SAFE helping meet the goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan.

A New Kind of Conservation Reserve Program

Story By Mike Wefer
Photos Courtesy Wade Louis

DNR biologist Wade Louis and landowner Duane Dassow discuss grassland habitat improvements within the Grand Prairie Initiative Area.

In 1985, the Conservation Reserve Program was created in the federal Farm Bill to conserve soil and protect sensitive lands. Administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency, the program has been a boon for wildlife, especially birds. Unfortunately, advances in agricultural technology and changes in farming practices also have contributed to dramatic population declines of many bird species.

Based on the North American Breeding Bird Survey, 50 percent of grassland and 39 percent of successional-scrub species are significantly declining.

In the early years of CRP, wildlife benefits took a back seat to erosion control. But that changed in 2004 when a new federal program—the CP33 Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds practice—was offered as part of the Bush Administration's Presidential Bobwhite Habitat Initiative.

It was the first federal conservation practice specifically designed to help meet habitat goals of a large-scale wildlife conservation effort, the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative. It's also the first federal conservation program for landowners that included a wildlife-monitoring requirement and paved the way for other wildlife-specific CRP practices.

In 2007, SAFE (known formally as CP38 State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement) focused on projects addressing specific habitat and conservation needs of threatened and endangered, declining or economically valuable wildlife species.

SAFE allowed local and regional conservation groups, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, biologists, farmers, ranchers and others to submit proposals to the FSA to help farmers and ranchers develop and maintain high-value wildlife habitats through CRP. Aside from addressing high-priority wildlife species, SAFE offers an incentive package for producers: 90 percent cost share on wildlife habitat management and restoration

practices plus 50 percent cost share for mid-contract management practices required to maintain wildlife habitat during the life of the 10- to 15-year contract. To encourage program enrollment, SAFE offers an upfront, $100 per acre incentive payment on top of the regular CRP rental payments offered.

Four SAFE projects were approved in Illinois and this article focuses on the Grassland/Wetland Habitat Restoration in Prairie Landscapes project sponsored by the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife Resources. For information on Illinois' other SAFE projects, go to www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/stateoffapp?mystate=il&area=home&subject=landing&topic=landing or contact your local FSA office.

Illinois Wildlife Action Plan and SAFE

In 2001, the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Act and the State Wildlife Grants programs were enacted to help provide adequate, predictable funding for conservation programs. To be eligible for these funds, Congress required that each state develop a wildlife action plan, known technically as a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. These proactive plans examined the health of wildlife and prescribed actions to conserve wildlife and vital habitat before they become rarer and more costly to protect.

"The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan is not just an inventory of species, but a plan to address the particular needs of wildlife that are declining. This is a blueprint for the future of successful wildlife management in Illinois."

—Joint July 11, 2005 statement from Carl Becker of The Nature Conservancy, John Burk of the National Wild Turkey Federation, Marilyn Campbell of the Illinois Audubon Society and Eric Schenck of Ducks Unlimited

The SAFE initiative has addressed habitat needs for a variety of grassland wildlife, including ring-necked pheasants (nest above) and meadowlarks (below).

DNR and our partners took a broad approach in developing Illinois' plan to address the needs of all wild species of animals. The plan identifies priority areas where conservation opportunities are greatest, partner organizations working in each area and means of focusing resources to accomplish plan objectives. More than 850 people representing 150 agencies and organizations helped develop the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. Diverse perspectives were represented, from the Illinois Farm Bureau to Field Trial Clubs of Illinois and the Sierra Club. Organizations also varied greatly in geographic scope, from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to municipal park districts. The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan was approved on Oct.1, 2005.

To better focus resources and work strategically, the action plan was broken into seven overlapping campaigns grouped by habitat and issues.

(Photo courtesy Brian Tang.)

The Farmland and Prairie Campaign is designed to expand and improve grassland, shrub and wetland habitats in agricultural landscapes. Partners in this campaign include a broad spectrum of public and private conservation groups, including the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Ducks Unlimited, Illinois Audubon Society, Illinois Department of Agriculture, DNR, Illinois Farm Service Agency, Illinois Natural Resources Conservation Service, Kaskaskia Watershed Association, National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, Quail Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, University of Illinois and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Members of the campaign saw a real opportunity within the SAFE program to meet some of the habitat goals and aided in developing the proposal.

