

PRIVATE LAND STEWARDSHIP

FROM THE
PRESIDENT



Morrison Stevens, Sr.
PRESIDENT

I would like to thank James Bullock and James Cummins for their contributions to this column. Both of these articles illustrate the big picture view of the importance of private lands and touch on major federal programs that focus on private land conservation. In this article, I hope to “get in the weeds” and highlight other programs and resources available to landowners, provide a list of important contacts, and present some personal examples regarding private land ownership and enhancement on Michigan properties. My goal is to encourage our readers to engage themselves and become good stewards and preservers of their land. As Bullock and Cummings mention in their respective articles, our efforts will extend well beyond our property lines, and are an important part of the bigger conservation picture, as most of the United States is privately owned. No single agency, group or individual can do it alone. Today, conservation is a collective effort—partnerships and networks being key—and can only be achieved from a united front.

MICHIGAN PROGRAMS

Since I am a Michigan resident and landowner, I have listed Michigan-specific programs here that serve as resources for private landowners.

- **Qualified Forest Program**
- **Forest Stewardship Program**
- **Landowner Incentive Program**
- **Wildlife Habitat Grant Program**
- **Wetland Mitigation Banking**

If you are interested in discovering what programs are available for the type of land you own then I suggest you contact your local DNR or Fish and Game regional office where your land is located. A personal visit with the appropriate agency representative will assist you in choosing the program(s) that best complement your land and your personal objectives.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

- **The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency** administers the **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)** and its many forms that vary by State. CRP is a “set aside” program, which means that land must be actively farmed and taken out of production for a period of time in order to be eligible for enrollment. Contact your local USDA Service Center or Conservation District for more information.
 - **The USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)** administers the **Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs (ACEP)**, which includes programs and protection for wetlands, grasslands, and forest lands. The focus of the **Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)**, formerly **Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)**, is to restore and protect degraded wetlands. To qualify, the land must have altered hydrology, such as ditches or tiles, or be farmed wetlands. There is also protection for working land in the **Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRLPP)**, which promotes wise
- land use and protection of conservation areas for species or habitats at risk; an example is sage grouse and range land management in the Great Basin area. The **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** also administers the **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**, which is a program focused on improving farming practices. EQIP has taken over **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)**.
- **The USDA Forest Service (USFS)** offers the **Forest Legacy Program (FLP)** and **Forest Stewardship Program (FSP)**, which are grants given to state agencies aimed at sustainable and wildlife friendly forest management and protection on private forest lands.
 - **The Department of Interior’s (DOI) US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** has two private land habitat programs; 1) the **Coastal Program**, which can be on public or private land involving coastal habitat concerns regarding federal trust resources (e.g., migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, fish, and rare and declining habitats); and, 2) the **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW)**, which is one of the most flexible and landowner-friendly programs available. PFW benefits federal trust resources on private land. PFW funding is at least 50 percent non-federal, making it tax payer friendly.

GETTING STARTED

There is not enough room in this article to properly cover the specificities of each program. Thus, I urge you to

make contact with the agency office that has jurisdiction for the land that you own or want to enhance. They will be eager to help you due to the private property presence in the United States and its importance in the sustainability of our land and wildlife resources. To get you started, I list here some potential points of contact.

- **Non-Profit Conservation Organizations (NGOs):** Many of us are also members of other conservation organizations. Most of these organizations partner with state or federal conservation programs to ensure that their objectives are covered. Being involved with these NGOs can help keep you informed.
- **Conservation District Offices:** Sometimes called **Soil and Water Conservation Districts**, these are typically located in every county and are often co-located with the **USDA Service Center**. They are a hub for many private land conservation programs.
- **USDA Service Centers:** Usually co-located with **Conservation Districts**, house both **FSA** and **NRCS**.
- **USFWS State Private Lands Office:** Assistance for the **PFW** and **Coastal Programs**.
- **State Wildlife or Natural Resource Agency:** For state specific programs.
- **University Extension Services:** Offers programs and consultation that vary by state.

WHAT WE DID

I want to provide you with real life examples of how a team put together a number of these programs and contacts to use on a hunting property that I own with five other partners in northern Michigan. The Tuttle Marsh Club in northeastern Michigan is a 400-acre hunting camp that I have been a part of for almost 40 years. It is surrounded by the Huron-Manistee National Forest, which is designated as the Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area. This is a 5,000-acre area that is managed by the US Forest Service (USFS) primarily for wildlife habitat. The USFS has improved over 400-acres of wetland and has also established a couple hundred acres of native grassland in the area. The FS is devoted to keeping the forest young and vibrant for the benefit of wildlife.

