



NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION

State of Illinois

Grant Agreement

PROJECT NUMBER: T-26-D-01

PROJECT TITLE: Open Grasslands Project

OBJECTIVES:

To combat the grassland bird species decline in Illinois, this native grassland restoration project will convert existing openlands dominated by tall fescue back to native warm-season grasses (NWSG). A combination of tillage and prescribed fire will be used on the Shawnee National Forest (SNF) over two years to improve 500 acres of habitat as grasslands with foraging areas.

EXPECTED RESULTS OR BENEFITS:

The SNF is the single largest landholder in the state with approximately 285,000 acres and an estimated 500,000 visitors annually. The Forest provides some of the largest and most diverse blocks of mature hardwood forest, forest interior habitat, and public openland habitats in Illinois. With over 2,600 acres of potential openland habitat on the Shawnee National Forest, this project will help meet the CWCP goal of increasing the use by migratory grassland bird species by 20%. (Section III,C. - Statewide Overview, Desired Conditions for Wildlife & Habitat Resources – Birds p. 42) and creating/restoring an additional 1 million acres of grassland in Illinois. (Section III,C. - Statewide Overview, Desired Conditions for Wildlife & Habitat Resources – Grasslands p. 47) Managing large tracts of grassland habitat (like this project proposes) may be the best strategy for supporting viable populations of these various species of grassland birds.

Recent studies have shown that grasslands as large as 250 acres are required to have a 50% chance of attracting area sensitive grassland species. However, the restoration of any amount of grassland is important in Illinois and will contribute to the overall goal of 1 million acres. Many of the grassland dependent bird species are area sensitive requiring contiguous blocks of grassland 75 acres or larger so CP33 buffers and smaller blocks do not meet these specialized needs. Most of the “openlands” that we will restore with this project are significant because they will exceed the minimum size required by area sensitive species. This project is limited to the 500 acres project size only due to budgetary and funding constraints. The project is expected to expand to cover the entire 2,640 acres through future project phases when additional funds are acquired. Large tracts of grassland also have a high ratio of interior to edge, thus minimizing the negative edge effects, which can reduce nest productivity on small habitat blocks. Over the grant period, the proposed project will create approximately 500 acres of open grassland habitat and food plots. These large blocks of grasslands should accommodate area sensitive species that are more difficult to manage for, while at the same time provide ideal nesting and brood rearing habitat for wild turkeys.

APPROACH:



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Prescribed fire management, disking, plowing, mowing, and seeding are the activities that will be used on this project. The project site is on the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois in Jackson county at Township 8,9S, Range 3,4,5W, section UTM zone 16 and can be found on USGS quad map Raddle & Oraville, IL on Quad #2 and #3. These activities typically occur in either early spring or late fall. After the initial burning, the fields will be allowed to green-up, then shallow disked to kill the competition. At this point, the site will be planted to a grain food plot, or seeded to a warm-season grass/forb mixture to further suppress the germination of any remaining fescue seed. Some of the initial food plot sites will be seeded to warm season grasses the following year using the shallow disking method. Several of the sites have been actively managed in the past using one or more of the above management practices. Construction of fire lines by disking and/or the use of a bulldozer to create a firebreak around the burn area have occurred on over 60% of the total openland acreage.

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), supported by the SWG funds, will provide project management and assist with the project monitoring. The NWTF local chapter is providing financial resources to support the purchase of NWSG seed. The SWG funds will also help support the purchase of the food plot seed, land preparation costs, and provide informational signs to educate the general public about the project and the importance of the project to the implementation of the Illinois CWCP. The local chapter of Quail Unlimited will volunteer its member's equipment to mow, disc, and plant the food plots and NWSG. A contractor (Heartland Utilities) is donating his labor for the project and will mow, disc, and plant the food plots and NWSG. The Forest Service has or will be performing the prescribed burning on the project sites (up to 60% of the 2,640 acres in any one year) and through an existing partnership with the Cooperative Wildlife Research Laboratory at Southern Illinois University, monitor the grassland birds use of the sites through the project period. This monitoring will complement the data currently being gathered with an emphasis on Henslows sparrows by Southern Illinois University under the direction of Jack Nawrot, PhD. Although a separate report on the before and after grassland bird use of the 500 acre affected area will not be prepared, data from the annual bird monitoring survey will be included in NWTF annual project reports. The NWTF will coordinate the activities of all project partners through periodic (at least quarterly) meetings and communications with the group as a whole or individually. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IL DNR) will receive quarterly progress reports and annual reports from NWTF to ensure that project execution is on schedule and within budget. The IL DNR Project leader will be John Cole he can be contacted at telephone number 217/782-6384 or email address jcole@dnrmail.state.il.us.

LOCATION:

The project site is on the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois in Jackson county at Township 8.9S, Range 3,4,5W, section UTM zone 16 and can be found on USGS quad map Raddle & Oraville, IL on Quad #2 and #3. The NWTF contractual Administrator will be located at 770 Augusta Road, Edgefield, SC 29824 and the NWTF Field Biologist will be located at R.R. 2, Box 164, Wyoming, IL 61491.