Focused Approach

About 60 percent of Illinois, approximately 22 million acres, once was prairie. Since it is simply not possible to restore all these lands, a focused approach was needed.

The Farmland and Prairie partners developed two strategies focusing on two different natural divisions and two different groups of grassland wildlife.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Focus areas within the Southern Till Plain were selected based on use by the endangered greater prairie-chicken.

Criteria used to select focus areas within the Grand Prairie Initiative included highly erodible lands, prior converted wetlands and existing grasslands. Southern Till Plain Focus Areas were selected based on recent use by greater prairie-chickens and other focal species, closeness to existing conservation areas and the potential to provide open, upland habitat.

The SAFE proposal followed the same outline, resulting in the identification of 22 township-sized focus areas in the Grand Prairie Initiative Area and nine township-sized focus areas in the Southern Till Plain Initiative Area. Each initiative area was allocated 10,300 acres in the SAFE program, and most of the enrolled acres have been planted in native warm-season grasses.

The SAFE program can benefit landowners by allowing them to take less fertile lands out of production, enrolling small or odd-shaped fields that are hard to farm, managing risk in their operations, and supporting healthy wildlife populations on their farms.

For more information on the Grassland/Wetland Habitat Restoration in Prairie Landscapes SAFE program, go to www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/safe.

Enrollment

In the last few years, crop prices have seen record highs and it is hard for CRP rental payments to compete with current prices. That said, SAFE has benefitted landowners and wildlife in some key areas.

More than 5,500 acres have been enrolled in the Grand Prairie Initiative, mostly in Tazewell, Livingston, Montgomery and Ford counties. Although enrollment has not been as good in the Southern Till Plain, where only about 650 acres have been enrolled, enrollments have been in key locations, including a 135-acre enrollment in Jasper County that is within a mile of the Prairie Ridge State Natural Area and has the potential to benefit greater prairie-chickens, northern bobwhites and other grassland birds.

Monitoring

Like CP33, monitoring is a requirement of SAFE.

After developing a monitoring process, biologists conducted bird and mammal surveys on newly established SAFE fields to measure response on a local scale. Also, DNR altered its annual roadside survey methods and locations in an attempt to measure bird response on a regional scale. While most of the fields surveyed have been planted for only a year or two, and the grasses and forbs are not fully established, monitoring demonstrated a measurable, positive response, including increases in the number of eastern meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrows, and northern bobwhites on several fields between 2009 and 2010.

Often overlooked, small mammals play an important role in grassland ecosystems. They impact vegetation and are prey for many predators, including raptors, snakes and medium-sized mammalian carnivores. Captured in small-mammal surveys initiated in 2010 were 11 species: prairie vole, deer mouse, meadow vole, northern short-tailed shrew, house mouse, southern bog lemming, 13-lined ground squirrel, western harvest mouse, long-tailed weasel, white-footed mouse and meadow jumping mouse. Prairie voles, deer mice and meadow voles made up 95 percent of the animals captured.

Future Efforts

When the SAFE program was first offered, campaign partners were conservative in the selection of focus areas to include in the program. With more than two years of experience under their belts, partners remain focused but are now adjusting their approach after reviewing results.

In the first wave, the focus of both SAFE initiatives was grassland birds. However, shrub land birds also are an important part of the campaign. Shrub land birds—northern bobwhites, brown thrashers, prairie warblers, yellow-breasted chats and black-billed cuckoos, to name a few—have significantly declined as the brushy habitat that these species require has matured to forests and woodlots, or been converted to crop production. Campaign partners are considering adding two or three new focus areas to address the needs of this group of birds.

Partners also are considering expanding some focus-area boundaries to bring in more suitable habitat for grassland birds. For instance, adding a few sections in Mason County may aid in the development of habitat for the state-endangered Blanding's turtle and state-threatened Illinois chorus frog. Campaign partners also are looking at adding some focus areas in the Rock River Hill Country Natural Division in hopes of establishing more grassland habitat in northern Illinois.

Hopefully, SAFE will continue to be part of the Farm Bill and will continue to benefit wildlife in Illinois.

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