Understanding that my team is a part of a larger landscape and that collective management is important, the first thing we were advised to do was to develop a forest management plan. This was facilitated and completed by a professional forester, and was cost-shared through the Forest Stewardship Program with the Michigan DNR. First, our club had to prioritize our management goals. Our goals were to improve habitat for wildlife with an emphasis on game such as deer, grouse, woodcock, and turkey, and to generate revenue while maintaining forest aesthetics around the lodge.

The forest management plan provided a baseline and template of a process to achieve those goals. The plan outlined specific areas and techniques for habitat improvement such as tree plantings, timber harvests, forest opening improvement, food plot establishments, nesting structures, fruit tree establishment and maintenance, and forest edge improvement. With the plan as our guide and

with some additional support from a USFWS Biologist, we implemented many of the suggested practices and preformed several others as opportunities arose.

First, we established food plots and mineral licks in key locations. Second, we planted conifer trees, fruiting shrubs, and apple trees along the edges or our larger openings. We also instilled an annual apple tree management plan for pruning, fertilizing, and spraying. Third, we worked with the USFWS to improve our larger fields by controlling invasive knapweed and establishing diverse native grasses and wildflowers, which met both federal objectives and our own by providing benefits to migratory song birds and pollinators, as well as water, food, and cover for our game. Fourth, we enhanced several wetland areas on the property through the PFW program. These wetlands provide critical habitat for a wide array of species, not just ducks. Fifth, we conducted two timber harvests; one to regenerate aspen and young forest while maintaining mast producing trees. The other was a timber stand improvement, or thinning, to improve understory cover and mast production. As part of the timber harvest we installed more food plots and trails and seeded them to clover. Using revenue from the timber sale we planted more conifers and fruiting shrubs in the cut over understory. Sixth, we established nest boxes for wood ducks and bats around the wetland areas. Seventh, we found a beekeeper to put hives on the property in an effort to improve pollination and fruit production of our apple trees and fruiting shrubs. Eighth, we worked with the PFW program to perpetuate alder and aspen that were not commercially viable and declining in value to wildlife. Strips were clear cut,

basically mowed using a hydro-axe or forestry mower, to regenerate the young trees and shrubs. These species need to be occasionally cut down in order to maintain optimal habitat for woodcock and golden-winged warblers, which have national importance, but also provided great habitat for grouse, deer, rabbits, and turkey of interest to our club.

These outcomes did not occur overnight; in fact, our first step, the Forest Management Plan, took place back in 1998, but over the years we have become more educated as a club and can readily see the difference our efforts have made in the land and the wildlife.

In 2001, a resource professional from the Conservation District approached my family with a proposal to place our family farm land in a "set aside" program. The program was called the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program or CREP, an enhanced version of CRP. His plan was to restore the hydrology by breaking some tiles and doing shallow excavation to mimic land formation, similar to what might have been there prior to land grading and farming, to create some open water, and to plant the fields to native grasses. CREP, which is a DNR and USDA cooperative effort, offered a substantial annual soil rental rate plus incentive payments to take our land out of production for 15 years. After the 15 years we could farm it again if we desired. This seemed to make sense not only financially, but also to improve the land for wildlife, hunting, soil conservation and water quality—so we signed up!

It took a few years to implement the program, but once it was complete we immediately saw the benefits for deer, turkey, waterfowl, and even some pheasants and

quail. Plus, we no longer had to worry about losing the crops to floods. Our 15 year contract is due to expire soon, so we are now pursuing permanently protecting the land in order to continue these resource benefits in perpetuity. This land serves as a perfect example of the old conservation slogan, "farm the best, and conserve the rest." Even though the land has productive soil to grow crops, it still floods annually, which makes the land difficult to farm and contributes to water quality problems. We have decided to be good stewards and protect this land permanently by enrolling in the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program.

Through the WRE program, we hope to further improve the wildlife habitat and restore it to a more natural floodplain plant community. We look forward to the satisfaction of knowing that its benefits will long outlive all of us. We will give up some of our land ownership rights, but we will also retain the rights to hunt, fish, and control trespassing, which is ideal for our situation.

Neither of these examples would be presentable without assistance from professional natural resource folks such as foresters, resource professionals, and wildlife biologists. Nor would we have had the financial incentives to do the right thing, as land management can be very expensive with little economic return on investment. I encourage you, especially if you are a landowner, to find the right program or person to help you meet your goals. It is your duty and responsibility as a landowner to be a good steward of the land. If you seek professional assistance you, too, can be effective. Spread the word! ■

