

Great blue heron

Setting Direction

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Wetlands Definition

Wetlands, which are also commonly known as swamps, marshes, bogs, potholes, bottomlands, playas, or pocosins, are the transition zones between open water and dry land. Isolated wetlands that are not associated with open water also occur. One of the biggest challenges in the conservation of wetlands has been in determining where to draw the boundary lines around them (i.e., where do they begin and where do they end?).

The process of drawing lines around wetlands on the ground is called wetland *delineation*. The agency with regulatory jurisdiction over a wetland is responsible for the delineation. (Different agencies have jurisdiction over different wetlands—depending on the program in question). A private consulting firm can perform a delineation for a landowner, but the appropriate regulatory agency has final decision-making authority. This process has been complicated by the fact that different agencies have used different wetland definitions as the basis for making delineations on the ground.

After much discussion, the Technical Advisory Team agreed upon a wetland definition for the *IWCP*. This definition has two components. The first component is the broad, scientific definition that sets the scope of what a wetland is. **This component of the definition is *not* regulatory in nature, and is not intended for use in making wetland delineations on the ground.**

The second component identifies the various state and federal regulatory definitions currently in place—definitions that are a reality for everyone who is impacted by or has impacts on wetlands in Indiana. The *IWCP* does not alter any existing regulatory definitions at any level, nor does it create any new regulatory definitions.

Broad Wetland Definition

The *IWCP* recognizes the following scientific definition of wetlands:

Wetlands are lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water. For purposes of this classification, wetlands must have one or more of the following three attributes:

- (1) at least periodically, the land supports predominantly hydrophytes;
- (2) the substrate is predominantly undrained hydric soil; and
- (3) the substrate is nonsoil and is saturated with water or covered by shallow water at some time during the growing season of each year.

(From Cowardin *et al.* 1979. *Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service FWS/OBS-79/31. 104 pp.)

“Definitions of such abstract concepts as wetlands are difficult to produce in such a manner as to satisfy all stakeholders. This definition fits the Plan well.”

—Larry Hilgeman,
Aristokraft, Inc.

“As good a description of the ‘definition’ as I have seen.”

—Phil Brechbill,
Indiana Soybean Grower’s Association

NOTE: This is a scientific definition—not a regulatory definition. It is not intended for use in conducting regulatory delineations. The *Plan* also recognizes that there are other scientific definitions of wetlands in existence (e.g., the National Academy of Science, National Research Council: *Wetlands: Characteristics and Boundaries*). However, the *Plan* is non-regulatory in nature and therefore not dependent on a specific legal definition; and the Cowardin definition remains the most widely accepted and used scientific definition to date. Therefore, the WAG and the TAT agreed upon use of the Cowardin definition for purposes of the *IWCP* at this time.

Regulatory Definitions of Wetlands

The *Indiana Wetlands Conservation Plan* recognizes that there are state and federal regulations currently in place that define and delineate wetlands for specific purposes. Therefore, parts of the *Plan* that come under the jurisdiction of these regulations will be subject to these definitions. The *Plan* does not add to or alter the existing regulations in any way.

State of Indiana Definition (from rules adopted by the Natural Resources Commission to help administer the Indiana Flood Control Act)

“Wetland” means a transitional area between a terrestrial and deep water habitat (but not necessarily adjacent to a deep water habitat) where at most times the area is either covered by shallow water or the water table is at or near the surface and under normal circumstances any of the following conditions are met:

- (A) The area predominantly supports hydrophytes, at least periodically, or the substrate is predominantly undrained hydric soil; for example, peat or muck.
- (B) The substrate is not a soil but is instead saturated with water or covered by shallow water some time during the growing season; for example, marl beaches or sand bars.

Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Definition (from Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (40 CFR Part 230.3(t)))

The term “wetlands” means those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs and similar areas.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Definition (Food Securities Act, Part 12.2)

- (a) (29) *Wetlands* are defined as lands that —
- (i) Have a predominance of hydric soil; and
 - (ii) Are inundated or saturated by surface water or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support a prevalence of hydrophytic vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions; and
 - (iii) Under normal circumstances do support a prevalence of hydrophytic vegetation.

Goal

The goal is the end result that development and implementation of the *IWCP* is designed to achieve:

Conserve Indiana's remaining wetland resources, as defined by acreage, type, and function, and restore and create wetlands where opportunities exist to increase the quality and quantity of wetland resources.

