only attached to the Tourism Arts and Heritage Cabinet administratively for limited functions and purposes as requested by the Agency.
- Wildlife Management Area (WMA) categories were approved by our commission and implemented in 2022. WMAs are now categorized into High, Moderate, or Low levels of management. High management areas being staffed and intensively managed while Low are areas with staff some distance away that will receive the minimum in the way of management but are still available to hunting, hiking, wildlife watching, etc. Ideally, this approach gives area users a better idea of what to expect on areas when visiting or planning a trip and will also help focus our staff, budget and sometimes commission to prioritize efforts on Highly managed areas.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023
Michigan Department of Natural Resources-Wildlife Division
Earl Flegler

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

Vast Acreages of Northern Corporate Land Changing Ownership with Unknown Consequences for Public Access

Slowly Shrinking Revenue/Staffing Balanced with Increased Interest in Alternative Uses for Public Land

Unsuccessful Land Acquisitions Where Private Sales Occur Before the Public Can Acquire

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

Grant Funding for Public Land Opportunities: There are more opportunities to apply for grants for public land acquisition/protection/management than there is staff capacity to manage the grants.

Available Funding for Small Land Acquisitions: With the State Land Review (a statewide review of 240,000 acres of DNR-administered land) and disposal of some parcels, there are funds available to buy replacement lands, especially smaller parcels that help consolidate ownerships.

New Ideas and Energy: We have seen an increasing rate of turnover of staff across the division. Although filling positions seems slow and in some cases there is a shortage of qualified applicants, positions are being filled ("the glass is half full-but it is still leaking"). We are hiring some very skilled and energetic employees that will lead natural resource issues into the future.

Additional Things I Would Like to Discuss After Hours:

Public Easements Over Private Land (PEPL)
Access to Landlock Public Land
Bike/Equestrian Trail Use

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
April 2023
(MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION)
(Matt Bowyer - Southeast Regional Administrator)

Top State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- The Comprehensive Conservation Strategy (CCS) continues to guide newly aligned workforces across regions to implement natural resource management. Our tiered approach helps prioritize the highest priority work and guide funding. This approach has helped streamline Prescribed fire efforts and wildlife response and the funding of work to be done on highest tiered areas first and has helped secure additional grants for extra work in the right places.
- Urban, suburban, and exurban, sprawl and development are putting increasing pressure on conservation lands. Areas that used to be in rural space are not anymore. Habitat and wildlife are under increasing pressure, and we are seeing encroachment issues with negative impact.
- Invasive species are ruining/taking over wildlife habitats. This is next biggest issue we face as public land managers. Aquatic and terrestrial invasives threaten to dominate our time and resources if we allow it. If we do not address this issue, it will impede and prevent most other management, and will negate the ecological benefits those lands provide for wildlife and people. Most impacted areas are in and near urban centers, and it grows outward exponentially, impacting our highest quality natural communities. While we have made incredible progress towards the goal of eliminating feral hogs throughout southern Missouri, invasive plants, as well as wildlife diseases represent a paradigm that will require ever increasing investments in the future.
- Pollution, sedimentation, and poor soil conservation practices continue to threaten our public waters and stream habitats threatening many of our aquatic and terrestrial species. Collaboration with professionals tasked with protection of clean water for human use is critical. Clean water will be the issue of the future, and it affects everyone. Our public lands can be used as prime examples for buffering these resources but public lands cannot handle it all.
- Recruitment of resource management professionals. The number of qualified individuals (relevant degree/adequate experience) pursuing professional careers in our professions has been declining for years, leading to the hiring of underqualified staff which are unprepared for several years. It is not their fault but in some cases their staff, the public, and the resource may suffer. Improving staff retention will help with this problem, but getting more kids interested and trained seems essential.
- The timely reporting of land management activities and accomplishments to help drive future funding of public lands projects.
- Aging infrastructure on public lands. Especially on our wetland areas where pump failures were all too common in the last year. Continued issues with flooding and lack of resiliency of our wetland infrastructure.

