

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION PROGRAM

PROJECT NUMBER: T-7-L-1

PROPOSAL TITLE: Northern Bobwhite Habitat Restoration Through Land Acquisition

PROJECT OFFICER INFORMATION

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NEED: Northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) numbers have declined sharply in the last three decades. Prior to World War II, bobwhite flourished on the landscape created by small, general farms consisting of wood lots, shrubby fence rows and small fields of corn, oats, wheat, clover and bluegrass pastures. After the war, farms in south-central Illinois became larger and less diversified shifting to operations producing continuous corn and soybeans. The effects of this transition on bobwhite was mitigated to a degree by United States Department of Agriculture programs to reduce production of feed grains (soil bank and set asides) that returned many acres in south-central Illinois to grass/legume mixtures and/or fallow fields that provided increased nest cover and brood habitat.

From 1960 to 1975, the annual harvest of bobwhite was estimated to be between 1.5 million and 2.5 million birds. During this period, an average of 152,000 hunters spent 840,000 days afield hunting quail each year. From 1976 to 1980, large scale reductions in short term set aside programs and two consecutive severe winters reduced estimated harvest by 50 to 60 percent. From 1981 to 1994, milder weather and low grain prices resulted in a modest increase in bobwhite. During this period, short term set asides returned and the Conservation Reserve Program began. The ACR program (annual setaside) annually idled 500,000 to 3,000,000 acres in Illinois as highly erodible cropland was enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. Between 1985 and 1995, CRP enrollment reached 822,000 acres in Illinois. These programs dramatically increased available nest cover and brood habitat for bobwhite. During this period, the estimated statewide bobwhite harvest reached 900,000 to 1,000,000 birds four of ten years. From 1995 to 2000, bobwhite numbers reached all time lows. Weather and Federal agricultural policy were primarily responsible. Between 1995 and 1996, bobwhite harvest fell from 706,000 to 426,000 as annual setaside was eliminated and 200,000 acres of CRP grasslands were returned to production. In addition, many of the remaining acres of CRP had succeeded to poor quality grass monocultures including considerable tall fescue. From 2000 to 2002, an annual average of 40,000 hunters harvested 265,000 bobwhite in 240,000 days afield. These figures represent historic lows for Illinois.

Conservation of wild bobwhites is an important objective of IDNR. Population trends and hunter effort and harvest are monitored annually. Hunting seasons and bag limits are reviewed annually and adjusted as deemed necessary. Habitat restoration on private land and public land is the primary

focus of bobwhite conservation efforts in Illinois. On private land, 35 district wildlife biologists prepare wildlife management plans for bobwhite habitat restoration. In a typical year, 5,000 landowners receive planning assistance. Through the program, approximately 15,000 acres of grassland, 2,500 acres of shrubs and 1,500 acres of food plots are established. In addition, a new initiative to create early succession habitat on CRP grasslands is beginning.

However, Illinois has very little public land devoted to management for bobwhite. At most sites, management for general recreation (day use and camping) precludes intensive management for bobwhite. Strategically located parcels of public land complement bobwhite habitat on private land and provide core wintering areas and larger blocks of habitat that cannot be provided on private land. These parcels can also provide opportunity for limited access, high quality hunting.

OBJECTIVES: The objective of this grant is to purchase 361 acres of land in Franklin County for restoration of grassland and shrub land habitat for northern bobwhite and other species with similar habitat requirements.

EXPECTED RESULTS AND BENEFITS: When acquired, this land will provide a reasonably large tract of habitat for northern bobwhite and other grassland and shrub land wildlife species. Habitat development and management will be intensive to maintain appropriate successional stages. Recreational use will be a benefit; however, it will be limited to wildlife observation and limited access quail hunting (one party of four per day, no more than 20 days per year). Free permits will be issued by random drawing .

APPROACH: Three suitable parcels (100 acres, 155 acres and 106 acres) have been located and are currently for sale. IDNR real estate agents will contact the seller, conduct appraisals and make a fair market value offer on the property. When purchased, habitat restoration will consist of restoration of shrubby fence rows, establishment of native grass/forb prairie and rotated food plots of corn, milo, lespedeza and annual weeds. Plantings will be made by IDNR personnel with aid of volunteers from the local Quail Unlimited chapter. Maintenance activities (prescribed burning, strip disking, herbicide treatments) will be carried out by IDNR personnel and Quail Unlimited volunteers.

SCHEDULE: Land acquisition will begin in December 2003 and should be complete by December 2005. Habitat restoration will begin as soon as land is owned and will be completed in three years.

LOCATION: The parcels are located in Franklin County, approximately 6 miles east of Benton, Illinois. A locator map, plat map, air photos and soils map are attached to this proposal.

PERSONNEL: Current IDNR staff from the nearest site will oversee development and operation of the project.

ESTIMATED COST: Total cost of acquisition is estimated to be \$ 500,000.00. Fifty percent of the cost (\$ 250,000.00) will be provided by a grant from the Illinois State Habitat Stamp Fund. Cost to the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Fund will be \$ 250,000.00.