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This goal embraces the following concepts:

- No-net-loss of wetlands. In other words, the necessity of impacting some wetlands is recognized, but the goal is to have no overall loss of wetlands.
- Conservation of existing wetlands is important in terms of acreage, type, and function. *Acreage* refers to the quantity or amount of wetlands. *Type* refers to the ecological community; for example, a bog or a marsh. *Function* refers to the role of wetlands in the environment; for example, groundwater recharge, flood water storage, or endangered species habitat.
- In most cases, restoring wetlands that have been drained or modified in some way is preferred to creating wetlands where none existed previously. However, there are opportunities for creating wetlands for specific purposes such as wastewater treatment.
- Includes preservation as part of conservation. Some wetlands are sensitive, and to the degree possible, should be protected from all human disturbance— what some people refer to as *preservation*. However, the conservation of many wetlands is compatible with other uses such as timber harvesting or hunting.
- Explicitly acknowledges the importance of conserving the quality of wetlands as well as the quantity of wetlands.
- The short-term goal is to conserve the wetland resources that exist in Indiana today. The long-term goal is to increase Indiana's wetland resources.
- Is consistent with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' December 1, 1995 non-rule policy on wetlands conservation (Appendix D).

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles describe the principles by which the *IWCP* has been developed and will be implemented. The *Indiana Wetlands Conservation Plan*.

“The guiding principles are very well presented, showing that all interests involving wetlands and wetland conservation are being considered in this process.”

—John Konik,

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District

1. Is based on the best scientific information available
2. Is fair—considers diverse points of view
3. Recognizes importance of wetlands to society
4. Recognizes private property rights
5. Addresses funding of wetland conservation efforts as a critical factor
6. Emphasizes voluntary, non-mandatory efforts
7. Strives for consistency
8. Emphasizes partnerships, cooperation, and coordination (efficiency of efforts)
9. Prioritizes—focuses efforts on priority wetlands
10. Encourages flexibility and creativity
11. Uses existing programs in the best way possible
12. Emphasizes and facilitates local involvement
13. Conserves wetlands on an ecosystem or watershed basis
14. Is practicable
15. Is long-term oriented—for future generations

“The Plan is pragmatic and sets a good tone for the future direction of wetlands conservation in Indiana.”

—Mike Litwin,

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Wetlands Conservation Priorities

Given the limited resources (time and funding) available for wetlands conservation, determining the number of acres and the types of wetlands that should be conserved will be a challenge. Such *prioritization*, however, is fundamentally important to the *IWCP*. The more specific the plan can be about how many acres of what types of wetlands need to be conserved and where they are, the more efficient and cost-effective the wetlands conservation strategies can be.

Two things make setting priorities difficult, especially on a statewide basis. First, as discussed in the Status section of this plan, detailed, up-to-date information on the location, status, and threats to existing wetlands is not readily available.

Second, and more important, the many functions and benefits derived from wetlands make it difficult to set priorities. For example, how do we compare the value of protecting existing wetlands or restoring drained wetlands for purposes of flood control versus for conserving biological diversity?

After considerable work, discussion, and review by both the Technical Advisory Team and Wetlands Advisory Group, the following recommendations were made regarding prioritization. These recommendations represent progress to date and do not constitute a complete prioritization process. They should be used as a starting point for implementing Actions 2.2.1 and 2.3.1 in the *Hoosier Wetlands Conservation Initiative* (page 40).

1. Given that 85% of Indiana's wetlands have been lost, all remaining wetlands are important and should be considered important for conservation. However, a system for prioritizing wetlands for conservation must be developed.
2. Priorities for conserving wetlands based on water quality, flood control, and groundwater benefits should be made at the watershed or sub-watershed level. Criteria for identifying priorities based on water quality, flood control, and groundwater benefits were developed and are included in Appendix E. A description of Indiana's 12 water management basins or "watersheds" is included in Appendix F.
3. Special concerns for water quality, flood control, and groundwater should be identified for each watershed. An initial list of concerns developed by the Technical Advisory Team is listed in Appendix F.

"The Natural Resources Conservation Service of USDA is pleased with the process utilized over the past two years in preparing the first Indiana Wetlands Conservation Plan."