Top State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Incredibly successful partnerships are making advances in the fight against feral hogs. Especially noticeable at Mingo NWR, SW Missouri, and on some of the most infested parts of the eastern Ozarks on publicly owned lands.
- Outreach to and engaging the public in wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, and experiencing wildlife in the wild. People will only defend what they hold personal value in. Newly hired Recreational Use Specialists in our Regions has increased the ways that the public can use our lands and opened the eyes of staff focused on traditional uses.
- There is a need to focus efforts to retaining institutional knowledge given the well experienced workforce who are nearing retirement.
- We should adapt and accept technology creatively as a teaching/gaming/exploration tool to bring people outside to better understand, identify, appreciate wildlife.
- We should support sustainable and regenerative farming approaches on our public lands which make better use of cover crops and depend less on pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizer in order to better support the ecosystem and balance needs.
- Opening the rivers and letting the floodplain be the floodplain supporting wildlife habitats (reduce the number of levees).
- Protection or reintroducing of species of conservation concern on restored/managed terrestrial and aquatic habitats.
- Ability to collect public engagement is available now more than ever to create informed decisions and better reach all Missourians. Focus efforts on public engagement and partnerships.
- Work team restructuring to get habitat work accomplished.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023 (Wisconsin Dells)
Nebraska
Pat Molini, Assistant Division Administrator, Wildlife

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- Shrinking applicant pool for position openings with fewer and fewer experienced/qualified applicants. Less interest from existing staff to take on leadership positions. It's almost dire at the midlevel management positions. Competitive wages for permanent and temporary staff.
- Depredation response/Big Game management by public lands staff is taking time away from staff to spend on public lands management.
- Increase demand on public wildlife areas for activities outside the traditional uses of habitat/hunting/fishing/trapping. With increase interest in using wildlife areas for hiking/biking/kayaking/canoeing/etc. there may be opportunities to understand and manage these uses and limit potential negative impacts and/or conflicts. These uses need to be wisely managed so as not to affect the intended purpose, users and funding of these areas. Most states can't keep up with the upkeep on current infrastructure so adding any infrastructure for these activities just doesn't pencil out currently.

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Partnerships allow for large habitat projects to be completed on public lands. It takes time to spend money and having partners that can streamline or even complete most of the administrative side of spending habitat dollars is greatly beneficial.
- Nebraska is still engaged in acquiring high quality important habitat lands for wildlife management and conversely engaged in surplus of management areas with high management costs and input often with little or no public access.
- Recovering America's Wildlife Act. Maybe this is the year? Of course, this will come with many challenges also.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023, Dells Wisconsin
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
Public Lands Working Group

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- 1) Continued demand for other uses including trails, dog training, energy development.
- 2) High hunting pressure/use on WMA's due to limited public lands in North Dakota. 94% of the state is privately owned and access to private lands increasingly difficult.
- 3) Limited acquisition budget of \$800,000 per biennium. Long and extensive process to acquire lands (Governor, legislature, local government, neighbor notification, etc)

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- 1) Land acquisition – even though ND has limited and slow process – currently have Governor and Director supportive of additional land acquisitions.
- 2) Ample budget for equipment purchases and ability to implement new land management projects. However, limited staff and significant amount of time for O and M limits new developments.
- 3) Multiple partner and NGO's available to cost share projects and activities.

For Report (optional categories if relevant to your agency/program)

Budget ND Game and Fish Department \$109,500,000 biennium. Land Management of WMA's \$3,645,000 for 2023-25 biennium)

Land Acquisitions \$800,000

Legislation (Highlights)

HB 1151 Prohibits the ND Game and Fish Department from issuing rules or adopting a policy or practice prohibiting the baiting of big game animals for lawful hunting on private property. Various amendments (approved by House 76-18; failed Senate 21-26). Very contentious and debated hot topic.

HB 1233 Allow 11,12,13, year old youth hunter to hunt during September youth season and expands to include regular deer gun season in November (passed)

HB 1377 – Allow for party deer hunting up to 10 members – failed.

SB 2368 Proposed study and possibility of implementing an appointed game and fish commission (failed). Currently Governor appoints Director (since inception has always been a seasoned wildlife or fisheries professional).

NDGF Budget – 6 new FTE positions added including ANS biologist, Fisheries Supervisor, Warden Supervisor, 2 Private Lands Biologist and 1 Private Lands Supervisor. Additional \$4,000,000 increase authorized for private lands.

