Every time a hunter in America buys supplies, they're contributing to our natural resources. Meet the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, and why it matters in Illinois.

The Sport

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The dollars add up—quickly.

A boat, trailer and waders for the duck hunter. A deer stand and life-sized deer decoy for the bowhunter. Camouflage and a shotgun for the turkey hunter. A dog for most types of hunting. Licenses, permits and stamps. Food, gas and overnight accommodations.

Sportsmen and women annually spend 4.5 million days hunting in Illinois, a cash outlay of an amazing $451 million (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2001.) That equates to more than $1.2 million in purchases in the state revolving around the sport of hunting—each and every day.

Thanks to the foresight of members of United States Congress, who created the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, a portion of the federal excise tax on sporting arms, ammunition, archery equipment and handguns is returned to Illinois each year.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service apportions the federal excise tax, based on the number of hunting license holders and the total land area within each state," explained Paul Vehlow, coordinator of federal assistance programs for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "Illinois first received money from the program in 1939, and to date, $103 million has been returned to the state for habitat and hunting programs."

Funds are dispersed for four major programs: habitat development, surveys and investigations, hunter education and land acquisition.

One of the largest, and longest running, federal assistance projects in Illinois is the Statewide Public Lands Wildlife Habitat Development Project,

The W-76-D project funds planting of native vegetation, wheat, sunflowers and other crops to increase food and cover areas for wildlife.

sman's Tax

initiated in 1962 and known commonly as W-76-D. The goals of the project are to create wildlife habitat on public lands, provide facility access and recreation opportunities, and establish wildlife management demonstration areas for Illinois citizens.

Paul Willms, W-76-D project manager for the Division of Wildlife Resources, has been involved with the project for 34 years and coordinates development of the on-going six-year plans for each of the 66 DNR sites currently participating in the project.

"The number of people contributing to the development and implementation of each plan is astounding," Willms said. "From within DNR you have the land manager and the district wildlife biologist, forester and heritage biologist, and then you factor in the role of constituent groups and other land management agencies. The knowledge and enthusiasm these folks have really shows in the amount of on-the-ground work they are able to accomplish each year."

As alike as four southern Illinois sites are in meeting the goals of the W-76-D project and serving the public, they are equally varied in the types of habitat projects under way.

Bottomland Forest Restoration Along the Cache River SNA

The Cache River State Natural Area contains 1,000-year-old bald cypress trees, Illinois' largest natural area and largest dedicated nature preserve—and 18 parking lots constructed through the W-76-D project that are designed to provide hunter access to more than 11,800 acres of prime squirrel, deer and duck habitat. For the majority of the year, these lots provide the hiker, birder, photographer and nature enthusiast access to incredible sights and sounds of the river system.

At the Cache River SNA, the W-76-D project has provided for the creation of trails that provide hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts with views into swamp communities (above right), including ancient trees along Big Cypress Tree Trail (right).

Watering holes constructed through the W-76-D program are typically less than 12 feet deep, and in recent years, 3-to 4-foot wetlands are the trend, costing less than $2,000 to construct and quickly attracting a variety of wildlife.

"Management and restoration of the Cache River is a work in progress involving DNR, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ducks Unlimited, with support from NRCS, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Friends of the Cache River, Citizens Committee to Save the Cache River and other local constituency groups," said Jim Waycuilis, site superintendent of the 14,314-acre site spanning Johnson and Pulaski counties.

At monthly meetings, partners discuss how to maximize efforts and leverage funds for restoration of the unique bottomland forest and river ecosystems.

"One of the largest accomplishments within the boundaries of the Cache River project is the reforestation of lands that were cleared and drained throughout much of the last two centuries," Mark Guetersloh, district heritage biologist, said. "Since 1991, more than 601,000 seedlings have been planted on 1,560 acres, and almost 2,000 acres of wetlands restored on public and private lands within the watershed, due in large part to support from the Conservation 2000 program and W-76-D project."

The W-76-D projects implemented at the Cache River SNA also are an excellent example of how cooperative efforts—development of wetlands, removal of exotic species, trail development, planting of warm-season grasses—between biologists with different specialities can have profound benefits for both game and nongame species.

"In most cases, when landscape-scale practices are used for effective and sustainable resource management, you find that what is good for one species will benefit the entire resource," Guetersloh explained.

Giant City State Park

"Much of the public is unaware of the scope of hunting programs within some of our state parks," said Dan Woolard, district wildlife biologist working with staff at Giant City State Park. "The W-76-D project at this park has not only helped create grassland areas, but several ponds and water holes that benefit wildlife and create other recreational use opportunities."

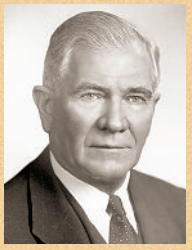
Food plots managed within the park provide a hard grain source that may be a critical wildlife food some years.

"If there is poor mast production, or even a failure of oaks to produce acorns, these food plots are heavily utilized by forest and grassland wildlife," Woolard explained.

"Management of Giant City requires looking at the big picture because of the proximity of Carbondale, and the fact that Giant City adjoins the Shawnee National Forest, Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge and lands owned by Southern Illinois University," explained Bob Martin, site superintendent at Giant City. "Our work plans take into consideration how urbanization of surrounding lands will affect wildlife and park pro-

(Photo by Paul Willms.)