—Robert L. Eddleman,

Natural Resources Conservation Service

4. Statewide priorities for conserving wetlands based on biological and ecological functions should be developed based on the following criteria:
 - a. Rarity of wetland type
 - b. Presence of endangered, threatened, or rare species
 - c. Presence of endangered, threatened, or rare species habitat, but species not yet identified at the site
 - d. Diversity of native species
 - e. Diversity of wetland community types
 - f. Proximity of other valued ecosystem types
 - g. Natural quality (amount of disturbance/degradation)
 - h. Irreplaceability (can the wetland type be re-created)
 - i. Recoverability (can the wetland type recover from disturbance it has experienced)
 - j. Size
 - k. Location

The priorities should be identified based on the natural regions currently used by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Nature Preserves and many other agencies and organizations. The natural regions and wetland communities found in each watershed are identified in Appendix F. Wetland communities are described in Appendix G.

5. Historical and recreational benefits of wetlands should be considered in identifying priorities.
6. Based on the statewide biological and ecological priorities, a process should be developed to assist in identifying wetland priorities at the watershed or sub-watershed level.
7. Better information on Indiana's wetland resources is needed to more effectively identify scientifically based priorities described in Appendix G.

"It's always inspiring to see a voluntary group putting so much time and energy into addressing issues and solutions together."

—Cathy Garra,

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency,

Region 5

Case Studies

Following are a few of the focus area efforts that exist in Indiana. These samples were selected to show the variety of ways that local people, agencies, and organizations can work together for wetlands conservation.

Case Study: Fish Creek Watershed Project

A Nationally Acclaimed Project

The Fish Creek Watershed Project has been hailed around the country as a model for local area watershed conservation efforts. How did this project come by such high praise?

It Started With a Cat's Paw

A 1988 survey of the St. Joseph/Maumee River watershed in northeast Indiana showed that populations of mussels (freshwater clams) had severely declined. In addition, the survey found that one particular mussel, the white cat's paw pearly mussel, was exterminated in the watershed with the exception of one tributary—Fish Creek.

Although the potential loss of any species was cause for grave concern, perhaps of greater concern was the reason for the loss. Mussels are indicators of water quality, and severe declines in mussel populations meant severe declines in water quality. As a result, a federal/state/private partnership was formed among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Indiana and Ohio Departments of Natural Resources, and The Nature Conservancy to address problems in the Fish Creek watershed. By 1992, the partnership swelled to 13 organizations, and had a full-time coordinator, Larry Clemens. "The first thing we did was to form an advisory group of people from the local area," says Clemens. "The partners come up with good ideas, but the advisory group figures out how to implement them on the ground."

What's Being Done?

Project partners determined that erosion and excessive runoff were the primary causes for the decrease in Fish Creek's water quality, and they focused their attention on reducing or eliminating these causes. Wetlands can play a major role in those efforts. Says Clemens: "Wetlands are known to slow the flow of water, reducing soil erosion and siltation in the creek. They are also able to filter out harmful chemicals and excess fertilizers that run off from agricultural fields, industrial sites, and suburban lawns."

"One of the best outcomes of this Plan could be to inspire local communities to learn from the successful case studies listed here and duplicate these successes around our State."

—Jon Voelz,

Indiana Wildlife Federation

"The first thing we did was to form an advisory group of people from the local area. The partners come up with good ideas, but the advisory group figures out how to implement them on the ground."

—Larry Clemens,

Fish Creek Watershed Project

“Gathering a diverse group of agencies, organizations, and individuals together is the key to success in this kind of effort.”

—Larry Clemens,

Fish Creek Watershed Project

In addition to voluntarily restoring wetlands, partners also encouraged local landowners to plant trees and filter strips along the Fish Creek corridor, and encouraged farmers to adopt conservation tillage practices to reduce erosion. And they don't just talk about it either. Partner organizations provide the technical expertise needed to do the projects right. Perhaps more importantly, they provide cost shares and other funding for these measures through internal programs as well as grants received from outside sources.

Partnerships Are the Key

According to Clemens, “Gathering a diverse group of agencies, organizations, and individuals together is the key to success in this kind of effort. We found it worked best to keep the partnership informal. Every partner brings different talents and resources to the table, and we don't worry about who's getting recognition for it.”

Clemens highly recommends that the partnership have a full-time, locally based coordinator who can keep things moving forward. “It means a lot to the local interests when you can meet with them face-to-face. Then the partnership becomes real—it has a name and a face—and it's not just a pie-in-the-sky idea anymore.” Clemens also says that getting the “right” local people involved can make a big difference. “We sought support and participation from community and neighborhood leaders in addition to leaders in the local units of government. Probably the best promotion that the partnership gets is through word-of-mouth among neighbors.”