Operations/Management Land Management WMA's \$2,445,000 per biennium

Partnerships Corps of Engineers, Bureaus of Reclamation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, American Foundation for Wildlife, NGO's including DU, Mule Foundation, PF, RMEF

Personnel 19FTE's (1 Section Leader, 6 district Supervisors, 5 Resource Biologist, 9 Technicians) Wildlife Division Chief, Assistant Division Chief. To date, have had high quality candidates compete for positions, but number of applicants has decreased. Section generally hires 12- 15 summer seasonals and numbers of applicants had decreased. Increased recruiting efforts and advertisements increased to approximately 60 applicants.

Public Land Use Continues to be a challenge with multiple requests from various user groups. Uses start as compatible use, but eventually cross the line to incompatible due to the amount of activity and disturbance (ie hiking trails, etc). Shed hunting and going for a walk in later winter to find a shed antler seems compatible. However, more and more shed hunters go earlier and earlier and continually walk winter habitat cover and winter foraging areas displacing and causing additional stress for wildlife.

Continued and increasing needs for recreationists and desire to use public lands. However, public lands and Wildlife Management Areas are not the same.

Relevancy Roadmap You have reached a Dead End.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
ODNR Division of Wildlife
Mike Ervin – Public Lands

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges:

1. Understanding management needs on public lands, primarily quantity and frequency.
2. Fitting the appropriate resources to the work and learning efficient delivery approaches.
3. Non-personnel resource fluctuations and staff longevity and attrition.

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

1. PR, capital, H2Ohio, and other funding windfalls.
2. Attrition and turnover.
3. Governor DeWine's H2Ohio program has accelerated our wetland habitat delivery.

For Report (optional categories if relevant to your agency/program)

Budget: Recent budget windfalls from PR, capital appropriations, H2Ohio, and LCF have accelerated both the need to spend and our conservation delivery.

Land Acquisitions: Continue to buy land at an unprecedented pace.

Legislation: Ohio Senate Bill 9 requires agencies to reduce 'restrictive language' (i.e. shall, must, require, shall not, may not, and prohibit) in Ohio Administrative Code by 10% annually for the next three years and two rules must be removed for every new rule introduced. We're working on revision of many rules that impact public lands (refuges, restricted access, signage, etc.) to help meet this requirement.

Operations/Management: Continue to pursue large multi-year statewide procurement contracts with our Department of Administrative Services to reduce administrative hurdles with purchasing for both habitat and recreational management. Recently completed contracts for seed, herbicide, adult rooster pheasants, brush clearing, and refuse dump removal. Currently pursuing contracts for forest invasive species and mid-story treatment, road grading, and bush hogging. Scoping roughly 15 additional contracts for future bidding.

Partnerships: Our H2Ohio program is delivered exclusively through partnerships with third party conservation partners. Many are NGO's, for profit companies, and local governments.

Personnel (retention/recruitment): Recent hiring glut followed several years with no hires in the Wildlife Management section. On pace to fill nearly 32 staff in the Wildlife Management section this year, which will represent about 1/3 of our staff in new roles or as new hires.

Public Land Use: Met with Google and AirSage to learn how they can use location data or on-site sensors to quantify public use. No contract or scope of work in place yet but planning future work.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING

May 9 – 11, 2023

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

Ryan Wendinger, Habitat Program Administrator

Top State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- Inflation and product availability – The cost of doing business continues to increase. Cost of machinery and other land management equipment continues to go up in price and staff are waiting up to a year or longer for some items to be built and delivered. This poses budget challenges and requires making do with old equipment for longer than expected. The cost of other products for projects like fencing or herbicide application also remain costly impacting budgets. The cost of contractors has increased substantially and the availability has decreased as they have plenty of work keeping them busy. Lastly, as with many other states South Dakota's public lands are scattered across the state and with that comes travel. Fuel and mileage prices have also remained high requiring strategic planning by staff to be most efficient with travel to various GPAs to complete projects.
- Habitat management staffing – The department has recently had a fair amount of turnover in our habitat management staff. This has created some good opportunities for staff to move up and take on new roles but also required pulling in new individuals that require training. Additionally, applications received for entry level jobs have been down as the job market continues to be very competitive. Part of the staffing challenges go beyond full-time staff as filling seasonal and intern positions has been even harder. Some adjustments to wages for these positions in the recent few years has helped. During the summer months our workforce almost doubles as we rely on seasonals and interns to help us complete a large portion of our field work on public lands. Maintaining a fully staffed regional habitat team remains a challenge for GFP regional habitat managers.
- Annually adjusting to climatic conditions - GFP habitat managers put a great deal of time and resources into annual habitat management planning for GPAs. Making timely adjustments to plans in response to extremes in weather (e.g. drought, flooding, seasonal temperatures) prove challenging for proper management planning and budgeting. The past year was no exception to extremes with heat and drought during summer and winter proving to be a very hard one. Drought conditions during spring and summer limited the ability for prescribed fire on Game Production Areas and made establishment of newly planting habitat challenging. Winter snowfall, wind, and cold was one South Dakota hadn't seen for a while. Wildlife losses were common in parts of the state due to winter conditions as we moved into 2023.

Top State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- Funding - PR apportionments remain high and Habitat Stamp funds continue to be generated at a very respectable rate. GFP habitat managers and staff continue to use these dollars to complete large scale habitat and access

projects on GPAs. This work is being completed both in-house and by using various contractors. Habitat Stamp funds have continued to allow for an amplified rate of habitat improvements on GPAs. Staff continue to be excited about the opportunity to make these major improvements to GPAs. The time required by staff on contract and project management for these projects above and beyond normal operations has been the limiting factor.

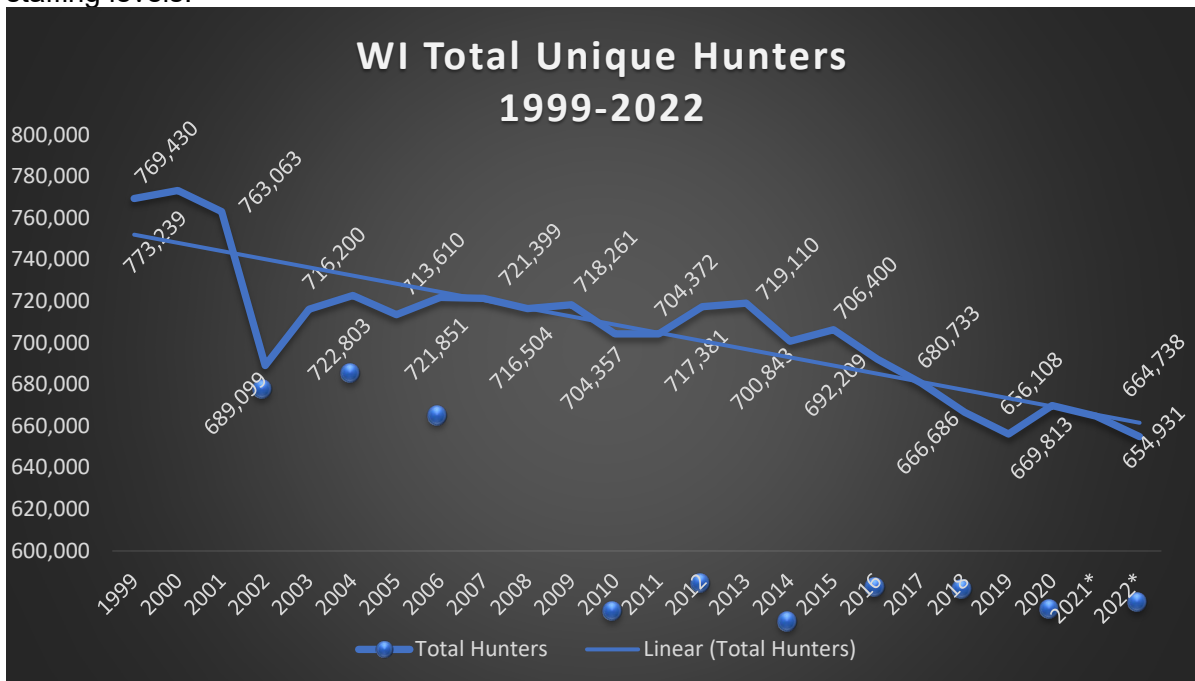
- Private land in public hunting programs – In 2022, 1.48 million acres of private land was enrolled in one of GFPs public hunting access programs. This is a record for South Dakota. As more acres are enrolled crowding can be reduced on some of the GPAs improving users' experiences. Additionally, during the fall of 2022 a new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) was launched in eastern South Dakota in the Big Sioux River Watershed. This watershed is home to a majority of the large population centers so more hunting access is always needed. This program, once fully enrolled, will create 25,000 acres of habitat open to the public for hunting and fishing. This CREP program complements the James River Watershed CREP located in east central South Dakota that is about 80% of the way towards the goal of enrolling 100,000 acres.
- Habitat and access a top priority – Habitat and access continue to be a top priority for the department. All staff have been involved this priority and continue to find ways in whatever capacity they serve to be part of it. This whole team approach has put a spotlight on habitat and access and helped make some great achievements that include public land projects. GFP will continue to make habitat improvements to GPAs as well as seek out enrollment of private lands into public hunting access programs to provide quality opportunities for outdoor recreation throughout the state.