Many W-76-D site management plans include the use of prescribed burns on a rotational basis to maximize ecological diversity.



The Founders of Federal Assistance

Nevada Senator Key Pittman and Virginia Representative A. Willis Robertson chaired committees on wildlife and conservation issues, and made the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 a reality. As part of this legislation, hunting and fishing license fees can be used only for administration of the fish and game department and not diverted for other purposes.

grams, and how to zone the park to maximize a variety of recreational uses.

"It takes a lot of planning from all disciplines within DNR to develop a facility that protects the resources and meets the needs of park visitors," Martin concluded. "Despite our best efforts, without the financial support and volunteer work of organizations such as the National Wild Turkey Federation and Friends of Giant City, many projects would not be accomplished."

Wildlife Food and Cover Management at Kinkaid Lake SFWA

In addition to providing hunter access, the Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area W-76-D project site focuses on conversion of blocks of fescue to warm-season grasses and wildlife food plots in a manner that minimizes soil erosion.

District Wildlife Biologist Rich Whitton works with the Kinkaid Lake Conservancy District on a long-term project to create permanent cover on former agricultural fields. The goal is to create one 40- to 50-foot wide food strip every 40 acres, locating it adjacent to the previous year's strip to maximize plant diversity. Strips rotate on a three to four year basis from corn to soybeans, clover, wheat or millet.

"Development of these sites provides good demonstration areas for private landowners to see how they can convert areas to permanent cover that benefits wildlife," Whitton said of the Jackson County project. "It provides a first-hand experience of seeing how contour strips work, and the benefits of using mowing, selective herbicides and burning to retard woody succession."

Project Manager Paul Willms (right) routinely meets with field staff to discuss management plans. Here, District Wildlife Biologist Rich Whitton provided an overview of activities at Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) at Dixon Springs SP

Federal assistance funds are contributing to a project at Dixon Springs State

(Photo by Paul Willms.)

Through partnerships with the National Wild Turkey Federation and funding from the Illinois Habitat Stamp in cooperation with the W-76-D project, many state sites have purchased habitat management equipment. DNR's heavy equipment crew utilizes the equipment to remove the exotic shrubs autumn olive and bush honeysuckle.

(Photos by David Allen.)

Timber Stand Improvement activities at Dixon Springs State Park include selective removal of red cedar and prescribed burns to speed recovery of a heavily grazed woodlot.

Park that will speed recovery of a heavily pastured woodlot by 25 to 30 years.

"Because soils on the 98-acre farmstead were compacted from years of grazing before the state acquired the property, there was no oak regeneration and little growing but exotic species," District Forester David Allen explained. "Through a process of systematically removing the competition and conducting prescribed burns, oak seedlings are starting to emerge and will eventually provide mast (food) and homes for many species of wildlife."

Success of the project may drive restoration of other sites, and research under way by Southern Illinois University Carbondale will help monitor the recovery of hardwoods and effects of burning.

"This timber stand improvement project may have tremendous application throughout the state on both public and private properties," said Mike Murphy, district wildlife biologist. "Sharing the results of the effort is important and this tract already has been used for several on-site classes and tours for land managers and biologists."

Sixty-six years and millions in federal funding has resulted in an Illinois program with direction, consistency and public accountability.

"Over the years, land managers and biologists have worked to create projects that are aesthetically pleasing, have long-term value for wildlife, foster partnerships and support a diversity of recreational activities," Willms concluded. "The professional, plan-do-accomplish attitude of the site management teams grows each year; not only by wildlife habitat acres, but also harvest figures and hunter use days."

W-76-D wildlife habitat practices in a nutshell

The habitat and hunter management projects conducted under the W-76-D program are diverse. For additional details, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildliferesources.

- Dams, dikes and levees: maintenance or creation of these structures create wetland habitat for birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects.
- Trees, shrubs and herbaceous seedlings: native vegetation is planted to increase food and cover areas for wildlife.
- Clearings, vegetation control and firebreak widening: exotic species and other undesirable herbaceous and wood plants are removed through prescribed burning, herbicide application, mowing and heavy equipment hand clearing.
- Water level management: through impoundment flooding and draw downs, seasonal habitat is provided for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds.
- Wildlife water holes: construction of water holes up to one-acre in size provides water and roosting and loafing sites for waterfowl.
- Forest management: timber stand improvement through selected tree girdling, spraying of chemicals, prescribed burns or removal of exotics and softwoods improves habitat for wildlife.
- Nest structures: boxes and platforms are placed, inspected and repaired annually to improve nest success for wood ducks, squirrels, bluebirds, bats, ducks and geese.
- Agriculture leasing program: leasing of agricultural lands owned by DNR provides income for the local economy, food and cover for wildlife, and cash for specific operational needs of the site.
- Land acquisition: Pittman-Robertson funds have been used to acquire tracts at Anderson Lake CA, Baldwin Lake SFWA, Beaver Dam SP, Burnham Island CA, Campbell Lake, Chain O' Lakes SP, Green River SWA, Horseshoe Lake CA, Marshall SFWA, Mermet Lake CA, Rice Lake CA, Sam Dale Lake CA, Sanganois SFWA, Stephen A. Forbes SP, Turkey Bluffs SWFA and Union County CA.