Interestingly, the partnership aspect also helps when it comes to funding the conservation efforts. “Partnerships is a buzzword in the fund-raising arena,” says Clemens. “People want to give to partnerships because they know their money will go farther and be used more effectively that way.” Clemens points out that location can also play a role in funding. “There's a lot of national attention being placed on water quality in the Great Lakes Region right now. It's a good time to get funding for these critical efforts from the Environmental Protection Agency, Great Lakes National Program Office and Great Lakes Commission.”

As final words of advice to other local areas who are considering forming a partnership like Fish Creek, Clemens says: “Put a high priority on getting some projects done right away. It's a lot easier to build and sustain momentum for the whole effort when you can point to a restored wetland or a completed tree planting.”

For more information, contact Larry Clemens, (219) 665-9141.

Case Study: Little River Wetlands Project

Thinking Big

When Paul McAfee, Jane Dustin, Keith McMahon, and Carl Hofer sat down to discuss wetland conservation in 1989, they were thinking big. Specifically, they were discussing the possibility of forming a large nature preserve in northeast Indiana. What arose from that discussion was the Little River Wetlands Project, Inc. (LRWP).

The LRWP became a not-for-profit corporation in 1990 with the official mission of: *Facilitating the restoration of wetlands in the Little River watershed and providing educational opportunities that inspire and challenge individuals to be good stewards of all natural resources.* Although they are legally able to acquire land (and willing if the need arises), the LRWP is just as interested in the educational side of wetlands conservation. Paul McAfee, one of LRWP's founders, puts it this way: "We want to get the next generation involved in conservation efforts today."

Cooperation With Other Interests

When a sanitary landfill in the watershed planned to expand, filling an existing wetland, the LRWP sprang into action. After researching the proposed action and all the alternatives, the LRWP decided it was in everyone's best interest to cooperate with the landfill company and help them successfully restore a 14-acre wetland in a nearby protected area as mitigation. Because of their cooperative, reasonable approach, they were able to help plan the restoration, successfully lobbied for inclusion of a wetland boardwalk, and coordinated the participation of local high school students to help plant trees—a wonderful educational experience for the students.

The LRWP works with landowners throughout the watershed, helping them plan restorations and other conservation practices, and putting them in touch with the right agencies and organizations when they have questions or problems. Throughout these efforts, McAfee explains how they always keep their educational goals in mind. "Whenever possible, we try to get agreements with landowners where we provide the trees and planting labor in exchange for use of the wetland for educational purposes."

The Bottom Line

"We have shown ourselves, the community, corporations, and other agencies that by working together it is possible to make the best of any situation," says McAfee. "By taking a proactive approach to wetlands conservation, a not-for-profit organization can restore wetlands, and in the process, help people learn more about wetland ecology and ultimately about the environment as a whole."

For more information, contact Paul McAfee, (219) 489-5032.

"We have shown ourselves, the community, corporations, and other agencies that by working together it is possible to make the best of any situation."

—Paul McAfee,

Little River Wetlands Project

“We said from the very beginning that we can’t wait on someone else to come along and help us do this. We said if we’re going to get it done, we’ve got to be the ones to get out there and do it.”

*—Norma Flannery,
Oxbow, Inc.*

Case Study: Oxbow, Inc.

Protecting the Land

While some focus area groups pursue a wide range of wetland conservation efforts, such as restoration, enhancement, and education, Oxbow, Inc. has chosen to focus on a much narrower strategy—permanent protection of existing wetlands.

The “Oxbow” is a 2,500-acre area of Ohio River bottomlands and floodplains along the Indiana/Ohio border. It is one of the few remaining wetland ecosystems within 100 miles of the Cincinnati, Ohio, metropolitan area. As such, it provides critical habitat to many kinds of wildlife, including more than 275 species of birds. It also provides water quality and flood control functions to the Great Miami River and the Ohio River.

The Rallying Point

In 1984, a bill was introduced into the Ohio Senate that would have established an industrial port on the Ohio River in the Oxbow area. Recognizing that this would significantly alter the ecological integrity of this unique area, several local conservation organizations and many concerned individuals conducted a letter-writing campaign that caused the bill to be withdrawn. The Oxbow was spared. In the wake of their successful efforts, the loosely knit group decided to incorporate into a not-for-profit organization in order to help prevent future attempts at converting this area from its natural state. Thus was born Oxbow, Inc.

“Our goal is to conserve and protect the natural integrity of the Oxbow area,” says Norma Flannery, president of Oxbow, Inc. “We do this through the purchase of permanent conservation easements or outright purchase of land.” Oxbow, Inc. has not pursued restorations, enhancements, or other wetland-related projects. “We only have so much time, money, and energy,” says Flannery. “Sometimes, people call us up with an interest in restoring a wetland on their property. We try to put them in touch with someone who can help, but we don’t get involved ourselves. That’s just not our focus.”