MAFWA PUBLIC LANDS WORKING GROUP MEETING
May 9 – 11, 2023
Wisconsin
Submitted by Anne Reis, Public Lands Specialist

For Discussion

Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Challenges

- We have prioritized areas for some of our most important cover types statewide, the challenge is: how to prioritize resource allocation among these potentially competing priorities (e.g. grasslands vs wetlands) and find common themes with partners (internal and external) that is then linked with meaningful mutual resource allocation and implementation.
- We have a sense of what the general public (new constituencies) need in order to feel comfortable using Wildlife Areas for recreation in the off season, but we have not yet reached out to our current constituencies to gauge their response to sharing these lands. We are only relevant to a small proportion of the state's population, yet we have the largest land holdings in our division. How do we:
 - Increase license costs for current customers, while also finding ways for non-hunting public to contribute directly to conservation.
 - Share the land among new user groups and current user groups without creating conflict (seasonal use).
 - Make Wildlife Areas 'for' more people (bird watchers, hikers), while also keeping them wild (off the beaten path).
- We currently have a structural deficit (our revenues are significantly lower than our spending authority); our license sale revenues have significantly decreased (fees haven't increased in the last 18 years), while at the same time our PR funding has increased. We also have 115,000 fewer hunters from 1999 to 2022. There are more limitations on the use of PR dollars; we also have significantly less staff. How do we maximize PR spending with current staffing levels.



Top 3 State Wildlife Public Lands Opportunities

- The WDNR Wildlife Management program is expanding its capacity by contracting with Ducks Unlimited and Wisconsin Waterfowl Association to assist with design and engineering services for managed impoundments and restorable wetlands on DNR properties.
- We recently purchased 1800 acres to double the size of a Wildlife Area in the southern part of the state (the most densely populated part of the state). NRCS secured a wetland reserve easement and DNR purchased the fee title. This project was years in the making; all finally came together on May 1st. Ducks Unlimited and NRCS will be starting the restoration process in 2024.
- Our new Land & Habitat Section in Wildlife Management has integrated both public and private lands so that our staff work together on wetland, forests, grasslands and barrens in a more integrated way.

For Report (optional categories if relevant to your agency/program)

Budget

Land Acquisitions

Legislation

In 2022, a suite of 'Sporting Freedom' bills were proposed by our state assembly and senate, all of which were vetoed by our governor. None of the bills were sponsored by our partners, nor were they consulted. Some of these bills included increases in trout and pheasant stocking beyond current capacities, with no additional funding proposed.

Operations/Management

Partnerships

Personnel (retention/recruitment)

In 2022, we hired over 20 new biologists and technicians who went through a year long training. We also recently hired an additional 10 biologists and technicians so that we only have two biologist vacancies currently. During the pandemic, we had over 30 permanent staff vacancies the majority of which are now filled.

Public Land Use

Relevancy Roadmap

MAFWA Conference Notes

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

Scaling Up – Partnership-Supported Landscape Conservation in SW Wisconsin – Cindy Becker

- Focus in SW Wisconsin, southern driftless grassland area
- Invasive species, large scale energy projects, development taking away grassland and native plants
- Collaborative conservation-grassroots effort
- Private landowners “hold the key,” they are listened to much more than scientists are
- Southern driftless grasslands long-term vision
 - o Protect large blocks of land, support and sustain grassland birds, new program to identify new landowners and look at restoration of the land
 - o Outreach, education, training, landowner assistance
 - Visits with landowners result in 60% enrollment in conservation programs
 - o There is only one person running this at the moment, could use two more people in the field
 - o Important to remember things take time

Collaborative Partnerships – Reconnecting Wisconsin’s Northwest Sands Landscape – Bob Hanson

- Northwest sands corridor plans
 - o Sharp-tailed grouse confined to certain areas with proper habitat, goal would be to add a 1,280 acre block every 3.1 miles to connect each chunk of land
 - o Crex Meadows, Bird Sanctuary, Namekagon, and Grouse Society friends helping
 - o Hurdle removed for jack pine time from 3 years to 5 years
 - o Cutting cycle to create rolling barrens
 - o There will always be 3,500 acres maintained by fire and working forest

Partnering with Tribes – A Balancing Act – Richard Monette

- Balance and relations – external/internal, society/citizen, territory/property, public/private, time/place, collective/individual
- Example he gave was the oak and chokecherry, balanced relationship that benefits one another
- Unwritten constitution – when society determines its own culture using its own norms and values to attain its own “constituted state”
- All societies have enforced laws or they would not survive
- Important to separate “in government” and “from government”
- Property bundle of rights
- Examples with Oregon (can walk across private land to get to public) and Texas (cannot do that, much more exclusion)
- Wisconsin Case – Rock -Koshkonong Law vs. DNR
 - o Public trust doctrine or police power doctrine
 - o PTD constitutive, no “taking,” not eminent
 - o PPD legislative or executive, “taking,” eminent domain

- Each society decides for itself the balance between collective and individual between private and public
- Where society places balance is defining marker of culture

Public Lands Working Group

Questions

- Do directors get back to you?
- Did directors meet in person?

Thoughts on morning talks/thoughts in general

- Very thought provoking
- Interesting because some agencies have less interaction with tribes
- Minnesota tribal interactions involve walleye fishing, wolf hunting, moose/wild rice management, elk reintroduction
- Rick Monette's talk interesting and unique
- Share pine barrens and driftless region with Minnesota, project ideas with boundary crossing
- Kansas has no tribal connections aside from giving each tribe a bison, big stereotypes around casinos
- Michigan wanting training area acreage increased, denied due to tribal input and their concerns not wanting expansion, tribes vocal to pipelines going through Mackinaw Bridge area, better environmental ethics than many of us due to ancestral lands

Habitat Prioritization – Nathan Holoubek

- Manage 1.6 million acres publicly, spent about \$5.8 million in habitat plans
- NHC, WM, Forestry, Fisheries – habitat management programs
- Regardless of who owns property, habitat managers work where they can make greatest gains
- Forestry – timber management and fire
- WM – game species management
- NHC – nongame species management and rare communities
- Improve habitat management by creating standard of what “good” habitat looks like, set measurable goals to achieve, define standard techniques, refine where we invest
- Habitat strategy vision
 - o Long term (~10 years) goal
 - o Short term (1-3 years) goal
 - o Develop projects, develop budgets
 - o Supervisor cross check goals
 - o Leadership monitor progress and adjust resources/guidance to improve efficiency and success
- Challenges
 - o Only WM undertaking effort
 - o Very little external partner participation
 - o Starting from scratch (never had “habitat” budget)
 - o Resistance to change among staff