The Oxbow area comprises 1,000 acres in Ohio and 1,500 acres in Indiana. By involving county agencies in their project, Oxbow Inc. was successful in encouraging the Hamilton County (Ohio) Park District to secure conservation easements on 99% of the Ohio acreage. Consequently, their current efforts are directed at the Indiana side of the line. “Easements work well for us and for the landowner,” says Flannery. “Much of the land around here has been in people’s families for more than a century, and they don’t want to part with it. Who can blame them? We just want to see this unique ecosystem protected in its natural state. A conservation easement is the tool that allows both the landowner and Oxbow, Inc. to satisfy their individual priorities.”

Oxbow, Inc. is a grassroots organization that has more than 1,100 members from around the country. It is funded primarily through membership dues, although it has been the recipient of several large settlements from industries that have caused pollution in the area.

Getting It Done

For other focus area efforts just getting started, Flannery offers this advice: “Try to attract prominent members of the local communities to join your effort. They have the financial resources and influential friends that can really help—especially when you’re just getting started.” Although she admits that fortunate timing had a lot to do with the success of Oxbow, Inc., Flannery also credits the can-do attitude of the members and the Board of Directors. “We said from the very beginning that we can’t wait on someone else to come along and help us do this. We said if we’re going to get it done, we’ve got to be the ones to get out there and do it.” To date, 1,541 acres are preserved or protected. So far so good.

For more information, contact Norma Flannery, (513) 471-8001.

Case Study: Cedar Creek Watershed Alliance

Clean Drinking Water and a Lot More

No one wants to drink water that is laced with pesticides and herbicides, yet that is the reality that faced the 175,000 residents of Fort Wayne and other cities and towns along the St. Joseph River in northeast Indiana. Today, some forward-thinking people are working together to do something about it.

Cedar Creek winds its way through prime agricultural lands before emptying into the St. Joseph River above Fort Wayne. Chemicals that do wonderful things for crop yields were finding their way into city water supplies, where they were not at all welcome. Fort Wayne water treatment officials and local environmental organizations took on individual aspects of the problem as best they could, but there was no coordinated effort to address the overall situation.

Then in 1994, a Noble County commissioner (Harold Troyer), suggested that a broad array of agencies, organizations, and individuals should work together to try to resolve the water quality issues in the Creek and its watershed. Thus began the Cedar Creek Watershed Alliance (CCWA).

“Most landowners want wetlands restored on their property because they provide such great wildlife habitat. The water quality and flood control benefits are just icing on the cake.”

—Randy Jones,

Cedar Creek Watershed Alliance

How to Get Started?

Based on Troyer’s recommendation, a core group of about 20 people who shared a common concern came together to form the CCWA. Most members represent other agencies and organizations, including the city of Fort Wayne, Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Izaak Walton League, Pheasants Forever, and others.

Originally, the group was part of the Maumee River Basin Commission, which covers Dekalb, Noble, and Allen counties. There are several river basin commissions in Indiana, and these can be very helpful to local area efforts just getting started. The Maumee River Basin Commission helped the group get on its feet, then took a back seat so that local interests could take control. A local farmer now serves as the CCWA project chairman. Randy Jones, who is a project coordinator for the Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District, is the watershed coordinator, and his office serves as the project headquarters. “Having an agency person serve as coordinator has several advantages,” says Jones. “It allows the effort to have a full-time representative, a permanent mailing address and phone number, and often provides exposure for the project through the agency contacts.”

Wetlands Can Help

Jones recalls how the CCWA recognized the benefits of wetlands early on: “We talked about how wetlands within the watershed could provide many functions that would help our cause. [Wetlands] are able to take up or filter out many pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers that run off agricultural lands, keeping them out of the water supply.” The CCWA has worked together with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help interested local landowners restore and enhance wetlands on their property. “Most landowners want wetlands restored on their property because they provide such great wildlife habitat,” says Jones. “The water quality and flood control benefits are just icing on the cake.”

How Does the Group Operate?

As the core group of the CCWA came together, they agreed that they needed a systematic approach for discussing issues and making decisions. At the suggestion of the Soil and Water Conservation District, the group decided to use the Coordinated Resource Management process. In this process, participants have a facilitated discussion about an issue until everyone agrees on a single course of action. This process seeks to find common ground and to avoid creating

“winners and losers,” as often happens when issues are decided by voting. “I would strongly recommend the Coordinated Resources Management (CRM) process to anyone who is considering starting a local conservation effort such as ours,” asserts Jones. “Gather all your interested parties together and get CRM training at the very beginning. It will really pay off in everything you do.”