- Balancing top down and bottom-up leadership

WDNR Wetland Infrastructure Prioritization – Jason Fleener

- WI DNR owns or manages ~1,100 impoundments
 - Which provide habitat and recreational opportunities
 - They all require maintenance work/funding, about 19,000 hours/year
- Replacement/repair – ideally 8 miles of dike renovated, and 46 water control structures replaced annually, but accomplishing approximately half of this now...taking a reactive approach instead of a proactive approach
- Current funding
 - Operational: seg/PR
 - Major projects: waterfowl stamp, state budget, grants, NRCS, gifts and donations
- Impoundment prioritization project: shift resources from low priority to high
- Process overview: inventory/assessment tool, managers complete assessments, evaluate assessment data, validate priority categories, develop implementation plans
- Validation/exemption criteria for priority level
- Low priority – divestment options
 - Formally abandon infrastructure and restore natural hydrology, dropping water level below operating level, turn over management to other party, choose what technique to lessen
- Implementation
 - Budgeting/planning, short/long term strategies, record keeping, evaluation, funding major projects that seek funding
- Do other states have this many impoundments?
 - Wisconsin seems to have the most, I believe Michigan stated they had 100-200 and they believed they had a lot
 - Missouri public wetlands huge challenge to keep up with aging infrastructure and climate change

State Reports

- Challenges (common across states)
 - Increased use on WM areas, increased non-hunting use on WM areas, acquisition is a challenge, aging infrastructure, etc.
- Opportunities (common across states)
 - New prioritization tools, PR funding increases, recreational specialists, etc.
- Kentucky
 - Challenges
 - Aging infrastructure and equipment
 - Staffing, low interest levels in vacancies
 - Low income
 - Opportunities
 - 25% match for conservation easement
 - Passed bill to separate into own government state agency
 - WMAs categorized into high, medium, low prioritization

- Michigan
 - Challenges
 - Many acres with changing landowners, public access questionable (northern areas)
 - Slowly shrinking revenue/staffing with increased public land interest
 - Unsuccessful land acquisitions
 - Opportunities
 - Grant funding for public lands
 - Available funding for small land acquisitions
 - New ideas and energy, so much staff turnover
- Illinois
 - Challenges
 - Procurement, timely
 - Low staff levels, less than 1/3 of the staff had 12 years ago
 - Equipment very old but need for habitat work
 - Opportunities
 - New land acquisitions
 - Initiative for more shooting ranges on state sites
 - More PR money for habitat work on state sites
- North Dakota
 - Challenges
 - Continued demand
 - High hunting pressure/use on WMAs due to limited public land
 - Limited acquisition budget
 - Opportunities
 - Land acquisitions
 - Ample budget
 - Multiple partners
- Iowa
 - Challenges
 - Reduced number of departments in state, every rule must go back for public comment and through legislature, 3-year process
 - Landowners can kill furbearers all year and no longer need permission from LE
 - Low staffing that seems to keep increasing
 - Opportunities
 - Engaging users and neighbors to acquire public lands
 - Popularity of public lands, more voices to speak in favor of public lands
 - Prescribed fire IFIRE launched to get training and experience
- Missouri
 - Challenges
 - Invasive species
 - Recruitment low
 - Developmental sprawl leading to encroachment issues
 - Opportunities

- Fight against feral hogs has been “incredible”
 - Grants available and distributed
 - CCS guides implementation
- South Dakota
 - Challenges
 - Inflation and product availability
 - Habitat management staffing
 - Annually adjusting to climate changes
 - Opportunities
 - Funding, PR high and habitat stamp funds
 - Private land in public hunting programs, 1.48 million acres in 2022
 - How they accomplished this: PR funding, raised rates, 10-15 year contracts, good relationships with landowners, different options available if they don’t want their land fully open/public
 - Habitat and access a top priority
- Ohio
 - Challenges
 - Understanding management needs on public lands
 - Fitting resources to work
 - Fluctuations in PR, staff turnover, positions not filled
 - Opportunities
 - PR, capital, H2Ohio, funding
 - Attrition and turnover
 - H2Ohio has accelerated wetland habitat delivery
- Indiana
 - Challenges
 - Department staffing
 - Increased operating costs
 - Competing interest for public use
 - Opportunities
 - Salary increase
 - Land acquisition
 - Expansion of volunteer program
- Kansas
 - Challenges
 - Nonresident waterfowl hunting pressure
 - Homeless camping at state fishing areas
 - Timber theft and damage
 - Opportunities
 - Banning trail cameras on WMAs
 - Electronic access on 28 properties, collection helps management decisions
 - Some of the best hunting in the country
- Nebraska
 - Challenges

- Staffing/recruitment
 - Higher priority in big game species vs. habitat management
- Opportunities
 - Partner funding
 - Land acquisition
 - PR grant for depredation approved
- Minnesota
 - Challenges
 - Finding contractors
 - Seed supply
 - Opportunities
 - Outdoor heritage fund, really brought people together
 - Governor very into climate change, habitat work in climate change bill
- Wisconsin
 - Challenges
 - Prioritized areas for most important cover types
 - Structural deficit, license sale revenues significantly decreased
 - Sense of general public's needs/wants for wildlife area uses
 - Opportunities
 - Expanding capacity by contracting DU and WWA for impoundments and wetlands
 - 1,800 acres purchased to double the size of a wildlife area in the south
 - New land and habitat section in WM has integrated public and private lands
- Idea brought up for recruitment
 - MAFWA job board and internship opportunities

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

Introduction to the Midwest Landscape Initiative

- MLI current work to develop a plan
- Regional species of greatest conservation need
 - Nearly 3,000 species of RSGCN
 - 1,817 SGCN, 13 taxa teams, 120 plus experts
 - Narrowed down to 340 RSGCN, 147 proposed RSGCN
 - Planned/ongoing RSGCN work: better coordination between state/fed partnerships, filling species priority gaps
 - Midwest SWAPS and landscapes team – guided actions for greater coordination
 - A report that evaluates actions/implementation, regional wildlife action plan
- Midwest conservation blueprint
 - Base map of priority areas for conservation for anyone doing conservation in Midwest
 - Vision is healthy lands and waters, people, sustainable populations of wildlife, fish, plants
 - Step 1: collect data for regional indicators
 - Step 2: define spatial stratification
 - Step 3: prioritize core areas in zonation

- Step 4: prioritize corridor in linkage mapper
- Co-produced with federal and state staff, plus open feedback

Interjurisdictional Project Scoping

- Grasslands
 - Midwest Grasslands Savanna Barren Initiative
 - Increase grassland connectivity
 - All MAFWA states, but focus on high priority grassland area
 - Create, maintain, enhance, restore grasslands
 - Include public and private lands
 - Habitat management and research between before and after results
 - Backyard Prairies
 - Homesteads, hobby farms, urban area grassland/prairie restoration
 - Cover all MAFWA, focus on areas that provide connectivity between grasslands
 - Any large work would be contracted out
 - For people that don't qualify for farm bill programs
 - Birds, bees, butterflies
 - Civilian Conservation Corps
 - Habitat contractor shortages, this would create local workforce hubs
 - MAFWA west of the Mississippi
 - Work study programs, other organizations, universities
 - Regional Native Grasslands
 - Native grass conversion, target high risk grasslands
 - Great plains states in MAFWA
 - Grazing management
 - Regional Grass and Soil Health Program
 - Haying, grazing, burning to be more user friendly
 - Cover crops, annually planted determined by state (great plains in MAFWA)
 - Native Seed Production
 - Provide native seeds for private or public lands
 - Work with already existing seed associations
 - Provide our own seed for planting/restoring grasslands while also providing pollinator habitat
- Wetlands
 - Addressing Wetland Management Across MAFWA Region
 - Stream infrastructure restoration or removal
 - DU, Pheasants Forever, etc.
 - Wetland restoration
 - ~1.5million/year for 10 engineers
- Aquatics/Mussels
 - Conservation Practices for Freshwater Mussel Priorities
 - Cleaner water, more mussels, engaged landowners
 - All MAFWA states
 - Use existing data to determine high priority for mussel habitat

- Engage landowners to take action like reduce sedimentation, etc.
- Evaluating Effectiveness of Regional Mussel Restoration
 - All MAFWA states
 - Catalog what has been done and where, recommend metrics to record success
 - Surveys in field on reintroduction sites
- Evaluating Effectiveness/Conservation Practices for At Risk Fish Species
 - All MAFWA states
 - Catalog what has been done and where, recommend metrics to record success
 - Surveys in field on reintroduction sites
- Forests
 - Strike Training Teams for Functional Forests
 - Restore forest dynamics, conduct burns with landowners
 - Train landowners, engage and create credentials for them to become burn bosses
 - All MAFWA states