Bigger and Better

Today, the CCWA is part of an even larger watershed conservation effort, the St. Joseph River Watershed Initiative. This initiative is comprised of local efforts (such as the CCWA) in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio—along the entire length of the St. Joseph River and its tributaries. It just goes to show what can be accomplished by a few determined people working together.

For more information, contact Randy Jones, (800) 748-3704.

Case Study: Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project

The Big One

In Indiana, the Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project (GKMP) is “the big one.” With a budget of nearly 4 million dollars, it is larger in size and scope than any other Indiana wetland conservation project currently in existence. However, despite its scope, it is still managed and administered by local people through a partnership of private organizations, corporations, and local, state, and federal agencies. Although it was developed and funded through unique circumstances, there is still much that other local area efforts can learn from the GKMP experience.

No Other Place Like It

At one time the Grand Kankakee Marsh covered up to one million acres of Indiana’s northwest corner, from South Bend to the Illinois line. Historical accounts of the waterfowl and other wildlife in the marsh are the stuff of dreams. Beneath the marsh lay the stuff of other kinds of dreams—fertile farmland—and as early as 1850, settlers began to drain the marsh for farming. By the early 1900s the drainage was completed, and today only small remnants of the original marsh remain.

“The first thing we did was to put together a steering committee made up of local people. In order to be successful, this effort had to be run at the local level.”

—George Seketa,

Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project

“You’ve got to have dedicated, locally based people who are open-minded and willing to work together for common goals.”

—George Seketa,
Grand Kankakee Marsh
Restoration Project

The history of the marsh has lived on in the minds of many area residents. This, combined with a deteriorating agricultural drainage system and the potential for funding under the North American Wetland Conservation Act, led to the establishment of the Indiana Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project in 1993.

A Unique Situation

Recognizing that wetlands provide many benefits to society, Congress passed the North American Wetland Conservation Act, which makes funds available to states for wetland conservation. Through this Act, the GKMP became eligible for a grant of a whopping 1.5 million dollars—but there was a catch. The grant had to be matched with money from the state.

To help achieve this goal, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources appointed a project coordinator, George Seketa. “The first thing we did was to put together a steering committee made up of local people,” says Seketa. “In order to be successful, this effort had to be run at the local level.” The steering committee developed a project plan and then sought out other partners to help fund the Indiana portion of the matching grant.

These efforts proved very successful, as 13 partners stepped forward and raised \$2.3 million in cash, land donations, and in-kind services. Partners include Northern Indiana Public Service Company, Lake County Parks and Recreation Department, Waterfowl USA, Ducks Unlimited, Kankakee River Basin Commission, The Nature Conservancy, and others. New partners are welcome to join the effort at any time.

How Does It Work?

Based on technical expertise of the partners, the local steering committee decides how to use the grant money to best achieve the GKMP’s guidelines, which are to protect, restore, enhance, and manage wetland habitats in the Kankakee River watershed. All lands that are acquired by the project are purchased from willing sellers. Each parcel has a management plan developed for it, and after all restoration and enhancement work is completed, ownership of the parcel is turned over to a local entity, such as a county parks and recreation department. If no local entities are interested in ownership, the title becomes state ownership. Through this process, GKMP will purchase and restore nearly 4,500 acres of wetlands and associated uplands during the first two years of the project.

Keys to Success

Seketa believes that having the right steering committee is a major factor in making local area efforts successful. “You’ve got to have dedicated, locally based people who are open-minded and willing to work together for common goals,” he says. He also believes that selecting the right chairperson of the committee is critical. Once the committee and chairperson are in place, they must develop a plan of action that communicates their vision and mission to the public and to potential project partners. “Grants and other sources that provide money on a matching basis are the best bet for project funding,” Seketa says, “because they create and encourage the formation of partnerships, which makes all of the efforts more powerful.” The final keys to success that Seketa mentions are the intangibles. “Sometimes, you just need some good luck—to be in the right place at the right time. That’s what happened with the GKMP; I still can’t believe we’ve done what we’ve done.”

For more information, contact Dick Blythe (Project Chairman), (219) 924-4403.

“Sometimes, you just need some good luck—to be in the right place at the right time.”

*—George Seketa,
Grand Kankakee Marsh
Restoration Project*